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**Militarized Refugee Populations:
Humanitarian Challenges in the Former Yugoslavia**

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MILITARIZED REFUGEE POPULATIONS: HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA¹

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This paper examines the conditions under which refugee flows cause conflict to spread across borders. In order to develop propositions, the paper studies a group of Bosnian Muslim refugees who formed an army to retake their hometown. The situation of those refugees suggests that external political conditions, especially support from the refugee receiving state, determined the ability of the refugees to mobilize militarily. The presence of non-civilian elements among the refugees and the influence of powerful refugee leaders acted as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions that led to violence. The Bosnian Muslim case confirms that the actions of humanitarian agencies are constrained by the level of available resources and the attitude of the receiving state. Within those constraints, UNHCR and NGOs may attempt to prevent, reduce, or ignore political violence that involves refugees.

INTRODUCTION

If asked about the activities of refugees during the war in former Yugoslavia, most observers quickly assert that Bosnia is not the right place to study militant refugees. Other observers counter, with an equally broad sweep, that *all* male refugees were militarized due to forced conscription into one or another state army.³ By studying a group of Bosnian refugees, this paper seeks to clarify the conditions under which refugee flows cause conflict to spread across borders. In order to develop propositions, the paper examines a group of Bosnian Muslim refugees who formed an army to retake their hometown. The situation of those refugees suggests that external political conditions, especially support from the refugee receiving state, determined the ability of the refugees to mobilize. The presence of non-civilian elements among the refugees and the influence of powerful refugee leaders acted as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions that led to violence.

This research also asks what role the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian actors can play in preventing the spread of violence.

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³ UNHCR personnel, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998 and NGO staff, interview by author, Split, Croatia, June 1998. On forced conscription in Croatia see Human Rights Watch, *Civil and Political Rights in Croatia* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1995).

The Bosnian Muslim case confirms that the actions of humanitarian agencies are constrained by the level of available resources and the attitude of the receiving state. Within those constraints, UNHCR and NGOs may attempt to prevent, reduce, or ignore political violence that involves refugees.

Refugee involvement in political violence, where it occurs, presents a serious threat to regional stability. In his address to the nation on the eve of the NATO bombing campaign in Kosovo, President Clinton warned that the movement of thousands, if not millions, of refugees from Kosovo would exacerbate the threat of regional violence in the Balkans.⁴ The mass exodus of ethnic Albanians from Kosovo in the spring of 1999 justifiably raised fears of a wider war. One UNHCR official expressed concern that the Serbs would target the refugee camps because “the refugee population and the KLA [Kosovo Liberation Army] are closely linked.”⁵ Observers have also reported that the KLA has forcibly conscripted refugee men into the rebel army.⁶ The most extreme fear is that Kosovar refugees may cause ethnic conflict in Macedonia by upsetting the existing balance there between ethnic Albanians and ethnic Macedonians.⁷

This paper focuses on how refugee flows, such as the exodus from Kosovo, can lead to the spread of political violence across borders. Political violence, as distinguished from criminal violence, is defined as organized violent activity for political goals. Although political activity occurs in many, if not most, refugee populated areas, political violence involving refugees occurs less often and can range from sporadic riots or beatings to full-fledged war. Indicators of a high level of political violence include cross border raids by militias based in or near refugee camps, attacks on the refugee population by the sending state, or military involvement by the refugee receiving and/or sending states.

Political violence often occurs in the context of a militarized refugee population. Militarization describes non-civilian attributes of refugee populated areas, including inflows of weapons, military training, and recruitment. Militarization also includes actions of refugees and/or exiles who engage in non-civilian activity outside the refugee camp, yet who depend on assistance from refugees or international organizations.⁸ It follows that demilitarization is the delinking of the refugee populated area from military actors and military activity, and respect by all parties for international law relating to the protection of refugees.⁹ Militarization can occur due to the presence of soldiers or militant exiles

⁴ President Bill Clinton, “If We Don’t Act, the War Will Spread,” excerpts from news conference (Federal Document Clearing House March 20, 1999), A08.

⁵ James Rupert, “Kosovo Army Not All-Volunteer,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 1999, A14.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The International Crisis Group, “Macedonia: Toward Destabilization? The Kosovo Crisis Takes its Toll on Macedonia,” [http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/sbalkans/reports/mac08rep.htm], May 17, 1999.

⁸ The term exiles refers to people, including soldiers and war criminals, who left their country of origin but who do not qualify for refugee status. Exiles and refugees may live indistinguishably in camps, as they did in Zaire after the exodus from Rwanda.

⁹ International law requires the protection of refugees and prohibits refugee participation in destabilizing activity. See the United Nations, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Chapter 1, General Provisions, Article 1, 1951 and Organization of African Unity, *Convention Governing the Specific*

(including war criminals) who live in or near the refugee populated area and interact with the refugees. Refugees or exiles who store arms and train outside the camp, yet return to the camp for food, medical assistance, and family visits, create a militarized refugee population. In eastern Zaire, for example, one influential Rwandan Hutu militant purchased a house and a banana plantation in South Kivu after helping perpetrate the 1994 genocide. From his plantation, he sheltered other militants and recruited refugees for cross-border raids into Rwanda. His activities endangered the refugee population and threatened the Rwandan government.¹⁰

Despite the potential political and security risks posed by refugee situations, no theory exists to explain militarization of refugee populated areas. Thus, the states and agencies adversely affected do not have any systematic framework to guide the development of policy for coping with military activity that involves or affects refugees. Critics of refugee relief find that, in some cases, humanitarian assistance actually provides a military advantage to one group of combatants.¹¹ The Bosnian cases chosen for analysis in this paper demonstrate that, under certain circumstances, the spread of political violence due to refugee flows can be contained. The following section of the paper provides a brief review of the relevant theoretical literature. The main body of the paper then analyses the political relationships that preceded the breakaway of the Muslim enclave and elaborates on the case of the Velika Kladusa refugees who formed an army, yet eventually were demilitarized. From the experience of those refugees, propositions on the causes of political violence involving refugees are derived. The paper concludes with remarks on the challenges faced by humanitarian agencies.

