

THE WAR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, 1992-1995

Section Five: Timeline, 1992

Introduction: The War Begins, 1992

By March 1992, Bosnia was clearly drifting toward civil war. Barricades sprang up along roads and outside towns as villagers armed themselves against the inhabitants of the next town over—or elsewhere within the same town. On 18 March 1992, in a last-ditch, admittedly stopgap effort to avert war, the EC persuaded all three ethnic leaders to sign the “Sarajevo Agreement” to divide the republic into ethnically based cantons. But on 25 March Bosnian President Izetbegovic announced one of the policy reversals for which he would soon become known. He repudiated his statement of the previous week—claiming he had been pressured into signing by the EC representatives—and called for all Bosnian citizens to reject the terms of the Sarajevo agreement on the grounds that it effectively divided the republic along ethnic lines. Instead, Izetbegovic renewed his call for a governmental system founded on the principle of a unitary, multi-ethnic Bosnian state.

Izetbegovic's call, though perhaps well intentioned, was far too late and the fragile structure of the ineffective republic central government was in no position to do anything to back it up. The centrifugal forces driving the country apart were far greater than the weak forces binding the country together which might have given hope to the idea of a multi-ethnic Bosnia.

As April began, the EC foreign ministers gathered in Luxembourg to debate whether to extend recognition to Bosnia, while a similar debate went on in Washington. But as Europe's ministers met yet again to discuss the future of Bosnia, the Bosnian population was already taking up arms and settling matters for themselves on the ground.

All the catalysts that had brought rumors of war to Bosnia—paranoia, ethnic referendums, covert arming, the formation of paramilitaries and “ethnic cleansing”—finally came together in the first week of April in the Bosnian town of Bijeljina. An ethnically divided town of about 36,000 people in the very northeast corner of Bosnia, Bijeljina sat less than fifteen kilometers from the Serbian border at the junction of two important roads. The town was key to the Serb-proclaimed “Semberija and Majevisa Autonomous Region,” and the SDS had made substantial efforts during 1991 and early 1992 to “Serbianize” its police force and ensure Serb political control of the town. On 31 March, in an apparent attempt to provoke an armed Bosniac response that would justify a Serb takeover of Bijeljina, local Serbs attacked a Bosniac-frequented coffee shop. The provocation worked. The next day Serb Territorial Defense (*Teritorijalna Odbrana*—TO) and volunteer troops surrounded and flooded the town, routing scattered members of

the Bosnian Muslim Patriotic League and police and executing Bosniac leaders in the streets. They were led by the already infamous Arkan's Tigers, the Serbian Volunteer Guard organization that had fought around Vukovar, Croatia, the previous summer. Their reign of terror continued even after JNA troops moved in to "keep the peace" on 3 April, and by 4 April the Serbs had full control of the town. The town's Bosniac residents either cowered in their homes or fled for their lives. The operation had been a set-piece re-creation of the summer 1991 fighting in Croatia.

The Bosnian Serb takeover in Bijeljina set in motion a chain of events that would leave all the military players—the Bosnian Serbs, the Bosnian Republic TO, and the JNA—armed and ready for war when the republic declared its independence only a few days later. Angered by the JNA's failure to contain the violence the Serbs had staged in Bijeljina, the Bosnian Presidency voted to mobilize the republican Territorial Defense, reserve MUP forces, and civil defense



ABIH fighters fire machine gun

elements. On 4 April, Izetbegovic issued the order for general mobilization to, as he put it, "...enable people to defend themselves...from future Bijeljinias." The Serb members of the seven-person Bosnian Presidency, Koljevic and Plavsic, promptly declared the mobilization illegal and resigned from the Presidency that same day. The JNA meanwhile refused the Presidency request for the return of the TO's weaponry, which the army had confiscated in 1990. Bosnia's Bosniacs and Croats had by this point left the JNA, and Serb members of the TO ignored the mobilization order. Now there were two legally constituted armies in Bosnia—the JNA and the Bosnian TO—and they were already at odds.

The SDS and the Bosnian Serbs had been making their final preparations for the establishment of the "Serbian Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina" in March. The last step, taken as fighting flared in Bijeljina, was the creation of an independent Serb police force, the MUP, on 1 April. SRBH President Karadzic and the rest of the Serb leadership now were ready for a pretext to declare independence. The Bosnian Presidency's decision to mobilize the TO on 4 April gave them that pretext. The Serbs immediately rejected the mobilization order and activated their Municipal Crisis Headquarters, reserve police units, and civil defense forces. The next provocation in the escalating crisis soon came as Serb TO troops and Serb members of the Bosnian Republic MUP anti-terrorist unit seized the Republican Police Academy on a key hill overlooking central Sarajevo, apparently in preparation for a Serb attempt to partition the city by force. Armed clashes soon spread to other parts of Sarajevo. Cease-fire

negotiations and the deployment of small JNA “peacekeeping” units failed to halt the fighting.

