The Action's Croatian Interpretation; Croatian Sources

Picture 16: Forces dislocation of the both - Croatian and so called "RSK" side

Though there have been many "professional" discussions, memoirs and military history articles written, there are only a few in-depth homeland war analyses, and even fewer are those dealing with specific chapters of the war. The Medak Pocket Operation therefore has not had a professional evaluation done yet. The repulsion towards it prevailed soon after the initial euphoria followed the successful liberation of temporarily occupied territories. The world and domestic public opinion were immediately furnished with data about war crimes committed during the operation. UNPROFOR, UNCIVPOL, foreign, especially Serb but also Croat media, started cataloguing the numbers of people slaughtered, buildings destroyed, animals killed: all of which General Cot referred to as "the scorched earth". Therefore very little space was left for documents and eyewitness accounts to be inserted and published in order to complete the Action's framework, and pull aside the curtain concealing the truth. Later, the reluctance even to speak about such "ill-reputed" military operations became the reason that the history's "hot potato" was not touched. And when the Hague's ICTY came into the picture with its indictments, the Medak Pocket Operation was avoided as one would avoid a contagious disease. The events were being connected with crimes and threatened to become historically inaccurate and permanently referred to in a negative light.

Therefore, one had to analyze the Medak Pocket operation. The Operation was scrutinised within the Croatian Army ranks and at the Croatian Army's military academy; but those analyses were protected as military secrets and were unknown to the public. Recently some of these documents have been released and some were used in this case study. General Janko Bobetko speaks about the Medak Pocket Operation in his book. He dedicates a whole chapter to it. He is of the opinion that it was *"a brilliantly executed operation"* which together with his HQ, he planned, led and victoriously ended. In his book, Croatian General Martin Špegelj[183] does not write about the Medak Pocket Operation, dealing mostly with Croatia's early stages of the war. He defends his decision to attack JNA barracks, eventhough President Tuđman considered it to be a strategic JNA trap. In his book "Rat u Hrvatskoj,"[184] Ozren Žunec writes half a page about the Medak Pocket Operation. Domazet's "Hrvatska i veliko ratište" mentions the "Pocket"[185] among other Croatian Army offensives that preceded the "Bljesak" and "Oluja" actions. The majority of Croatian military analysts, historians and journalists, agree that the Medak Pocket Operation was the fourth most successful Croatian Army's action. The first being the Miljevac plateau, the second Maslenica and the third the Peruča Dam, that led to the final liberation and reintegration of the occupied Croatian territories. Though small in its range, that operation confirmed that previous limited actions

and victories were not taken indiscriminately, and that Croatian military power development was a process that could not be stopped. Whatever we call it: "the mice bites strategy" or *"the pinching of the salient Serb parastate areas in Croatia"* – that strategy proved viable, and led to the final success. As main HQ commander General Janko Bobetko writes in his book, the strategic reasons for undertaking that operation were confirmed: *"the Velebit Mountains were the key factor to Croatia's defence – whoever controls the Velebit Mountains, controls half of Croatia."*[186] From that strategic conclusion, General Bobetko came to the idea of the necessity to undertake a military operation with attacks spearhead towards Divoselo, Počitelj and Lički Čitluk, in order to straighten the Lika defence line and push off the threat imposed on Gospić's[187] civilians. By then taking the key heights on the Velebit Mountain and preventing a Serb offensive towards the Adriatic sea, the cities of Karlobag and Zadar; they would stop the Serb army from cutting Croatia in half. Croatian tactical and operational goals were decided upon – the danger to block communication was eliminated, Gospić was secured, the enemy forces were repelled from "the Pocket", and pushed to Medak itself, and the force of Serb artillery attacks on Lika's cities was diminished. Now the situation became quite the opposite – it was the Croatian Army now who posed a threat to Medak, Gračac, Ljubovo, Udbina and Korenica. It threatened to cut off the Dalmatian part of the "RSK", which actually happened in the "Oluja."[188] "Before the Lički Osik operation was undertaken, the vicinity of Gospić Serbs have been able to fire on the Gospić-Perušić main communication indiscriminately. Our positions were shot at, Gospić was semi-circled and the enemy had its outposts on domineering positions. Our psychological status and our patience were coming to an end, the enemy could have started their offensives whenever it suited them. If measures were not taken (if there was no Medak Pocket operation – author's note) Gospić, would have been completely destroyed."[189] After hearing what the reasons were to take on such an action, the Army's Commander in Chief, President Franjo Tuđman: *"agreed on it, but asked that it should be quickly and efficiently executed, because a strong reaction from the international community was possible."*[190]