REFUGEES AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

Two bodies of literature contribute to propositions on the spread of political violence due to refugee flows—international relations and refugee studies. Until recently international relations scholars tended to ignore the political and military implications of refugee movements. Current advances in the theory of civil war now highlight the implications of civil and ethnic wars that spill across borders, although Michael Brown admits that “no systemic study exists of the ways in which internal conflict engages and involves neighboring states.”¹² Although most scholars agree that the presence of refugees and diasporas affects the security and foreign policy of sending and receiving states, international relations literature rarely addresses the issue directly.¹³

Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, 1969.

¹⁰ Africa Rights, “Witness to Genocide. John Yusufu Munyakazi: The Killer Behind the Refugee,” *Africa Rights* 6 (June 1997).

¹¹ Ben Barber, “Feeding Refugees or War,” *Foreign Affairs* 76, No. 4 (July/Aug 1997), 8-14.

¹² Michael E. Brown, “Introduction,” in *The International Dimensions of Internal Conflict*, ed. Michael E. Brown (Cambridge, MA: Center for Science and International Affairs, 1996), 25.

¹³ On international relations and civil war see David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, ed., *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); David Carment and Patrick James, ed., *Wars in the Midst of Peace* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997); Steven R. David, “Internal War: Causes and Cures,” *World Politics* 49 (July 1997); Daniel Byman and Stephen

Refugees and exiles can contribute to the internationalization of civil war in many ways, yet theories that treat refugees as an independent variable often do not specify the mechanisms by which refugee movements lead to the spread of conflict. Brown limits his analysis to comments on “waves of refugees and motley gangs of renegade troops” that “crash across borders.”¹⁴ Ben Barber offers a more precise analysis in his scathing attacks on humanitarian aid to refugees as a cause of war. He argues that “the packed camps, protected by international sympathy and international law, provide excellent cover for guerrillas and serve as bases from which they can launch attacks.”¹⁵ Building on the civil war literature, this paper attempts to operationalize refugee populations as an independent variable.

The refugee studies literature does not offer systematic study of the security implications of refugee populations either, although there is growing attention to the issues of security threats and military activity.¹⁶ Myron Weiner contends that refugee flows can be understood “both as cause and consequence of international conflict.”¹⁷ Similarly, Gil Loescher finds that “the activities and ambitions of the refugees themselves, as well as those of the governments of asylum and of the guerrilla movements in both sending and receiving states, are additional significant factors in the prolongation and complexity of refugee problems.”¹⁸ Zolberg, Suhrke, and Aguayo offer a brief, but seminal, contribution to the list of challenges posed by refugee participation in war. Their analysis recognizes the dangers created by militarized refugees, even when the violence does not occur in the refugee camps.¹⁹

THE VELIKA Kladusa REFUGEES

A particularly interesting, yet relatively unexamined, instance of political violence concerns the refugees created as a result of the actions of a breakaway Muslim faction led by the

Van Evera, “Why They Fight: Hypotheses on the Causes of Contemporary Deadly Conflict,” *Security Studies* 7, No. 3 (Spring 1998), 1-50; Michael E. Brown, et. al., ed., *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996-97). Specifically on refugees, see Barry Posen, “Military Responses to Refugee Disasters,” *International Security* 21, No. 1 (Summer 1996), 72-111.

¹⁴ Brown, “Internal Conflict and International Action,” in Brown, *The International Dimensions*, 612.

¹⁵ Barber, 8.

¹⁶ Cheryl Bernard offers an analysis of the political implications of refugee movements that touches on security issues. See Bernard, “Politics and the Refugee Experience” *Political Science Quarterly* 101, No. 4 (1986), 617-636. Kathleen Newland focuses on how to reduce the number of refugees from ethnic conflicts without addressing the propensity of refugees to cause or spread ethnic conflict. Newland, “Ethnic Conflict and Refugees,” *Survival* 35, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 81-101. See also Leon Gordenker, *Refugees in International Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ Myron Weiner, “Introduction: Security, Stability, and International Migration” in *International Migration and Security*, ed. Myron Weiner (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Gil Loescher, *Refugee Movements and International Security* (London: Brassey’s for IISS, 1992), 41.

¹⁹ Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 275-278. They use the concept of a “refugee-warrior community” to describe what is termed here a militarized refugee population.

charismatic businessman Fikret Abdic during the war in former Yugoslavia. Under the leadership of Abdic, a group of about 25,000 refugees fled their town—Velika Kladusa in the Bihac pocket—twice during the war in Bosnia. (See timeline, Appendix 1) The first exodus occurred in late 1994 when the Bosnian government army defeated Abdic's forces. That exile ended in early 1995 when the refugees formed an army to retake their hometown from the Bosnian 5th Corps, which was deployed by the Muslim-led government. When the Bosnian Army pushed Abdic's supporters out of Bosnia a second time in August 1995, the exiles were unable to mobilize militarily. The refugees either returned peacefully or resettled to third countries. What accounts for the different outcomes in each case?