Declared or not, the Bosnian civil war began on 6 April 1992 in reaction to the Republic's formal declaration of independence from Yugoslavia. This is not to say that blood had not been shed in Bosnia before that date. During March 1992, Croat and JNA/Serb forces clashed in Bosanski Brod along the Republic's northern Sava River border. By 1 April organized violence had begun with the interethnic fighting in Bijeljina. Serb forces had begun positioning themselves on Vraca hill south of Sarajevo on 4 April and shooting broke out in Sarajevo on 5 April. But it was on 6 April that the fighting ceased to be local and sporadic, and flared into a countrywide conflict. After that day, the entire population—Serb, Croat, and Bosniac, man, woman and child, near or far from the front lines—found themselves in a country undeniably at war. And there was no longer any way to avoid choosing sides.

That same day—as the Bosnian Serbs prepared to take full and overt control throughout their new republic—the European Community formally recognized Bosnia and Herzegovina as a fully sovereign, independent country. Recognition from the United States followed the next day.

Radovan Karadzic had earlier stated that if Bosnia should ever be recognized as an independent state it would not survive a single day. At virtually the same moment the Europeans and Americans were recognizing Bosnia as a sovereign state within its republic boundaries, the Bosnian Serb assembly was declaring its secession from the new state and claiming most of its land area. Politically appointed SRBH police officers quickly moved to establish control in those Serb-coveted areas where Serb officials had not already achieved quasi-independent status. When supporters of the Bosnian Republic contested this power grab in several key towns, shooting erupted, the fighting spread, and rival governments declared their opponents outlaws. The international community had performed the diplomatic equivalent of adopting a stillborn child.

1 April

The independent Serb police force MUP was formed.

1-4 April

Serb TO and volunteers seized Bijeljina and commenced expelling all Bosniac residents.

4 April

Serb TO and MUP troops seized Sarajevo Republican Police Academy on Vraca hill.

6 April

European Community recognized Bosnian independence.

Bosnian Serb areas seceded from Bosnia.
Serb snipers in Sarajevo opened fire on peace demonstrators from the Holiday Inn downtown.

7 April

United States recognized Bosnian independence.

JNA troops captured Kupres from a Croat HV/HVO force. By May these forces had driven on to occupy territory in and around Mostar. The Croats saw in this an attempt to invade Croatia and cut off the Dalmatian coast.

7-9 April

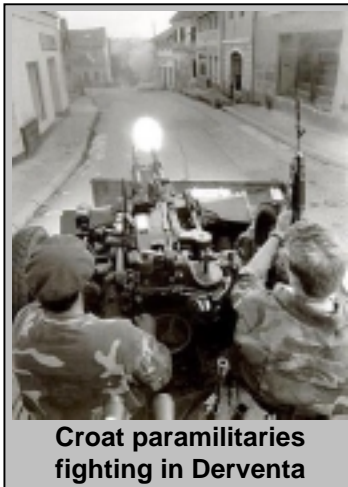
Serb Territorial Defense forces, TO and JNA forces captured Visegrad and commenced ethnic cleansing operations.

7-18 April

Serb forces captured Foca and commenced ethnic cleansing operations.

8-10 April

Serb MUP, TO and paramilitaries captured Zvornik and commenced ethnic cleansing operations.



**Croat paramilitaries
fighting in Derventa**

April-May

HVO and HV forces captured Bosanski Brod, Modrica and Derventa.

April-June

Muslim Patriotic League Forces and Croat HVO troops surrounded and occupied various arms factories and JNA barracks. During this process, initial signs of Croat-Bosniac tensions emerged as confrontations occurred over control of certain facilities. JNA formally evacuated forces from Bosnia beginning 18 May, although Bosnian Serb members of the JNA remained in-country to form the professional core of the VRS.

Late April-late July

The VRS captured the Prijedor-Sanski Most-Kljuc region and conducted ethnic cleansing throughout.

23 April

Bosnian Serb territorial forces captured Bosanska Krupa, near Bihac. This operation was the first large scale military operations around Bihac, which would remain a Bosniac enclave, surrounded by Serb forces and Croatia throughout the war.