The battle was fought between Croatian and Serb forces, the Croatian Army and police won, and the Canadians and French were mere observers. Medak was about to fall, in front of it, the commander of the Serb tank company Lt.Colonel Savić was killed. Therefore it was not just a clash *"between Croats armed to their teeth against barehanded Serb women and the elderly:"* This was the theatre of swift but fierce fighting in which soldiers from both sides were killed. On the Serb side, those were members of: the 103rd Lapac light brigade, members of the 9th Gračac brigade,

volunteers from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia,[191] as well as local territorial defence members, which was evidenced by documents found on them. On the Croatian side, members of the "Vukovi", special police, and Lika homeguard brigade members were killed. *"The enemy had been completely surprised and overwhelmed militarily;" said general Bobetko about the Medak Pocket Operation." A large organized political noise was raised. Pressure was exerted on the President, the Government, and on me personally, to stop the Operation, because had we been able to advance further to Gračac, Medak would also have been taken. The President absolutely forbid us to, apart from the area taken, move even one step further."*[192]

During and after the Action, the UN, IC, UNPROFOR, foreign press and Croatian Opposition pressure followed. Cedric Thornberry, the UN civil representative forwarded the political, and General Cot the military, requests from the UN Security Council. They mediated between the two sides. No sooner did the fierce Serb artillery and rocket attacks on Croatian cities along the coast and in the interior take place did the Croatian side insist upon UNPROFOR taking control of the liberated area – and a ceasefire agreement was reached. Croatia accepted the agreement on withdrawal from the liberated territory, which *"for each army is a tragic fact in itself. I had to make an unpopular decision, I had to organize a retreat. I ordered Domazet and Stipetić*[193] *to go and explain it to the troops, to make them comprehend state politics and to ask them not to "create any problems ."Because a man who had lost everything, whose every possession had been burned, once he had taken a village, you could not just say to him: "You have to retreat now, if you please." How could I explain such a thing to him?"*[194]

General Bobetko indirectly admits that difficulties arose when the order to withdraw was given. The soldiers obviously "created some problems." They were reluctant to obey, they voiced their dissatisfaction with the order that annulled their sacrifice and their fallen friends. An additional effort had to be made and some persuasion take place to make the retreat order be obeyed and to consequently realize the withdrawal. It was that dissatisfaction that possibly caused unlawful criminal acts, crimes that happened mainly when Croatian troops were retreating.

"We held our positions under control so UNPROFOR would not let the Četniks through. But UNPROFOR did not deter them. The Četniks continued entering Divoselo. But they stood no chance because their main force was defeated. From then on, special police forces dominated the Velebit Mountains."[195] General Bobetko, who with a certain dose of vanity, (allowable perhaps to the general of the winning side that initiated and with his HQ planned the action), judged it as a "brilliant" one and writes: *"All*

our objectives were fulfilled, our losses were minimal (Croatian casualties – authour's note) *and a foundation to liberate Croatia was laid. For me, Medak Pocket is one of the brilliant operations, one enemy battalion was completely defeated."* (Davor Butković in Globus quotes Serb sources as saying: *"…up to this moment we traced 107 members of the Gračac brigade who were alive"*[196]). *"The main tasks were accomplished, our casualties were minimal, the foundation was laid for the future liberation of Croatia during the "Oluja". If that Action was not successful, we would have lost Gospić (the strategic Serb target), and by that we would have lost the Velebit Mountains. Those who know how to judge such an event would understand that in such a case, our position would have been completely different."*[197]

I am of the opinion that this evaluation is the right one, no matter what price the Republic of Croatia would have paid, or will have to pay[198]. The Medak Pocket Operation showed where the limit of one sovereign state's patience was; the Medak Pocket Operation also showed statesmanship, wisdom and military ability with which such situations should be dealt with.[199] The crimes that were committed afterwards were awful, and have to be punished, but they are the consequence of an imposed war of aggression, and they were done in breach of self-defence. However these acts were not in any sense a premeditated political or premeditated criminal act.