The story of Fikret Abdic and his unsuccessful rebellion against the Sarajevo government is often considered an outlier in the overall history of the war in former Yugoslavia.²⁰ Regarding the Abdic refugee situation, UNHCR officials recognized that “the problem may be small relative to the overall numbers of displaced and refugees but it is highly complex and no less politically charged.”²¹ Although the intra-Muslim conflict defies conventional wisdom about ethnic conflict and ethnic affinity, it provides a uniquely helpful case for the study of political violence among refugee populations. By examining the same population twice within a single conflict, the researcher controls for multiple variations that would impede comparison of refugees across conflicts. Later refinement of the propositions developed in this paper will probe differences between paired populations from the same conflict, for example Rwandan Hutu refugees in Zaire versus those in Tanzania.

*Refugees and the War in the Former Yugoslavia*²²

The break up of the Soviet empire, and resulting insecurity, contributed to political upheaval and ethnic tension in Yugoslavia after 1989.²³ In 1991, Slovenia and Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia, claiming fears of Serb domination of the federation. The secession, and perceived mistreatment of the Serb minority in Croatia, led to war between Serbia and Croatia. In the multi-ethnic state of Bosnia, wedged between Serbia and Croatia, the majority Muslims felt threatened by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav federation. Against the wishes of Bosnian Serbs, the state government decided to secede from Yugoslavia in 1992. Over the course of the ensuing war, Croatians and Muslims alternately fought each other and allied against the Serb forces. Within the Croat-Muslim-Serb hostility, a small intra-Muslim conflict emerged in northwest Bosnia. This paper examines the refugees created by that rebellion against the Sarajevo government.

²⁰ In the words of one journalist, a “bloody fratricidal sideshow.” Charles Lane, “Picked Pocket,” *The New Republic*, Dec. 19, 1994, 14.

²¹ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy for Former Yugoslavia—External Relations Unit, *Information Notes on Former Yugoslavia* (UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy for Former Yugoslavia—External Relations Unit, September 1994).

²² For a good account of the war, see Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia, Death of a Nation* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

²³ Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, No. 1 (Spring 1993), 27-47.

The war created millions of refugees and internally displaced persons. At the height of the displacement crisis, “fully half of Bosnia’s pre-war population was dead or uprooted.”²⁴ Most refugees did not live in camps but were either privately housed or accommodated in collective centers (schools, hotels, army barracks, etc.).²⁵ Refugee populations were composed primarily of women, children, and the elderly. For refugee men, militarization took the form of forced conscription and did not directly affect the provision of assistance to other refugees. For example, in late 1992 and 1993, Croatian officials forcibly repatriated draft-age Bosnian males to fight in the Bosnian army as part of a friendship agreement between the two states.²⁶ When the alliance between the Muslims and Croats collapsed in 1993, Croatia forcibly repatriated Bosnian men to Bosnian Croat prison camps rather than to the Bosnian Army. In the summer of 1993, after strong protests by UNHCR and the international community, the Croatian government stopped arresting and repatriating Bosnian refugees. The vast majority of refugees did not engage in political violence or military activity while receiving humanitarian assistance. An exception to that pattern was the group of refugees from Velika Kladusa who formed an army while benefiting from UNHCR support.

Background of the Muslim Rebellion

The town of Velika Kladusa, Fikret Abdic’s power base, nestles in the far northwest corner of Bosnia, in the Bihac region. After the Second World War, Bihac was one of the poorest areas in Yugoslavia.²⁷ Abdic transformed the region into a highly profitable industrial center. Through his company, Agrokomerc, he controlled virtually every aspect of the economy. His empire included local television and radio stations (invaluable resources for the later war against the Sarajevo government).²⁸ By providing lucrative employment and a high standard of living, Abdic secured the undying loyalty of most of the inhabitants of Bihac, especially those in Velika Kladusa.²⁹

In what had seemed a permanent defeat, Abdic spent two years in prison under investigation for commercial crime until his release in 1989.³⁰ The temporary setback slowed his rise to power, but not his popularity. A resilient politician and businessman,

²⁴ US Committee for Refugees, *World Refugee Survey* (Washington DC: Immigration and Refugee Services of America, 1994), 130. In 1993 the number of refugees from the former Yugoslavia totaled 1.3 million, with an additional 1.6 million internally displaced. US Committee for Refugees, 42.

²⁵ For example, in 1993 Croatia hosted 800,000 refugees and displaced persons. Of those, 55,000 lived in collective centers, 89,000 lodged in hotels, and the rest stayed with host families. Department of Humanitarian Affairs, *United Nations Revised Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal for Former Yugoslavia, April-December 1993* (Geneva, March 1993), 29.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch.

²⁷ For more information on the history of Velika Kladusa, see Misha Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 152-154.

²⁸ Igor Ivancic, interview by author, Split, Croatia, June 1998. Tanwir Shahzada, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

²⁹ Anna Husarska, “Pocket Change,” *The New Republic* (July 19 and 26, 1993), 9.

³⁰ The government accused his company, Agrokomerc, of issuing \$1 billion in unbacked promissory notes, which created havoc in the banking industry. Misha Glenny, “The Godfather of Bihac,” *New York Review of Books* (August 12, 1993).

Abdic bounced back from prison and bankruptcy to become one of the ten members of the Bosnian presidency in 1991. While he actually won more votes than any candidate in Bosnia in the 1991 regional elections,³¹ a still-unexplained intra-party deal gave the presidency to Alija Izetbegovic.³²

Observers agree that the residents of Velika Kladusa treated Abdic “like a god” and “were ready to do whatever he said.”³³ One vivid image captures the reverence his followers held for him. After his release from prison in 1989, Abdic desired a triumphal entry into Velika Kladusa. For his return from incarceration supporters lined the main road, chanting “*Babo, Babo,*” or “Daddy, Daddy.” As his white Mercedes car entered town, supporters slaughtered an ox in the road. Perhaps prophetically, Abdic’s convoy arrived home splashed in ceremonial blood.³⁴

In order to understand the dynamics of the later violence, it is necessary to trace the political and military relationships built by Abdic even before the war. When war broke out between Serbia and Croatia in 1991, Abdic’s political and economic fortunes were governed by the complex political connections he had forged with the belligerents.