2 May

JNA troops kidnapped President Izetbegovic as he returned to Sarajevo airport from a peace conference. Bosnian government forces retaliated by laying siege to JNA garrisons throughout Sarajevo. Further escalating the situation, JNA artillery shelled Sarajevo's old town and sent two columns into the city, which were both halted by Bosnian government, TO, and militia troops.

3 May

A cease-fire was arranged and Izetbegovic was traded for the safe conduct guarantee of surrounded JNA troops. In spite of this, Bosniac paramilitaries fired on the retreating JNA forces, killing six.

8-10 May

Bosniac militia, led by Naser Oric, evicted occupying Serb TO troops in Srebrenica.

Mid-May

Serb forces opened the Zvornik-Sekovici road.

May-July

ABiH forces successfully defended the Gorazde enclave against repeated Bosnian Serb assaults.

Late May

VRS Sarajevo-Romanija Corps was established from JNA 4th Corps and Serb TO forces under Major General Tomislav Sipcic (later Major General Stanislav Galic). From this period on, Sarajevo was surrounded and besieged by VRS forces occupying the dominating hilltops around the city. Serb shelling and sniper fire would become commonplace. The siege of Sarajevo was characterized by near-equal numbers of personnel between Serb attackers and Bosniac defenders. The Serbs were well equipped with artillery and armor, but the Bosniacs had inadequate number of weapons.

Late May

Joint HV/HVO forces under Corps General Janko Bobetko moved on JNA forces that were besieging Dubrovnik, Croatia.

23 May-13 June

Bobetko's Croat forces commenced an operation aimed at liberating Mostar from the Serbs. In this period, small operations were conducted to capture key geographical features in Herzegovina including Mt. Hum, Mt. Orlovac and the western bank of the Neretva River.

June-July

Fighting in the Bihac pocket spread to the Grabez Plateau, Cazin, Buzim and Velika Kladusa. Fighting for the strategic Grabez Plateau would persist throughout the war.

7 June-21 June

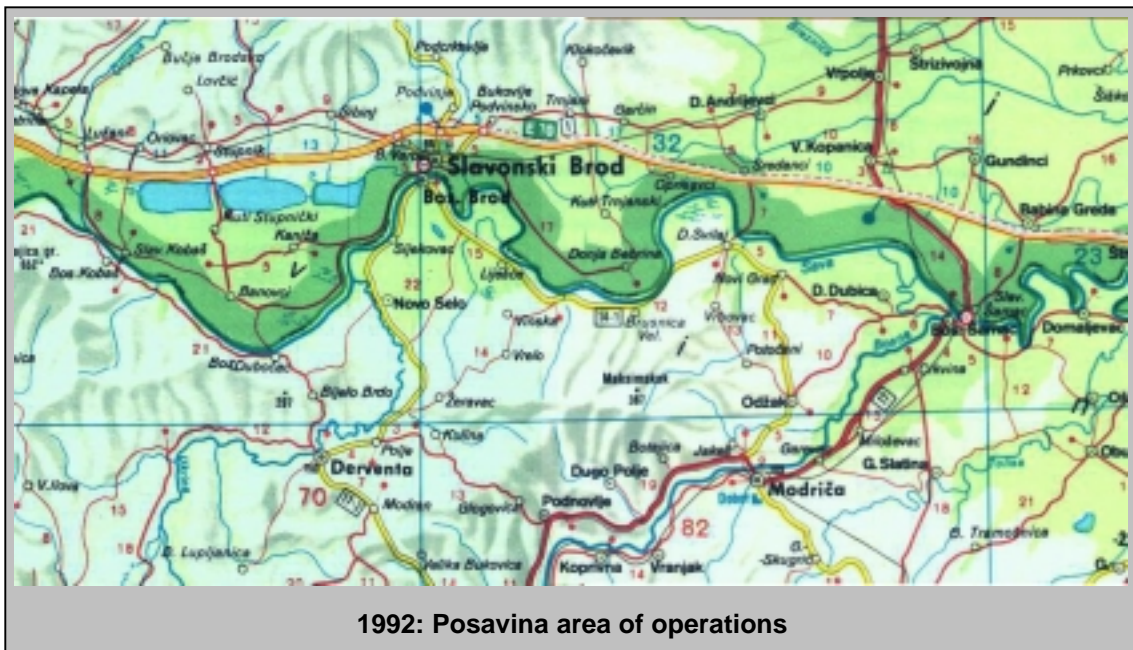
Bobetko's Joint HV/HVO forces launched "Operation Jackal" with the aim of liberating Mostar. A rapid, successful advance through thin Serb lines saw the Croat forces advance through Capljina, Recice and on to Stolac. Croat forces also advanced up the east bank of the Neretva. Croat forces captured all of Mostar by 21 June. From this period through early November a stalemate ensued outside of Mostar between Croat and Serb forces. As Operation Jackal wrapped up, it marked a notable success for Croat forces and General Bobetko and attested to the enhanced ability of Bosnian Croat forces when aided by the Croatian Military.