And finally, General Bobetko estimated the UN force commander General Cot, with whom he had often met during those days: *"Judging by Cot's reactions, one could not but conclude they were very surprised by the Croatian Army's swiftness and expediency."*[200] Bobetko is partly right, UNPROFOR had been surprised because of its own assessment of the Croatian Army's strength, which for quite a long time was based on statistics, foreign intelligence, JNA data, outside apparel (uniforms, discipline, armament). The military behaviour of Serb officers and soldiers, their apparel, training, discipline, weaponry, strength, the victories of the JNA and Serb armies in fights up until that time gave them the advantage over the newly-formed Croatian Army.[201] The Serbians had a well-organized army, that had secured great territorial gains and it was not too long before the other two belligerent sides, the Croats and Muslims/Bosnians were forced to sign peace- the peace of the losing sides. Croats were (like the Bosnians) a group of wild, untidy and unconvincing soldiers.[202] Therefore the question: how could "such an army" suddenly start counting its victories. Therefore UNPROFOR wished to punish it. General Cot didn't hide the fact that he liked the Serbs. He often went visiting Serb General Novaković in Knin. He felt his moment of decision, firmness and glory had come. He would impose a peace, he would be that strong arbitrator able to decide,[203] and not the weak,

unconvincing mediator and an aide to help achieve peace and assure that UN decisions were implemented on the ground. He was not impressed by the Croatian Army's efficiency. When speaking with General Bobetko he did not chose his words – at the time he thought Croats were stalling (that was Cot's understanding). We were asking for more time in order to withdraw all the Croatian troops (Bobetko's attitude) and all of that happened before the first bodies killed in the Medak Pocket were found[204]. General Cot wanted to be the protagonist who would decide how to deal with the new crisis. He was on the ground and not some high-ranking UN bureaucrat – they were sitting in New York and Zagreb. He flew to Knin, Gračac, Medak and immediately knew who the aggressor and the guilty party was.[205]

General Cot demanded Lt. Colonel Calvin be decisive and assert pressure, even to "bluff" the Croatians, which according to Calvin, could prove to be a serious mistake.[206] That decisive military attitude, with which Cot wanted to push civilians out of the UN leadership, led to a direct conflict with UN Security Council General Secretary Boutros Boutros Ghali, who at the beginning of 1994 relieved General Cot of his duties.[207] General Cot has, with "hardened" Canadians and "his" French troops wanted to show and teach the Croats a lesson for having dared to start "an aggression" against so-called "RSK". He was not interested in the fact that the Croats actually undertook a limited action in order to protect Croat civilians from terrorist shelling. Cot asked the UN Secretary General's permission to use air force – the "double key" in decision-making and the command for air strikes be passed directly to the UN military commander. When Ghali refused, Cot threatened to start "lobbying those governments who had their troops in the field and that he would communicate directly with the Security Council.[208] Because of this unseen rejection of civilians in the UN, Cot had been relieved of his duties.

Ten years ago, the international community was not that resolute in judging terrorism. During the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the policy of leniency towards Serbian President Milošević and the Serbs prevailed; their attacks were not considered to be terrorist ones and they were not called criminal acts. The Croatian action had been defined as an aggression, as an attack on a UN protected area, and the Serb entity, which strongly declined all UN and Croatian efforts to achieve a peaceful solution, most often used artillery to attack unprotected Croat civilians. Therefore some individual attitudes that General Cot and UNPROFOR are to be blamed for the death of a couple of hundred Croatian citizens which were killed in Croatia during their mandate are not unusual.[209] During the last ten years, a consciousness about the nature of terrorism has developed, and the need for pre-emptive strikes to prevent terrorist attacks, aggres-