The Abdic empire, built around Agrokomerc, depended on a dangerous and delicate web of trade links, involving Croatia (which gave Mr. Abdic a free port in Rijeka), its Serbian enemies in Knin, the Bosnian Serb army besieging fellow Muslims in the Bihac pocket, and Belgrade.³⁵

That history of dealmaking stood him in good stead during the siege of Bihac in 1993. Although other parts of the enclave starved, residents of Velika Kladusa survived on smuggled and black market food.³⁶ As usual, “Babo” took care of his people.

By spring 1992, the 6,000 square miles of the Bihac pocket were surrounded on four sides by hostile forces—the breakaway Republic of Serb Krajina (carved out of Croatian territory) to the west and north, and Bosnian Serbs to the south and east.³⁷ (See Map, Appendix 2.) The locally-situated 5th Corps of the Bosnian army was poorly armed and unable to defend Bihac in case of attack. A French battalion arrived as part of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in February 1993 but its mandate was limited.³⁸

³¹ Abdic received 1,010,618 votes to Izetbegovic’s 847,386. Silber and Little, 211.

³² Many interpretations of this supposed secret deal have been offered. Abdic has claimed he was forced to give up the presidency but at other times has stated his desire to forgo national politics for his business interests. UNHCR officials, interview by author, July 1998.

³³ Ivancic, June 1998 and Gonzolo Vargaz Llosa, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

³⁴ Igor Ivancic, story told by eyewitness, interview by author, June 1998.

³⁵ Emma Daly, “Is Life Really Worth Living Under King Babo?” *The Independent*, July 30, 1994.

³⁶ Husarska, 9.

³⁷ Serb-held Croatia included the Krajina area. The Serb-held areas hosted a United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) which renamed the area United Nations Protection Areas (UNPAs). UNPA South and North bordered the Bihac region.

³⁸ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, February 1993. For more information on UNPROFOR see Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, Refugee Project. *Protection by Presence? The Limits of United Nations Safekeeping Activities in Croatia* (New York, September 1993).

Two reasons explain the continued Muslim control of Bihac, despite its vulnerable position. The large size of the enclave deterred the Serbs from attack, for fear of heavy losses. Secondly, “too many people were making too much money out of it to want it snuffed out.”³⁹ Despite a Serb blockade, the Bosnian 5th Corps successfully fought its way out of the Bihac pocket for a brief period in 1994. The secret of the Bosnian Army’s strength was that “the Bosnian Serbs themselves...had sold the 5th Corps a good part of its weaponry.” The Krajina Serbs even sent food into Abdic’s territory for processing by Agrokomerc.⁴⁰

Abdic loyalists managed to profit from both UNHCR and the UNPROFOR battalion. When UNHCR ran short of vehicles it hired eleven trucks and local drivers from Abdic. In February 1993, that scheme ended in embarrassment when Serbs stopped the trucks at a checkpoint and found about 700,000 Deutsche marks hidden in the door of the trucks.⁴¹ Some UNHCR officials suspected, but never confirmed, that Abdic used the humanitarian convoys to import contraband for a huge profit. Abdic also ran his own for-profit convoy by importing food from Zagreb using French military trucks. In an unorthodox bargain, Abdic traded storage space in Agrokomerc warehouses in exchange for UNPROFOR escorts of Abdic’s imports.⁴²

The war between the Croats and the Bosnian Muslims in 1993 greatly advanced Abdic’s own position and may have spurred him to declare the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia in September of that year.⁴³ A few months after the declaration of autonomy, however, the Washington Framework Agreement of March 1994 enforced an alliance on the Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats (and their allies, the Croatian government).⁴⁴ At least officially, the breakaway Muslim enclave lost Croatia as a source of support.

Some observers speculate that both Croatia and the Serbs tried to use Abdic to meet their own, conflicting, goals. “For the Serbs, Bihac was the missing link needed to join Serb-held land in Croatia and Bosnia to Serbia itself, which is what Croatia wanted to avoid at all costs.”⁴⁵ Unconfirmed stories that Abdic provided intelligence about the Serb positions to the Croatian government could explain Croatian tolerance for Abdic’s behavior and his easy acquisition of Croatian citizenship.⁴⁶ Tactically, the Croatian government needed Bihac in “friendly” hands during the war.

³⁹ Tim Judah, *The Serbs* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 243.

⁴⁰ Judah explains that “so confident were those Serbs, however, of their good relations with their business partners in the 5th Corps that when it launched its attack only 20 per cent of Serbian troops who should have been at their positions along the Bihac front were actually there. Judah, 244-245.

⁴¹ UNHCR officials, interviews by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁴² Husarska, 9-10.

⁴³ Judah, 244.

⁴⁴ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1995), 214-215.

⁴⁵ Silber and Little, 359.

⁴⁶ UNHCR officials, interviews by author, Geneva, July 1998.

Several observers have asserted that Abdic made a fatal political error by declaring autonomy in September 1993. His declaration forced Sarajevo to consider him an enemy and a traitor. Before the declaration, Abdic held a referendum and obtained over 50 percent of the vote in favor of autonomy. He also met with the leader of the Bosnian Army's 5th Corps, Ramiz Drekovic, in an attempt to persuade the army to support secession. Drekovic requested time to consider the plan but Abdic rushed ahead and proclaimed the existence of the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia without the consent of the commander of the 5th Corps. Only two brigades of the 5th Corps defected with Abdic.⁴⁷ The rest of the Bosnian army now targeted Abdic as a dangerous enemy.

