

# Common wisdom about Croatia

*Margaret Casman-Vuko, an American resident in Croatia, refutes the false picture that is usually presented in the West of that country.*

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I am an American citizen who has lived in Zagreb, Croatia since 1972. I have a deep affection for my second home, which enjoyed one exhilarating year of fledgling democracy before Yugoslav troops and warplanes came to crush it back into submission to the generally despised communist regime.

In any discussion of the Yugoslav crisis, it is necessary to remember that for the past 46 years, the communist Yugoslav government has successfully passed off a doctored version of history, primarily to justify its suppression of the Croatian nation by portraying it as inherently unruly with fascist tendencies.

Indeed, the truth in Yugoslavia has been so vigorously suppressed that even the possession of the "wrong" books was a felony (including a glossary of the Croatian language). A chance remark at work could lead to a hearing before the disciplinary committee and perhaps a ruined career; the singing of the "wrong" song in public and sometimes private was good for a year in prison, while speaking out (whether in Yugoslavia or abroad) was good for a lot longer and in some cases cost lives. President Tudjman was sentenced to a total of 12 years in prison, of which he served eight, for merely disagreeing with some grotesquely inflated official World War II casualty figures in Swedish television interviews. Only persons willing to go along with the collective deception were permitted to serve as diplomats and in other positions of power, which accounts for the fact that many westerners dealing with Yugoslavia have been incorrectly informed.

Although reliable information is available from neutral sources such as old newspapers, archives, books, etc., reporters often consider interviews superior to delving through records and documents. Thus, considerable misinformation has become part of common wisdom.

Because so much current analysis incorporates this common wisdom, it is necessary to examine the origins of several

frequent assertions.

**Assertion 1:** Serbia fought with the Allies and Croatia fought with the Nazis during World War II.

Neutral sources (e.g., *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the article on Yugoslavia) state that *all* of Yugoslavia was occupied by the Nazis in 1941. In Croatia, the legally elected government under President Vladko Macek refused to collaborate with the occupiers and was replaced by a quisling government headed by Ante Pavelic. Pavelic's party, the Ustashe, never had the support of more than 1% of the Croatian population (50,000 out of 5 million), with the vast majority of the people hoping that the Americans would liberate them. Meanwhile, the Nazis installed a similar puppet government in Serbia led by Milan Nedic. Extensive documentation confirms that the Serbian Chetnik faction led by Draza Mihailovic was secretly collaborating with the Germans, among others. In August 1942, a German office reported "the problem of Jews and Gypsies has been solved: Serbia is the only country where this problem no longer exists."

**Assertion 2:** More than 1 million Serbs were killed by Croats during World War II.

In 1964, the Yugoslav government undertook a systematic survey of World War II victims because the Germans had rejected earlier figures claimed for reparation purposes. In this study, the total number of Serbian victims was 346,740, which obviously included many who had not perished at the hands of the Croats.

**Assertion 3:** The ancient hatred between the Serbs and Croats goes back for centuries.

Serbs and Croats co-existed peacefully for at least a thousand years prior to the formation of Yugoslavia in 1918. The chief reason why there are pockets of Serbs in Croatia is that they were hospitably welcomed when they fled from the Ottoman invasions. In fact, it was partially due to the romantic idealization of Serb culture by certain Croatian intellectuals that the union of the southern Slav peoples came into being in 1918.

**Assertion 4:** The war in Croatia is a civil war.

The conflict between Serbia and the other republics began almost as soon as Yugoslavia was formed due to fundamentally conflicting goals for this union: While the Croats and Slovenes intended for each republic to retain its own national identity (a miniature EC), the Serbs sought to forge one Greater Serbian State, i.e., to subjugate and eventually assimilate the others.

The deliberate destruction of hundreds of architectural treasures in Croatia, a vital component of Croatian cultural identity, is intended to facilitate the cannibalization of Croatian territory.

The Croatian borders being challenged were established nearly three centuries ago, in 1699 and 1710, although Croatian history goes back more than 1,400 years. The 1974 Yugoslav Constitution guaranteed each republic the right to secession. In 1991, the peoples of Croatia and Slovenia held referendums in which 95% of the voters chose to declare independence.