sion and genocide has risen. The 2002 Pulitzer Prize authour, Samantha Power, has dedicated a lengthy book to this problem.[210] She has proven that blunders, especially those in American politics, the terrible consequences of reacting too late in the case of genocide. Several countries, the United States primarily since the September 11th aftermath, tried to prevent terrorist attacks at their roots, in places where they were conceived like training camps. What else was the Croatian armed forces intervention in the Medak Pocket, but a pre-emptive strike to prevent continued terrorism? The fierce, unrelentless and unpunished shelling of Gospić and other cities and towns in Lika lasted for two years. Did Croatia not, after all unsuccessful negotiations, have the right to intervene, to repel the danger, to show its decisiveness? Everything that happened after that, all authors agree that incidents/crimes happened after the military operation had ended, and after the decision to retreat had been made, therefore the legitimacy of the action itself could not be questioned.[211] The linkage which many foreign analyst tries to make between the command to start the action and the crimes themselves can hardly be proven. General Bobetko admits "the stupidities" that happened[212], but these "stupidities" are far from being planned crimes.

"Military Globus HQ"[213] carefully followed the Action, and after it was finished soon made its professional analysis: *"The Croatian Army's action lasted for five (5) hours; two (2) Serb tanks were captured (that data differs from the Ministry of Defence data which states that one tank was taken), 105 millimetre Howitzer, 10 recoilless guns, 10 heavy machineguns, and an enormous amount of small arms and ammunition was taken."* According to the quantity of armour taken, one could approximate the number of soldiers who manned that heavy weaponry and sophisticated technical devices. It was not possible that they were manned by elderly Serbs and women. At least one hundred soldiers trained in the former JNA were needed in order to put those confiscated weapons to use. How many more soldiers there manned the tank company in Medak, the cannons, mortars and anti-aircraft guns? The numbers UNPROFOR mentioned in their report are obviously incorrect. The Serb data about Serbs being killed during the "Ustaša aggression" in the Medak Pocket revealed that the majority of those killed were of the right age for recruitment.[214] The "Globus Military HQ" also added that "700 Četniks were forced to flee" (sic!)[215] (According to Croatian military and police intelligence, in the "Pocket" *there were approximately: 400 soldiers/military personnel – 80 to 100 of them were members of the 103rd Lapac light brigade, 80 were volunteers from Romania"* – among the captured not one of them is mentioned, there were some other volunteers (persons from Glamoč and Teslić) killed. Brigadier Krpina speaks of at least 30 percent of Serb volunteers, among

them there are almost certainly some villagers, members of the territorial defence, and finally there were civilians. "Globus Military HQ" might have exaggerated the number of enemy soldiers, but does the exact assessment of the Croatian victory's strategic consequences – the Ličko polje area and the situation in the Velebit Mountains changed – *"after the Croatian forces took the Velebit Mountains, the majority of Serb Army forces in Dalmatia could easily be encircled, and the rebel Serbs couldn't manoeuvre freely over the Ličko polje anymore – the Serb garrisons in Medak and Gračac could be seen by the Croatian Army like in the palm of one's hand. The Operation surprised not only Serb terrorists but UNPROFOR, whose forces had a wide intelligence network at their disposal, spread from both sides of the demarcation line."*[216] That assessment about the UNPROFOR intelligence service network was not exact. UN intelligence reports forecasted that area should be very quiet in the period ahead – but others, the British, mentioned by General Wahlgren, *("The English had in the former Yugoslavia an intelligence network dating back to World War 2- the direct intelligence is handed to co-president of the peace conference Lord Owen personally"),*[217] were more accurate. Why would SAS members be in Medak if they did not expect anything to happen?! The "Globus Military HQ" concludes: *"On a tactical level, the Croatian Army showed it could make the right assessment of its own force, the force of the enemy, it could plan the action and execute it with precision."*[218]