Prior to Abdic's secession, the area of Bihac contained about 200,000 people.⁴⁸ Roughly 50,000 lived in the northern part and were fiercely loyal to Abdic. Further south, loyalty to Sarajevo outweighed support of Abdic.⁴⁹ Only the northern part followed Abdic in the declaration of autonomy. The declaration divided neighbors, and even families. The stated reason for secession stressed the radicalization and Islamic fundamentalism of Sarajevo. Abdic claimed he just wanted to follow western capitalism free from ideological restrictions. As one Abdic supporter categorically declared, "Alija Izetbegovic is the biggest Muslim fundamentalist. Fikret Abdic is the best economist and smartest man."⁵⁰ Abdic declared that the enclave enjoyed a more natural linkage with Zagreb than with the rest of Bosnia. As an autonomous territory, he planned to continue dealing with both Croats and Serbs. Abdic followers claimed they enjoyed better food and drink in his army. In addition to practical and self-interested reasons for supporting Abdic, "people had enormous trust in him."⁵¹

Abdic's defection left the remainder of Bihac in dire straits. The 5th Corps fought on four fronts, with no hope of reinforcements. Starvation loomed because the agricultural industries required imported raw materials in order to produce. Until the 1993 declaration of autonomy, some aid had arrived by convoy to the southern part of Bihac. After August 1993, Abdic and the Serbs blocked all aid to the beleaguered south. UNHCR sources reported that "[t]he Bihac pocket, where until recently activities ran very smoothly, has become another source of serious concern: local authorities in Velika Kladusa informed UNHCR and UNPROFOR that convoys would not be allowed into the area before 4 December [1993]."⁵²

⁴⁷ Roger Cohen, "Besieged Bosnian Pocket Fights Sense of Betrayal," *New York Times*, June 26, 1994, 3.

⁴⁸ The 1991 census counted 202,310 Muslims, 6,470 Croats, and 29,398 Serbs in pre-war Bihac. All but 1,000 of the Serbs left when the war began, leaving about 199,000 Muslims and 5,000 Croats. UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, June 1995.

⁴⁹ Abdic's influence controlled Velika Kladusa but dissipated in the south. In the September 1997 elections, Abdic's party won 15 of 24 seats in Velika Kladusa, a third of the seats in Cazin to the south, and zero seats in Bihac town even further south. Stephane Jacquemet, interview by author, July 1998.

⁵⁰ Jonathan S. Landay, "Bosnian Army Takes Control in Rebel Pocket," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 24, 1994.

⁵¹ Ivancic, information gathered from his interviews with 250 Abdic refugees.

⁵² UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, Special Issue. November 29, 1993.

The Bosnian Army launched an offensive against Abdic on June 10, 1994.⁵³ “Both sides reportedly impressed civilians into their armed forces, and detained others whose sympathies were suspect (many families have members on both sides of the conflict).”⁵⁴ The southern part of Bihac was desperate to break the blockade. The Croatian government, pushed into an alliance with Bosnia, “regretfully sacrificed Mr. Abdic—and his cash.”⁵⁵ The 5th Corps overran Velika Kladusa after Abdic refused to recant his declaration of autonomy.⁵⁶

1994 Exodus—Forced Withdrawal to Minefields and Chicken Coops

By August 21st, 1994 over 25,000 people had fled Velika Kladusa in front of the advancing Bosnian Army, creating a 30-mile long stream of people.⁵⁷ They traveled by cars, buses, and tractors, bringing along 100 horses and herds of cattle. Individual motives for flight varied, but most observers agree that political leaders orchestrated the refugee movement.

[Abdic’s supporters] sought to pressure others to leave, and are pressuring them not to return. They exercise effective control over the camps. There are those who fled fearing for their lives as the [Bosnian] army advanced, often reacting to false rumors spread by the first group, a propaganda campaign that began well before the final advance. Others, as witnessed by UNHCR, did not want to flee but were pressured to do so. And there were those who had long intended to leave and saw this as an opportunity.⁵⁸

The refugees ended up in two locations, both in Serb-held Krajina. To the west, about 16,000 people stopped at Batnoga, a disused chicken farm owned by Abdic, only a few kilometers from their home. To the east, 7,000 refugees went to Staro Selo, an area of open ground. After three or four days, “just as assistance was becoming organized, these refugees moved to Turanj at the instigation of the local authorities and Abdic followers, who were encouraging the refugees to force an entry into Croatia proper, and preventing some from returning home.” Some 2,500 of the refugees traveled directly to Turanj, bypassing Staro Selo.⁵⁹

As the refugees moved north, the Croatian government stopped them at Turanj, a destroyed, heavily mined area between the front lines of Croatia and Serb-held Krajina.⁶⁰ (See map, Appendix 3.) Turanj was a depopulated strip of land a few kilometers wide that had been demilitarized when UNPROFOR negotiated a pullback between Serb and

⁵³ Daly, “Is Life Really Worth Living...”

⁵⁴ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, July 1994.

⁵⁵ Daly, “Is Life Really Worth Living...”

⁵⁶ Davor Huic, “Bosnian Troops Take Rebel Stronghold,” *The Guardian*, August 22, 1994.

⁵⁷ “Bosnia Enclave Falls to Army Forces,” *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), August 22, 1994.