8 June

Bosniac defenders of Sarajevo launched widespread attacks on VRS positions on hills surrounding Sarajevo. After initial success, they were pushed back from all advances except Mojmilo Ridge.

24 June

"Operation Corridor 92" began. VRS 1st Krajina Corps commences offensive to open Posavina Corridor.



28 June

1st Krajina Corps recaptured Modrica.

July

Serbs took Odzak and Derventa from Croat forces.

September-October

Serb forces captured Bosnanski Brod, successfully opening the Posavina Corridor to the western portion of the RS.

October

HV/HVO troops retained Orasje in the face of VRS assaults

4 July-September

Croat HV forces launched "Operation Tiger" against JNA and VRS forces in Herzegovina in order to relieve the siege of Dubrovnik. By 10 July, key heights overlooking Dubrovnik had been seized from the Serbs but further advances were stymied through September.

Late July

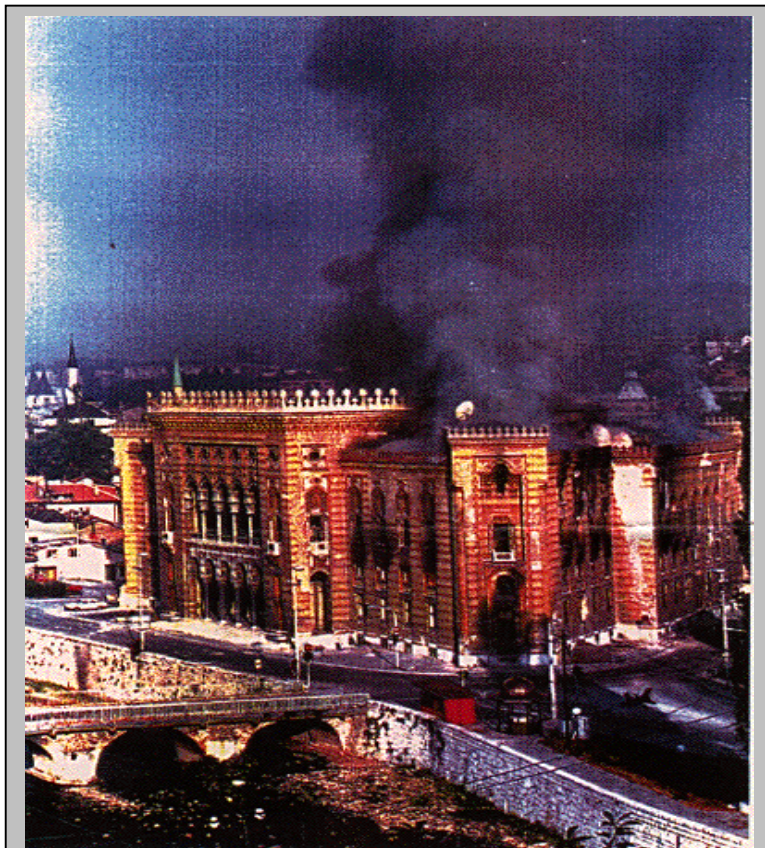
ABiH and Bosniac TO forces captured Trnovo and opened a supply corridor to Gorazde.

August to October

VRS 30th Infantry Division of 1st Krajina Corps fights successful campaign to capture Jajce. Bosniac TO and HVO defense weakened by lack of cooperation. 40,000 refugees flee to Travnik.

Late September

Lord Owen and Cyrus Vance, EU and UN Heads (respectively) of the International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia, stepped in to halt fighting on the Dubrovnik front. JNA forces were to pull



The National and University Library in Sarajevo burns after a Serb Mortar attack on August 26, 1992.

out by 20 October and the strategic Prevlaka Peninsula was to become a demilitarized area.

19-23 October

The first Croat-Bosniac clashes occurred. HVO artillery shelled the Bosniac town of Novi Travnik. The HVO shelled Vitez on 20 October.

20 October

ABiH 5th Corps was established under Ramiz DrekoVIC, with responsibility for Bihac pocket defense.

20 October

JNA pullouts in the Dubrovnik area lead to a power vacuum, HV/HVA forces and VRS troops clash. By 1 November, Croatian President Tudjman called a cease-fire, as his troops had made substantial gains and functionally ended the siege of Dubrovnik.