"What was achieved by this action?" – the "Globus Military HQ" asks: *"The effective answer was given to the rebel Serbs frequent terrorist attacks (on Pakrac, Sivac, Nemetin, Gospić, Kusonje), the places where (immediately before the Operation started – author's note) 11 members of the Croatian Army and police had been killed – were vindicated. Seven hundred Četniks ran in disarray, 60 of them were liquidated and ten rebels were captured. The Croatian Army now controlled the Medak-Lovinac-Gračac road. Taking into consideration the previous operations done in the Dalmatian area, (Maslenica, Peruča), this was the other end of the pincer movement which the Croatian Army was closing around the Maslenica bridge, the most critical point for Croatia. (The first end of the pincer movement went through Ličko polje towards Gospić, and the other from Šibenik towards Knin – author's note).*[219]

Croatian weekly "Nacional" journalist Robert Bajruši, after speaking with Milo Kosović the Gospić homeguard battalion commander, describes the battalion's engagement in attack that spearheaded to Divoselo, Počitelj and Čitluk: *"The battalion commenced the attack but the Četniks waited for us, intercepted us with heavy artillery fire, and we had to, in order to pull our wounded out, retreat to our starting positions."*[220] This was why the 9th

brigade slowed its advancements pace, and why the encirclement (ideated by General Bobetko, Ademi and Norac) was not completed in time and an escape route for Serbs to cross the Velebit Mountain woods and move to Gračac was formed. Later too, in the "Bljesak" and "Oluja" Operations, the Croatian Army and police deliberately kept such corridors open for Serb civilians and their army to pull out. Kosović says he realized: *"We wouldn't be successful using only small arms. So I ordered a heavy artillery attack on the enemy, after which we commenced our advancement. We broke through the Serb defence this time. They started running away. It was three or four hours from when the action started that we took our designated targets."*[221] It is possible that among those fleeing were the 107 men from the Lapac light brigade that were later found in Gračac. The fleeing Serb soldiers arrived to Medak where fellow Serbs laid harsh blame for their cowardice in the battle.[222] *"When we reached our task designated by Mirko Norac we stopped. Unlike the 9th brigade, our battalion did not have a single man killed. During the second day of the Action I got an order from Mirko Norac to re-deploy towards Medak because we expected Serbs would use that place to start their counter-attack. We dug in near the Kriva Rijeka, expecting a counter-attack, and instead, two kilometres away two UN armoured personnel carriers appeared and took that position."*[223] From this account it is unclear whether Kosanović's soldiers attacked Medak at all. On that day, September 10th, It is unclear whether the Croatian Army attacked Medak as UN sources reported. During the first day of the Action, the "Vukovi" reached "the first houses at Medak," then retreated. This second day of the Action the UN reported that "Serb refugees started walking towards Gračac" and therefore they were unable to counterattack as Kosanović and his homeguard battalion expected them to do. What is important in the Kosanović report is that instead of the Serbs counter-attacking, two UNPROFOR APC's appeared in front of the Croats. This means that on September 10th the Canadians deployed in Kriva Rijeka in front of the Serb lines, or mingled with the Serbs as they had stated, protecting them, and positioning themselves in front of the "aggressor" – the Croats. All of this was done prior to any negotiation or agreement being reached.

Brigadier General Bo Pellnas immediately rushed to Knin, to talk to Serbs General Novaković; he conveyed their ultimatum and demands back to Ademi in Gospić. Where was the UN's neutrality there? They considered their neutrality to be the equal treatment of terrorists and their "parastate" with the legal army of a sovereign state, and the latter's legal defence of civilians to be an aggressive act. Kosanović underlines: *"Back in 1991, on one such occasion we tried to take Divoselo, but because of the peace talks*

we had to withdraw. Back then a couple of houses were destroyed."[224] Houses in Divoselo were also destroyed in an action undertaken a couple of months prior to the Medak Pocket Operation in 1993, when local homeguard troops backed by a mechanized platoon from Gospić took and partly burned the village. The damage inflicted and the aremd persons(soldiers and civilians) killed in that action could have been later mistakenly added by UNPROFOR and UNCIVPOL to the total number of killed in the later operation.[225]

When that data is added to the ICTY depositions of Brigadiers' Krpina and Merčep, would the number of destroyed houses for what Croatian Generals stand indicted for be subtracted by at least a few? Will we be able to put some order in the given data and make some sense out of them?

