

# THE MEDAK POCKET

## Introduction



Picture 1: REPUBLIC OF CROATIA 1990-1992

The book "Tested Mettle" by Scott Taylor and Brian Nolan<sup>1</sup> and the citation awarded to the Canadian soldiers in late 2002 for the alleged battle they waged against the Croatian army in September, 1993<sup>2</sup> in the Medak Pocket ("*the biggest battle Canadians have fought since the Korean War*"<sup>3</sup>, but also the "battle" the Croatian Ministry of Defense officially denied<sup>4</sup>), provided me with the incentive to research what preceded the Croatian army's action in the vicinity of three Lika villages (Divoselo, Počitelj and Lički Čitluk)<sup>5</sup>, that like an elongated "pocket" starting at Medak<sup>6</sup> (hereafter the Medak Pocket) wedged into Croatian defense lines south of Gospić; what happened during and after the military action. The Medak Pocket in the eyes of the world and in Croatian public opinion has since become synonymous with a Croatian crime and everything connected to the action in Croatian public opinion has gained repulsive and almost forbidden connotations. Therefore I asked myself whether we know everything about that military and historic event, and whether the conclusions drawn are complete and trustworthy.

That generally accepted evaluation of the event, with all the consequences it bore for the Croatian army and the nation, that finalized historical truth, is what has drawn me to do this research. It is common knowledge among those who lived through the Croatian Homeland war that for two years that "pocket" occupied by rebel Serbs, volunteers and remnants of the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) threatened to occupy Gospić by crossing the Velebit<sup>7</sup> Mountains and thus cutting Croatia in two. The Serbs would, if that was achieved, reach the Virovitica-Karlovac-Karlobag<sup>8</sup> line and thus accomplished the "Greater Serbia"<sup>9</sup> project, they would occupy most of the Croatian territory and therefore they would defeat the very idea of an independent Croatia and bring it to its knees. As the Croatian army's military action in Masleničko Ždrilo<sup>10</sup> connected Croatia's southern region with the rest of Croatia, the limited military and police of the Medak Pocket operation prevented Croatia's amputation and defeat. It further made public Croatia's resolution to achieve its goal – using the combination of diplomatic and military means – the liberation and full sovereignty over its whole territory, its democratization and integration into the European Union and democratic world. Unfortunately, as in all wars, even the most carefully planned and lead actions can go astray and finish with serious consequences. That happened with this military operation: those unwanted and impermissible acts – crimes – have given the whole action negative connotations. In this case study, we will try to separate good from evil, without denying the evil, and give the facts their real place and meaning. In this case study we have meticulously researched everything that happened: during that military action, immediately following it, and all of the consequences it caused. In

our opinion what was important for Croatia was not simply that the country was to be cut in half<sup>11</sup>, but that action's importance is best described in the "Tested Mettle" statement that: *"the Medak Pocket was that breaking point in which, without any doubt, Croatian guilt for crime and ethnic cleansing was proved, and the equal war crime responsibilities both of the Serbs and the Croats was shown."*<sup>12</sup> This interpretation of the Medak Pocket events has questioned the Croatian state's sovereignty, war crimes interpreted as Croatian state policy, and the International Community has got a long search proof to explain its own interpretation of wars in the former Yugoslavia, its own inefficiency, biasness, and the realization of its geopolitical interests.<sup>13</sup>

So Croatia went from being a victim to a culprit for the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and for the war because of its alleged committed crimes. The punishment followed – political pressures, the path to European integration was slowed down, difficulties in transition (economic and civil society developments) and – the tribunal in the Hague. After the Medak Pocket operation, the International Community has accepted the interpretation of wars in the former Yugoslavia as civil wars<sup>14</sup>, "centuries long tribal warfare of Balkan tribes"<sup>15</sup> and has devised "the equal responsibility of all factions for waging that war"<sup>16</sup>. This unjustly turned Croats from victims into equal and responsible participants of the civil war<sup>17</sup> because of the material evidence and cataloging done by Canadians UNCIVPOL and the foreign press.<sup>18</sup> The Medak Pocket and not Ahmići or the Croat – Muslim conflict became that breaking point after which western public opinion shifted from Croatia and started considering it equal to its aggressor - Serbia<sup>19</sup>. The Medak Pocket was that milestone. After that operation, the world had changed its attitude towards the Republic of Croatia. The crimes committed during that military-police action are unforgivable and the responsible perpetrators should be brought to justice. Croatia, its political and military leadership, has not, according to the facts, planned and committed these crimes, and therefore should not bare its consequences.

That change in world public opinion was the visible damage; these were the consequences of the Medak Pocket operation. Although there were some gains achieved by it too. The balance of power was changed. From that point on, the Serb rebels, the army of the so-called fictitious "Republika Srpska," posed less of a threat to Croatia. Thanks to the Croatian government's decisive military, political and diplomatic activity, which defended Croatia's national interests, sometimes diametrically opposite to the European Union political interests (an important chapter of this study is dedicated to the steadfast struggle of the Croatian Republic through UN bodies, and step-by-step gains of those parts of its sovereignty which Serb rebels denied, and the interna-