23 October-1 November

Bosniac-Croat fighting spread to the town of Prozor. This town of 15,000 sits on Bosnia's main north-south highway. The causes of the conflict are uncertain but the result was ABiH and HVO troops fighting. Within days the town's 5,000 Bosniacs had fled. This event caused Croat-Bosniac tensions to spread throughout numerous towns of mixed ethnicity, including Mostar where HVO troops disarmed the Bosniac population. Quick diplomacy by President Izetbegovic with Croat leader Mate Boban and Croatian President Franjo Tudjman defuses further conflict, at least in 1992.

November-19 December

Bosnian Serb 2nd Krajina Corps, with Krajina Serb 15th Lika Corps launched Operation "Una 92" to seize Grabov Plateau and Una River southern bank. The ABiH 5th Corps, however, conducted a successful defense.

Early December

The VRS Sarajevo-Romanija Corps launched an offensive to capture the Sarajevo suburbs of Otes and Stup. Defending ABiH and HVO forces counterattacked and successfully held the important heights of Zuc Hill.

December

Bosniac raids led by Naser Oric from Srebrenica throughout the latter half of the year culminate in a mortar attack on Serbia proper. Atrocities committed against Bosnian Serb civilians by Oric's forces would inflame Serb nationalism and anti-Bosniac passions in the area.

Conclusion, 1992

The war in Bosnia was not an inevitable result of warlike peoples' desire to fight, but instead came about through the conflict of vital political interests among Serbs, Bosniacs, and Croats. Ethnic chauvinism and historical grievances, combined with the brutalities inherent in a civil war, ensured that the Bosnian conflict would be a bloody affair. As 1992 ended, the unfinished business of the year would provide the main battlegrounds for 1993. During the new year, the Serbs would move to end the Bosniacs' military control over key parts of the Drina Valley and thereby achieve one of the primary Serb war aims. Meanwhile, the Croats and Bosniacs would resort to war to settle their differences over the political shape of Bosnia, while the Serbs stood on the sidelines and laughed.

The side that started the military conflict—the Serbs—were able to achieve most of their war aims during 1992, including the creation of a territorially contiguous Bosnian Serb state. They were able to do this primarily because of their extensive pre-war preparations for secession from Bosnia, including the development of armed units. The backing given the Serbs by the Yugoslav People's Army in early 1992, together with the transformation of JNA units into a Bosnian Serb Army was by far the most important factor in the Serbs' ability to fight and win. This new army, the VRS, was able to win key victories, such as those in the Posavina corridor, through its application of professional military expertise and firepower. The Serbs owed their failure to completely defeat their enemies to the cumulative effects of the ambitious war aims of the Serb political leadership and the rapid expansion—at the cost of necessary training and discipline—of major portions of the VRS. As a result, when it took on a highly motivated enemy, as it did in the Drina Valley, the Serb army suffered a bloody nose.

The Bosniacs' lack of military preparedness for the Bosnian Government's drive for independence had catastrophic consequences for thousands of Bosniac citizens. Many paid for their leaders' lack of foresight with their livelihoods and their lives as the Serbs burned their villages and killed or drove off the inhabitants. Even so, with little military experience to draw on, through the Republican Territorial Defense and paramilitary Patriotic League the Bosniacs were able to build a framework from which to defend their new country. With even these primitive formations, when animated by the Bosniac soldier's typical motivation born of desperation, the central government was able to hold most of Sarajevo and key regions in central and northern Bosnia while strongly challenging the Serbs elsewhere.

The Bosnian Croats and their patrons in Zagreb were the wild card in 1992, and would remain so throughout the Bosnian War. There were times when they joined with the Bosniacs to raise a stout military opposition to the Bosnian Serbs, particularly through the deployment of thousands of Croatian Army forces into the country. Indeed, the introduction of HV troops to preoccupy the VRS was one of

the key obstacles to an early, total Serb victory. But Zagreb and the Bosnian Croats had a different vision of an independent Bosnia than did the Bosniacs, one in which the Croats did not answer to a government in Sarajevo. Bosniac-Croat conflicts erupted briefly at different places and over different local circumstances throughout the year, but all essentially were rooted in the divergences over what the nature of Bosnia would be. If Bosnia and Herzegovina remained intact, the leadership of the Serb and Croats wanted complete autonomy for their areas of majority; Bosniacs wanted the areas to remain within a unitary state. If full autonomy could not be guaranteed, the Serbs and Croats would secede and become independent or join with their respective patron republics.