"What is the truth about the Medak Pocket?" a journalist asked Brigadier and Ministry of Defence Police Department Commissioner Drago Krpina at a press conference in Gospić. During that press conference Brigadier Krpina at first tried to justify the action by explaining the facts that preceded it. *"Up until September 9th we noticed enemy forces bringing in terrorist reinforcements from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. We had intelligence about the enemy terrorist commando attacks against Croatia being prepared. These attacks already happened – in August and in the first couple of days of September 11 Croatian soldiers and policemen were killed. In the first days of September, Gospić was under constant artillery fire. On September 9th the fiercest attack happened which as a consequence had the Croatian army counterattack."*[226] Brigadier Krpina's claims were proven by the numbers killed on both sides. Members of the 9th guard mobile brigade: Siniša (Cvjetko) Rosuljaš-Oluja was killed on July 30th 1993 on the Begluk position near Ribnik; Ivica Jakovac was killed on June 6th 1993 on Medovača along with Damir Habijanac.[227] There were also 2 special police members killed on the Velebit Mountains. The data from the enemy side states that Miloš Đuro Rajčević, member of the 2/9th Gračac mobile brigade was killed on September 7th in the Divoselo, Medak area by a Croatian homeguard sniper.[228] If the Serbs had not resisted, as claimed in the UNPROFOR report later to become an official UN and ICTY document and ICTY basis for the indictments of Generals Bobetko and Ademi, how could there have been victims on the Croatian side?! Drago Krpina claims the opposite, *"In the Medak Pocket, the Serbs put up fierce resistance. Ten Croatian soldiers and 22 civilians were killed during the Medak Pocket liberation. This further proves that the Croatian police paid a heavy price for that action.*[229] Krpina has tried to answer the accusations of destroying and burning houses with credibility stating: *"The Serb houses were military fortifications, so*

they were destroyed during the September 9th action. Some of these houses were destroyed back in 1991." This statement is corroborated by Mile Kosović, *"And the destruction continued in the exchange of artillery fire."* Krpina claimed: *"Some of the houses were destroyed by terrorists themselves, the rest were destroyed later, perhaps on purpose. The iron beds found within houses were proof of their military use."* This case study's writer has himself seen one such house during the "Oluja" Operation in a village above Sunja, close to abandoned Serb positions. The first floor was covered with wooden bunks where soldiers slept while the cellar was an ammunitions and explosives depot. It was set up like an army barracks.

The Croatian Army handed in 52 terrorist corpses.[230] "Various documents were found on. A war diary with artillery co-ordinates to shell Gospić were found on Stevo Uzelac"[231] *"The Croatian army took 10 terrorists prisoners. Twenty people were hiding in the bushes (they were alive and unhurt and were brought to UNPROFOR). "Fourteen more people were found and were escorted from the area and transported to Senj, where they were sent to relatives in Rijeka, Pula and Zagreb."*[232]

We can calculate the Operation's data based on General Bobetko's data. "The whole battalion was wiped out." A battalion in organized armies is 400 to 500 soldiers strong (three platoons, a logistics unit and command). In the army/police like the RSK had, the battalion was half that size. The Croatian army and police assess the entire enemy force in the Medak Pocket to be 400 men/soldiers strong.

"Globus Military HQ" says 700 Serb soldiers ran in disarray, 60 of them were killed and 10 were captured". Krpina states that 52 were killed, 10 captured, and 20 or so people were hiding in the woods and surrendered. None of them were hurt. Fourteen civilians were found in the area and were left to freely join their relatives. "Globus" quotes Serbian sources citing about 107 soldiers saved from the Gračac brigade.In former French OP in Medak wrere sheltered 15 Serbs (Canadian source). In all, 70 or 96 soldiers and civilians were killed or captured out of 200/400/700 soldiers and civilians in the area before the Operation started. Of these, at least 107 were safely returned to Gračac. The UN also points out that on September 10th the retreat of civilians to Gračac was noted. It was also known that children had been evacuated earlier. The difference in numbers appears in Canadian sources as well. Numbers differ in the foreign, Croatian press, Sava Štrbac's data and the ICTY indictments. They also differ in "Veritas" and the official Serb register. The Serbs were prone to such inconsistencies in facts, making it is easier to accuse the Croatian side for disappearances and crimes. The weekly magazine "Arena"[233] did in-depth research on the

numbers game played. Reporters discovered people listed as dead in the ICTY Gotovina indictment, to be alive and living in Serbia or in the Republika Srpska.