⁵⁸ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1994.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Croatian forces. The Serbs allowed the refugees into Turanj at their checkpoint. On their side, Croatian police blocked the border with armored personnel carriers and water cannon, trapping the refugees in no man's land and crushing Abdic's hopes of reaching Croatian territory.⁶¹

In addition to the political desire to gain international attention, pragmatic considerations governed the direction of the refugees' flight. Serb-held Krajina was not the refugees' first choice for an asylum area. As former migrant workers in Croatia, the refugees knew they would find better economic opportunities there. Serb-held Krajina, on the other hand, was practically without water or electricity, and suffered 90 percent unemployment. Ultimately, the refugees' goal was resettlement in Germany or another European state.⁶²

Living conditions in both camps were awful. At Batnoga, the chicken coops had no electricity, little clean water, and insufficient shelter against the cold. In Turanj, sixty percent of the refugees lived in destroyed buildings, thirty percent lived in vehicles, and ten percent slept in UNHCR tents.⁶³ Although the effects of the oncoming winter posed "major health, fire, and security hazards," the refugee leaders discouraged a peaceful return.⁶⁴

UNHCR pressured both the Bosnian government and the leaders of Serb-held Krajina to facilitate a return of the refugees. Sarajevo agreed to offer an amnesty to the refugees and a six-month respite from military service. In vain, UNHCR appealed to the Serbs to ensure that "the refugees receive objective information, have a free choice on return, are not subject to manipulation, and do not engage in acts incompatible with their status."⁶⁵ The Krajina Serbs ostensibly protected the refugees, but also restricted their movement and access to information. Serb and Abdic police guarded the camps in a joint effort to control the inhabitants.⁶⁶

Military cooperation between the Krajina Serbs and Abdic's forces continued during the exile. The Serbs outgunned the Bosnian Muslims but faced a severe disadvantage in the infantry because Serb forces stretched across an impossibly long front-line through Bosnia and Croatia. The 5th Corps had about 14,000 soldiers in Bihac.⁶⁷ Abdic's ability to raise an army complemented the needs of the Serb forces, which were more than willing to provide artillery support.

One observer explained why the Croatians, former allies of Abdic, refused to support the refugees. At the time of the refugee exodus, Croatia and Bosnia were trying to patch up their split. When Abdic was defeated in 1994, the United States and Germany pressured

⁶¹ Adrian Brown, "Major Refugee Crisis Builds Up in Croatia," *The Daily Telegraph*, August 29, 1994.

⁶² Stephane Jacquemet, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁶³ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1994.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, November 1994.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, September 1994.

⁶⁶ Ivancic, interview by author, June 1998.

⁶⁷ Cohen, "Besieged Bosnian Pocket..."

Croatia to remain loyal to Sarajevo. Despite Croatian sympathy for Abdic, he was still a relatively minor player in the war. Politically, Croatia could not risk international support and the alliance with Sarajevo for the sake of Abdic's 25,000 refugees.⁶⁸

Abdic tightly restricted the information that reached the refugees, much to the frustration of international organizations. The relationship between Abdic and the refugees ensured that they trusted implicitly the information produced by his radio station.⁶⁹ International organizations could not develop such a high level of trust, and refugees suspected outside information as biased. The UNHCR had difficulty communicating the Bosnian government's amnesty offer because "the climate of intimidation and the scope for the leadership to manipulate and interpret to the refugees both information and events required caution."⁷⁰

On October 1 1994, the Krajina Serbs agreed to allow distribution in the Turanj camp of a UNHCR note explaining the amnesty offer. The letter, dated September 30 1994, reminded refugees of their duties under international law: "We also need you to understand that refugees must not engage in any hostile acts against either the authorities in their home country or those where they are refugees."⁷¹ UN workers were unprepared for the violent reaction to the note. "Distribution started peacefully with the refugees reading the note, but then the situation rapidly degenerated, as some refugees violently objected to the contents of the note, which they prevented others from reading."⁷² Abdic supporters objected to the note's condemnation of the military preparations for return and the UN's suggestion that a peaceful return was possible. Angry refugees flipped over cars of the UN Civilian Police, and UNHCR workers had to hide in fear for their lives.⁷³ The leaflet incident demonstrated both the importance of information and the difficulty of countering militant propaganda.

In other, less violent ways, Abdic managed to obscure the UN message. When the UN set up a food distribution center for humanitarian aid, the refugee leaders hung a huge billboard of Abdic's face over the food tables.⁷⁴ The refugees were meant to assume that Abdic, not the UN, took care of their needs. With Serb support, Abdic broadcast to the refugees from a radio station in nearby Vojnic.⁷⁵ A UNHCR spokesman complained helplessly of an "orchestrated campaign to prevent refugees getting independent analyses of the situation in Kladusa."⁷⁶

⁶⁸ UNHCR official, interview by author, July 1998.

⁶⁹ Landay.

⁷⁰ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1994.

⁷¹ Entire letter is reprinted in UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, October 1994.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Steve Corliss, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Roger Cohen, "For Rebel Bosnian Muslims, Life in Chicken Coops," *The New York Times*, November 13, 1994.

⁷⁶ Emma Daly, "Muslim Refugees Mass on Croatia's Border," *The Independent* (London), August 31, 1994.