A situation analogous to that in Croatia would occur if France withdrew from the EC, Germany invaded Alsace-Lorraine to "protect" French citizens of German descent and then bombed Versailles.

**Assertion 5:** The Yugoslav Federal Army is protecting the Serbs living in Croatian territory.

The Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army needed the pretext that it was "protecting" the rights and safety of the Serbs within Croatia in order to justify its invasion of Croatian territory. For over a year prior to the outbreak of the war, the Serbian media conducted a poisonous propaganda campaign designed to stir up Serbian fears. The real problem was that under the communists, the Serbs were the privileged class in all the republics, holding down a highly disproportionate number of jobs in the military, police, bureaucracy, government, etc., with their primary loyalties in many cases being more to Belgrade than the republics they inhabited. They may have been resented as alien authority figures, but were in no jeopardy. Because there had been so much skimming off the top during the communist regime, either to fill Belgrade's coffers or line private pockets, sweeping replacements were made after the overwhelming defeat of the Communist Party by the Croatian Democratic Party in the 1990 election, the first democratic election to be held since World War II.

The Federal Army is bombing cities with practically no Serbs to "defend," such as Dubrovnik, Vinkovci, and Osijek.

Accusations have been made, even by Serbian politicians and analysts, that the army brass are primarily intent on preserving their financial base, lavish lifestyles, and generous perks, which would disappear without Croatian tax revenues, because the remaining republics are in economic collapse.

One hears practically nothing about the 550,000 Croats living in Serbia or even the 2 million Albanian majority

living abjectly in Kosovo under minority Serbian rule, but the human rights abuses are extreme.

**Assertion 6:** The war in Croatia is primarily an ethnic conflict.

The Serbian media have gone to great lengths to stoke ethnic hatred, creating a smokescreen to camouflage an indefensible war of aggression.

It is telling that the percentage of Serbs among the defenders of Vukovar against the Yugoslav Federal Army nearly corresponded to the percentage of Serbs in Vukovar's population, after allowing for volunteer forces which arrived from all over Croatia.

**Assertion 7:** Anti-Semitism is on the rise in Croatia.

This is nothing more than another attempt from Belgrade to turn world opinion against Croatia. I am a member of the Jewish community in Zagreb. The president of our community, Mr. Nenad Porges, sent an appeal to Jewish organizations all over the world in which he stated the following:

"The government of Croatia has publicly denounced and condemned all neo-fascist and extremist ideologies and organizations that threaten the democratic system in Croatia and its citizens and decided to undertake all necessary legal steps to prevent the spread of such dangers.

"We express our fullest support for the efforts and declared policy of the government of the Republic of Croatia in building a new and democratic society in which the human, political, civil, national, and religious rights of every citizen will be protected. . . ."

On a personal note, I was in Zagreb when the Jewish center and cemetery were bombed. Not only were the bombings swiftly denounced by the Croatian political leadership, religious leadership, and press, but thousands gathered in the main Zagreb square to demonstrate their solidarity with the Jewish population. Many friends and acquaintances called me to express their condolences.

**Assertion 8:** The war in Croatia cannot be stopped as long as the Serbs and Croats are intent on killing each other.

This assertion does not originate from the Yugoslav government but from U.S. State Department officials, and is frequently echoed in the press.

The Serbs are invading Croatia either to block Croatian independence or change boundaries and thus gain territory. Croatia is deriving no benefits whatsoever from the prolongation of the massacre of its population; the bombing of its houses, schools, hospitals, churches, factories, etc.; the sieges of Dubrovnik, Vukovar, and Slunj; the destruction of its architectural treasures and thus the attempted obliteration of its cultural identity.

The West does not seem ready to accept the emerging democracies in eastern Europe unless they can prove themselves capable of militarily defeating the extremely powerful regimes which have oppressed them. Must they demonstrate their "worthiness" for freedom by first undergoing devastation and a bloodbath?