The battalion in disarray made 400 men, if there was 700 in all minus 60 killed and 10 taken prisoner, it would have equalled 630 men. According to Krpina, the numbers killed and captured was 96, plus 107 soldiers saved. The question remains, are there still any living persons listed as dead? The numbers differ. We will try to prove if some of the living were listed as dead in the Medak Pocket Operation in the Crime and its Victims chapter of this case study.

Even if proven, it would not make us less shocked by the killing of innocent victims and the consequent manipulation of their numbers. To trace the perpetrators of these crimes is not the aim of this study. This is to be done by investigators, prosecutors and the courts. The effort to establish a precise number of those killed, wounded and those that survived is the goal one should try and reach. Only then can one reach the truthful account of the Operation's tragic civilian victims.

Two months after the Operation, when the second anniversary of the 9th brigade was celebrated, the magazine "Hrvatski Vojnik" carried a short article explaining the events that took place: *"Gospić had taken the brunt of the Četnik's rage because of the Croatian soldiers successes at Maslenica and the Velebit Mountains. UNPROFOR was powerless. In some instances it covered up Četnik terrorist crimes. The worst provocations came from Divoselo, Čitluk and Počitelj. The Četnik artillery mercilessly pounded the innocent civilian population. The quick and successful operation followed – villages were liberated and the terrorists were defeated. The "Vukovi" showed how they fought for Croatian freedom."*[234]

Meeting with department commanders of the main staff HQ, General Bobetko summarized the Operation's development: *"The Lika situation had been solved in a fortunate and organized manner. The team that went to the area to organize our forces orderly retreat did it extremely well."*[235] The General would in 2002, deny that part of his statement and accused the co-ordination staff (General Stipetić and Admiral Domazet), of "escaping" to Zagreb before their job was finished. Both of the mentioned officers denied such accusations publicly and when they were summoned to give witness reports to the ICTY.[236] Sources mention a report that Admiral Domazet handed to President Tuđman on another occasion. He admits he gave that report to the Croatian army HQ (now it is at the ICTY's disposal). In the report Domazet allegedly allowed *"the possibility that during the withdrawal operations, crimes were committed."*[237] Without having the document at our disposal we cannot either confirm or deny the existence of such a

claim. General Bobetko further informed his staff: *"We have remained on the dominant points, which gave us the operative advantage. I ordered our forces to stay in a strong formation. There was a danger the Četniks would not enter the UNPROFOR controlled area, but the UN should not have allowed such incursions."*[238] The Četniks did enter the area and engaged Croatian forces even after September 17th at 18:00 hours when the Croatian Army and Ministry of the Interior special police withdrew to their designated positions.[239] Not only did they sneak in during the night, but they also used to squeeze in between Canadian and Croatian lines to shoot at Croatian positions in full daylight.[240] The misunderstanding with the Canadians continued. Canadians entered the area in a wider depth than agreed upon, bulldozed Croatian positions and ltcol Calvin did not attend the meetings where such problems were being solved. The tactics of the pressure and a bluff, promoted by General Cot, and put into practice by Calvin continued.

"At last night's military council meeting a government body led by Šarinić and Croatian army representative General Stipetić was formed. The task of the body was to contact UNPROFOR forces."[241] It was unusual for General Bobetko to appoint General Stipetić to such a position, especially when nine years later he said Stipetić had run away from the mission. The only excuse for General Bobetko's statement was that water had passed under that bridge.