The refugees' utter reliance on Abdic propaganda encouraged hard-line attitudes toward return. As one refugee explained, "We all would rather go home, but not without our Babo."⁷⁷ Since Abdic was wanted for war crimes in Bosnia, a peaceful return with him was not a feasible option. UN negotiators, pressing Abdic and the Krajina Serbs for return, reported that "all talks on the political level with leaders of the refugees have been unsuccessful so far."⁷⁸ Negotiators sensed that Abdic and his allies were willing to hold out for a long-term political solution, using humanitarian aid to support the refugees indefinitely.⁷⁹

Throughout their exile, refugee leaders refused a UN-planned repatriation; instead, they organized for a military return to their hometown. Refugees had few alternatives other than to go along with Abdic's plan. "The likely level of political manipulation against [a peaceful] return was so high that a free and informed choice on their future might be impossible in these circumstances."⁸⁰ A few refugees managed to escape to live with relatives in Croatia. UNHCR resettled nine families who did not want to fight with Abdic. In order to protect the refugees from retaliation, UNHCR had to sneak them out of the camp.⁸¹ Abdic's strategy was to keep the refugees concentrated. He wanted to force entry into Croatia and used international attention on the terrible conditions in Turanj to embarrass Croatia.

Refugees' options were also limited by a lack of opportunities for resettlement, employment, or integration into the local society. Both UNHCR and the Croatian government treated the camps at Batnoga and Turanj as temporary. The refugee leaders met with many European representatives and pleaded for resettlement abroad. All the Europeans stressed the hopelessness of gaining asylum in Europe. Despite Abdic's alliance with the Serbs, there was no question of the Muslim refugees settling permanently in the Serb-held territory.

"The situation for the Abdic refugees was much worse than for the average refugee in Croatia."⁸² In order to encourage return, the Croatian government would not allow the UN to build any permanent structures in the camps. The refugees complained and demanded more assistance in addition to UN-supplied sheeting, food, clothing, and some medicine. The harsh conditions, combined with the impossibility of crossing into Croatia proper, encouraged thoughts of return. However, "a quiet return was not acceptable...and people started to envisage a military solution."⁸³

⁷⁷ Carol J. Williams, "Defying West, Bosnian Muslim Warlord Pushes Followers Toward Croatia," *Los Angeles Times*, August 28, 1994.

⁷⁸ Sergio Mello, UN Director for Civil Affairs, quoted in "UN Tries to Convince Bosnian Moslem Refugees to Return to Bihac," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, August 29, 1994.

⁷⁹ "Bosnian Refugees; Head of EC Monitor Mission Meets Abdic and Mikelic," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, August 30, 1994.

⁸⁰ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1994.

⁸¹ UNHCR official, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁸² Shahzada.

⁸³ Jacquemet.

During the time that the refugees prepared for a military return, it was difficult to determine the extent of their access to weapons. The militants obviously wanted to hide any weapons from UN personnel. Observers agree that “a sizeable portion of the Abdic exiles...fled in uniform with arms.”⁸⁴ The refugees entered the camp with some small arms but stored heavy weapons, including six fifty-year-old Soviet built tanks (donated by the Serbs), outside the camp in Serb-held territory. “Serbian soldiers were seen standing over a huge pile of assault rifles and other military detritus turned over by Abdic’s fleeing troops.”⁸⁵ The refugees were able to buy more weapons from the Serbs to facilitate the return to Velika Kladusa.⁸⁶ Observers commented that young men were recruited from the camp but trained in Serb-held territory. UNHCR was unable to disarm the refugees or control their movements between the camp and Serb-held Krajina.⁸⁷

The situation of Turanj camp, in particular, highlights the difference between militarized refugees and militarized camps. Some UNHCR observers claim that Turanj posed no security problem because there were no arms in the camps. However, they admit, “the Serb territory was the depot.”⁸⁸ Militant exiles left mortars and artillery with the Serbs and then crossed to Turanj to sleep and eat with their families. From the point of view of the beleaguered 5th Corps in Bihac, the location of the arms in the camp or on the borders was a purely academic distinction. The end result—an army of refugees and exiles—was the same.

“As soon as the 5th Corps [now] led by General Atif Dudakovic thrust out southwards from the pocket, the Krajina Serbs began arming Abdic’s men.”⁸⁹ In the second week of November 1994, Abdic “began mobilizing draft age men in the camps to participate in the offensive.” Despite UN protests, between 5,000 and 10,000 refugee men were mobilized.⁹⁰ Abdic and Serb police organized the army and drafted any who were unwilling to serve. One observer estimates that 75% of those who fought did so willingly. People “had a feeling they were fighting for something good.” The idea of return was especially potent because they had previously enjoyed one of the wealthiest lifestyles in Bosnia. Forcibly conscripted refugees reported that they fought because they had no other choice. Escapees were caught and returned to the camp by the Serb police.⁹¹

UN personnel helplessly observed uniformed Serbs and Abdic leaders drafting people in the camps. Serbs positioned their artillery very close to the Batnoga camp, near the Bihac border. UNHCR offered protests but could not compel a halt to the militarization.⁹² When wounded refugee men entered Turanj, UN personnel could not ascertain how or where

⁸⁴ Carol J. Williams, “Muslim’s Drive for Fiefdom Ends in Chaos” *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 1994.

⁸⁵ Landay.

⁸⁶ Judah, 245-246.

⁸⁷ UNHCR officials, interviews by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁸⁸ Benny Otim, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

⁸⁹ Judah, 246.

⁹⁰ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, Update to No. 11/94.

⁹¹ Ivancic.

⁹² UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, Update to No. 11/94.

they had been wounded.⁹³ The only weapon in the UN arsenal was the withdrawal of humanitarian aid. Because that would have deprived dependent families of food, UNHCR continued to provide assistance to the camp.

