

II. SERBS IN CROATIA

The position of a substantial Serb population in Croatia has long been problematic. At the nationalist end of the Croatian political spectrum, the country's Serbs have been regarded as a Trojan Horse, which has repeatedly been used to undermine Croatia, and which could be used again to carve off pieces of Croatian territory and join them to a Greater Serbian state.³ The widespread perception among Croats of the experience of Yugoslav union before the Second World War in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, was of hegemonic Serb rule. The extreme reaction against that experience of the Ustashas, who in the German puppet Independent State of Croatia (*Nezavisna Drzava Hrvatska* or NDH) in the Second World War sought to wipe out all trace of Serbs (as well as Jews and Roma) in Croatia and Bosnia, heightened a Serb sense of vulnerability and sensitivity to any expression of Croat nationalism. It was among the Serbs, fighting for their lives in the NDH, that resistance to Axis occupation first flared. The communist-led partisans, in their effort to harness and take control of what was, in the early stages of the war, a largely Serb rebellion, applauded Croatia's Serbs for their sacrifices in the struggle against the occupiers and the Ustashas and for the new Yugoslavia. However, among Croats in communist Yugoslavia, it was widely felt that Serbs in Croatia were afforded numerous privileges, in party bodies and official institutions, at the expense of Croats.

There thus evolved two diametrically opposed views of Croatia's place in Yugoslavia among the republic's Croat majority and its Serb minority. Among Croats, dissatisfaction with and opposition to communist rule was coloured by resentment at perceived privileges enjoyed by Serbs in Croatia. Thus the aspiration to Croatian sovereignty was tinged by a determination to redress the perceived imbalance, to assert specifically Croat interests, at the expense of Croatia's Serbs. For Croatia's Serbs, Yugoslavia presented many advantages, placing them within a wider union bringing together Serb communities around Yugoslavia, and protecting them from the type of excesses they had experienced at the hands of the Ustashas.

Thus the nationalist euphoria with which most Croats greeted the assertion of Croatian sovereignty and independence in 1990-91 was matched by fear and insecurity among Serbs, which was unscrupulously manipulated and whipped up by the Serbian leadership in Belgrade. In regions in which Serbs formed a significant proportion of the population (an absolute majority in some areas), Serbs, with the help of the former Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslovenska narodna armija* or JNA), seized control of territory, driving out Croats in the process. Croatian determination to regain control of the whole country was acknowledged by the international community, as international recognition of Croatia's independence was granted in January 1992; however, the deployment of UN forces in the Serb-controlled regions, which brought a temporary halt to hostilities in Croatia, did nothing to bring about the restoration of Croatia's territorial integrity. When mounting impatience led the Croatian authorities to take matters into their own hands and re-conquer most of the territories in two lightning strikes in 1995, the move met with international disapproval as a result of the mass exodus of the Serb population and evidence of atrocities against the few who remained.

³ This view of Croatia's Serbs has been given pseudo-intellectual respectability in Croatia even in recent times, for example, by the head of the Institute of Contemporary History in Zagreb, Mirko Valentic, in an interview in the pro-government daily, *Vjesnik*, 6 February 1995.