tional community, through its ineffectiveness, helped)<sup>20</sup>, Croatia has against all the odds defended its independence and reached its full sovereignty. The perception of the Republic of Croatia as an aggressor, based on a single excess and crime, has made its diplomatic struggle more difficult. This also prolonged the war to the moment of a decisive (political and military) American entrance into the theatre in order to solve the problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that included Croatia as well. The Croatian and Bosnian army victories in 1994 and 1995 and American pressure led to Dayton<sup>21</sup> and the end of the war, but did not change Serb ideology and politics. The pragmatic international community's politics towards Serbian President Milošević, its unacceptance of the true nature of his regime, the Greater Serbian ideology, balancing the responsibility for starting the war, has led to another war and the genocide in Kosovo<sup>22</sup>, NATO air strikes on Serbia<sup>23</sup> and the final downfall of Milošević<sup>24</sup>. The present day trial of Milošević in the Hague, has allowed many witnesses to reveal to the world what nations attacked by the Serbian army endured. It has also proven that from the very beginning of the bloody conflict, the international community avoided recognizing who had been the initiator of the wars in the former Yugoslavia<sup>25</sup>. Today all truth-seeking individuals know that the Serbian nationalistic idea was the initiator of the aggression and bares the responsibility for the majority of crimes committed in the former Yugoslavia<sup>26</sup>. Those facts make no amends of responsibility and the guilt perpetrators who committed the rest of the crimes. Those individuals that committed the crimes in the Medak Pocket, for instance. The truth about who the aggressors and who the victims were should not be unknown anymore. From this general truth all other truths about the unfortunate war in the former Yugoslavia should be derived. All the unbiased research and analyzing done by independent historians should be attributed to this fact – like the recently published book by American military historian Dr. Charles Reginald Shrader's which deals with the conflict between Croats and Bosnians/Muslims in Central Bosnia. Using hard military logic he sheds quite a different light on the clashes in Central Bosnia (different from the widely accepted opinion and the Hague Tribunal's indictments). The thesis that what happened in Central Bosnia was the aggression of Croats and Croatia done on Bosnians/Muslims<sup>27</sup>. Shrader proves that military crimes happened because of military necessity – by the force of war. The cover-ups and the fact that no-one was prosecuted is interpreted by that need, the need to preserve the Croatian community in the Lašva Valley, to which a real threat of physical annihilation loomed if the war had been lost<sup>28</sup>. All documents should be studied, all facts gathered, all the differences and the double meanings should be

revealed, all the mystifications and all the conflicting interests should be unmasked.

All the questions should be asked and the answers given should reveal the historical truth.

All the known facts should be put into a historical context in order to understand the causes and the consequences of particular interests.

It is not up to us to find and put to trial all war criminals, it is up to the ICTY in the Hague. But we must pose some questions and ask them to be answered even if the answers are embarrassing for the "Croatian side" which we belong to.

The indictments of general Rahim Ademi<sup>29</sup>, and of the late general Janko Bobetko<sup>30</sup>, the wide implications those indictments have for the Homeland war and the creation of the Croatian state, together with the Croatian public's reaction, are additional causes for the intent to unbiasedly and truthfully research the Medak Pocket circumstances, to shed light on the motives for actions undertaken in that operation in order to come as close to the truth as possible.

A span of ten years from when the events that took place in the Medak Pocket should be enough time to find the historical truth which would be based on scientific facts, objective questioning, on documents and witness reports, therefore without bias and without passion (*sine ira et studio*).

There are many questions that should be asked and answered. Some answers we'll get immediately, and for some we have to wait. Part of the documents became public; the Croatian Ministry of Defense declassified those concerning the Medak Pocket. Some of the documents are yet to be acquired – for instance the Medak Pocket military operation analysis done by American military attaché Colonel Richard Herrick<sup>31</sup>. That analysis, according to General Bobetko, spoke of an "exemplary military operation". From what General Bobetko quoted as a part of a conversation that took place in his office, Colonel Herrick proved to be impartial in his analysis. "Our embassy has been worried by incorrect statements and we're interested in the results of the inquiry. We're not going to protect anybody; we are only interested in the truth."<sup>32</sup>

NATO documents should be studied, Serbian sources should be looked into, and also data provided by Canadian and French troops, intelligence services, and the CIA's history of war in the former Yugoslavia. Part of these documents should be possible to analyze no sooner than the ICTY finishes its proceedings in indicting all the suspected war criminals and consequently after it opens its archives.

The indictment process and the utmost care with which some of the participants and witnesses and possible indictees are pro-

tected is still making the difficult path to the truth as far as the Medak Pocket is concerned.

We hope that our case study will feed many a historian – researcher’s curiosity making them more thorough, impartial, and accurate when researching other key historical data in Croatia’s recent history: like Vukovar<sup>33</sup>, the role of the JNA in the wars in the former Yugoslavia<sup>34</sup>, the liberation of Croatia’s south (Dubrovnik)<sup>35</sup>, the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar<sup>36</sup>, Ahmići and Stupni Dol<sup>37</sup>, “Bljesak”<sup>38</sup> and “Oluja”<sup>39</sup>, or the Croatian army’s part in the Bosnia and Herzegovina operations (Bosanska Posavina, Srednja Bosna) and alleged Republic of Croatia interference into the Bosnia and Herzegovina war, or even the Croatian “aggression” on that country<sup>40</sup>. Dr. Shrader, an independent and impartial military historian had said something about it in his aforementioned book.

One important aspect of our case study should be pointed out – the influence of some countries on the sequence of events and the dissolution of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. Great powers have realized those influences using UN military contingents, using particular services, secret services as CIA, MI, MI5, MI6, SFB, SISMI, BND, DB and other special forces such as SAS, SBS, Special Forces, Delta, YFT<sup>41</sup>, various humanitarian organizations<sup>42</sup>. Great powers have also allowed the so-called “mercenaries” to participate in the crimes of war<sup>43</sup>. They had their undetected and detected sympathies – graces, and distributed help – mostly to one of the warring sides – Milošević and the Serbs. The mentioned secret forces were those building blocks that spun and promoted often different and diametrically opposite policy of the European Union, in the theatre of southeast Europe<sup>44</sup> and especially in Croatia.