"In general, the staff and the commanding area of Gospić was fortified, the tasks had been accomplished. There had been some errors committed after the mission was accomplished, some burning was committed after the command to withdraw was given.[242] General Bobetko admits *"errors…burning after the command to withdraw was given."* He repeated the same comments at a VONS[243] meeting. According to the commander of the chief staff HQ given to the operative army brass, it was clear that some soldiers/policemen had committed some "errors", not in accordance with the decision to withdraw command and against their commanding officers' will. This was done against the plan and against their commanders' knowledge. It seems logical that these "errors" were done by some, because of their bitterness in being forced to withdraw and because of the fear that Serbs might return out of a blind revenge. There was only a small possibility that an order was given to commit such crimes as the ICTY indictment explicitly states. The Croatian government reacted to those unlawful acts and criminal acts committed by Croatian citizens wearing army or police uniforms. Soon some commanders were relieved of their duties. The second in command of the Gospić commanding area, General Ademi and Mile Kosović, the Gospić homeguard battalion commander were relieved of their duties.[244] Access to the

Gospić area by MP members sent by Defence Minister Šušak to investigate the possible criminal acts that had been done by Croatian soldiers during and after the Medak Pocket Operation was initially prevented.[245] A report was written and handed to the Minister at the beginning of October. The report states that after interviewing Brigadier Ademi it was concluded the battle with the armed enemy was waged and there were no criminal acts committed. The report also stated that the inquiry will continue in order to discover all the relevant facts and possible perpetrators of such acts would be apprehended. SIS department members were not included in either the planning nor in the Action's execution or control.[246] After UNPROFOR entered the demilitarized arena, Croatian civil and military police were prevented any further access. Why any further measures were not taken – the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators – was to be decided by a court. According to the Croatian army HQ situation report, (on the basis of the district command post Gospić data), the main objective of the Operation was accomplished. The enemy that had been deployed on the Gospić-Medak-Gračac perimeter was now holding an unfavourable position. This would allow some future Croatian forces the possibility to deploy in a better operational and tactical position. The possibility of Serb enemy attacks on Gospić were averted. Apart from undoubted military and tactical gains, Croatia had, according to Croatian military analyst assessments, suffered political and propaganda damage. It had to return a liberated area (one should underline – under the UN's protection). "RSK" was given the possibility to again call Croatia an aggressor (sic!). At his HQ meeting, General Bobetko concluded his analysis: *"The anti-aircraft defence in Lika failed. This is where one should look for reasons that led to the uncompleted mission. I warned that Četniks would take retaliatory measures, and that in the frame of the command post we should organize ambushes to prevent any surprise."*[247] On several occasions the Četniks had tried, but never with such strength and determination as before the Medak Pocket Operation, to retake that area.

Is the Croatian military sources claim that Serbian forces were preparing the attack on Gospić and cutting off the Gospić-Karlobag communication, thus taking the Velebit Mountains and cutting Croatia in half valid? Is the claim that the Medak Pocket Operation was an operation imposed on Croatia correct? From confiscated Serbian documents it is visible that their forces reconnaissance incursions were executed and the Velebit Mountains were under constant Serb military command control. The constant Serb efforts to fortify Divoselo and the Medak Pocket defence are well documented, the volunteer reinforcements influx is proven, as well as Serb appeals to strengthen that important part of "RSK". By taking into account the complete military, political and

geostrategic position of the "RSK," that suffered a drastic change with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina gaining momentum, and because of the moral and psychological downfall of that parastate, it was obvious that the "RSK" did not have the necessary force to execute the planned action of cutting Croatia in half.

Would it therefore be possible to say that Croatia and her army invented the reasons to attack Medak Pocket? No matter what negative consequences the Operation bore (the breaches of war and the alleged war crimes), I am of the opinion that the military/police operation in the Medak Pocket was a legitimate one. Such was also the conclusion of the Croatian Supreme Constitutional Court. It was part of a military and political strategy, led by Croatia, in order for it to reach its full sovereignty. Sovereignty was not merely "served to Croatia on a platter" by the unwilling international community or rebel Croatian Serbs backed by the SR Yugoslavia and Slobodan Milošević. Only the strong would know how to take what was rightfully theirs.