The Abdic/Serb offensive began in December 1994.⁹⁴ The refugees attacked Bihac using the camps as a base. With Serb support, the refugee army “hit the 5th Corps from behind, so forcing it to fight on two fronts.”⁹⁵ The besieged enclave was weakened by the continued blockade of aid convoys.⁹⁶ By early 1995, the refugee army, with the help of Serb logistics, regained control of Velika Kladusa. As Abdic soldiers retook the town, “Croatian Serb artillery continued to fire towards the internal confrontation line separating the Abdic soldiers from the 5th Corps troops.”⁹⁷ With the invaluable Serb assistance, Abdic reestablished the front line at its July 1994 position. Over a period of five days, Batnoga and Turanj camps emptied of refugees as they returned to Velika Kladusa in the same buses that had carried them out.⁹⁸

1995 Exodus—Demilitarization

In 1995, the Abdic followers found themselves fleeing Velika Kladusa for a second time. This time, the Krajina Serbs were totally defeated, which changed the equation in favor of the refugees returning home peacefully. “As soon as the Krajina Serbs were attacked by the Croats, Abdic’s defenses collapsed.”⁹⁹ The loss of their patron Serbs, combined with Croatian reliance on American support (which mandated an alliance with Sarajevo) left the Velika Kladusa refugees no opportunity to engage in political violence. The political shifts weakened Abdic’s influence in the region, although his people remained fiercely loyal. Additionally, the refugees had more options than they did in 1994, decreasing their enthusiasm for militancy. The same group of refugees faced changed external political conditions, which helped determine their behavior.

Events leading up to the second exile, and final defeat, at first suggested that Abdic might continue to reign in Bihac. Upon regaining power in Velika Kladusa in early 1995, Abdic and his Serb allies continued the Bihac blockade. Disputes over aid convoys sparked fighting between the 5th Corps and its enemies. As the only entrance for the convoys passed through Abdic-controlled territory, UNHCR depended completely on Abdic, even though he “was demanding a larger allocation of aid going into the pocket than UNHCR

⁹³ Otim.

⁹⁴ On the battle for Bihac during 1994, see Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 154-159.

⁹⁵ Judah, 246.

⁹⁶ Between May 1994 and January 1995, only 16 convoys reached Bihac. UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, January 1995.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ 629 refugees decided not to return with Abdic and clustered on the Croatian side of Turanj. UNHCR convinced Croatia to accept those refugees. Ibid.

⁹⁹ Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*, 284.

considered justified.” In March, UNHCR took the drastic step of suspending aid to Velika Kladusa and Serb-held UNPA¹⁰⁰ North in light of their obstruction of aid.¹⁰¹

At the end of July 1995, Abdic and Krajina Serb troops launched an offensive on southern Bihac and made significant gains. The Croatian government, while sympathetic with Abdic, did not want Bihac to fall to his Serb allies. The Croatians and the Bosnians had agreed in the “Split Declaration” of July 1995 to jointly repel Serb aggression.¹⁰² Once again, Croatian sympathy for Abdic (and the desire to do business with him) was overruled by larger political interests.¹⁰³

The Croatian Army began an offensive to retake Serb-held Krajina in the summer of 1995. (See map, Appendix 4.) “Operation Storm” first attacked Serb forces in UNPA North and South.¹⁰⁴ The offensive lasted two or three days in the South and a bit longer in the North. When Krajina collapsed, the Croatians crossed into Bosnia but, unlike the harsh offensive in UNPA North and South, Croatian forces were restrained in the Abdic enclave. Although both the Bosnian and Croatian armies had reorganized and rearmed, the Bosnian 5th Corps posed a greater threat to Abdic’s forces. Abdic quickly surrendered to the Sarajevo government and his followers fled north out of their hometown.¹⁰⁵

During their second flight, the Velika Kladusa refugees did not receive assistance from the Krajina Serbs, who had been routed by the Croatian Army. The refugees crossed the border into Croatia just after the Serbs fled and before the Croatians established border guards. Croatian Special Police stopped the 25,000 refugees on the road near the village of Kuplensko, only 18 kilometers from the Bihac border.¹⁰⁶ The Croatians established a checkpoint and fenced in the area as thousands of people set up camp on a four-kilometer stretch of roadside. The whole situation was very chaotic, as the territory had just been liberated from the Serbs and 150,000 Serbs driven out of UNPA North and South.¹⁰⁷

Initially, UNHCR could not even locate the refugees, although they knew that thousands of people had left Velika Kladusa. The UN had to obtain permission from the Croatian

¹⁰⁰ United Nations Protection Areas. See note 37 above.

¹⁰¹ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, February 1995; March 1995.

¹⁰² Charlotte Eager and Peter Beaumont, “Vengeance Drives Croats Forward,” *The Observer*, July 30, 1995.

¹⁰³ Silber and Little, 357, note that the Croatian military advantage “could only have been derived from their increasingly congenial relationship with the United States.” American support for Croatia played a significant role in the Croat/Muslim alliance. Senior retired US Army officers reorganized the Croatian military, indebting President Tudjman to follow American dictates. See Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*, 283. Also see David Shearer, *Private Armies and Military Intervention*, Adelphi paper 316 (New York: Oxford University Press for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1998), 56-63.

¹⁰⁴ Rumor has it that “a lot was negotiated before the fight” between the Serbs and the Croatians, explaining the lack of Serbian intervention on behalf of the Croatian Serbs. UNHCR officials, interviews by author, July 1998. See also, Glenny, *The Fall of Yugoslavia*, 283-284.

¹⁰⁵ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, August 1995.

¹⁰⁶ For general information, see Norman Erik, “Croatia’s Special Police,” *Jane’s Intelligence Review* 7, no. 7 (1995), 291-293.

¹⁰⁷ UNHCR officials, interviews by author, Geneva, July 1998.

government to enter UNPA North. UNHCR representatives found the refugees surrounded by drunken Croatian soldiers who were attempting to push the refugees back to Bihac. After heated negotiations, Croatia allowed UN food trucks through to the refugees.¹⁰⁸

Despite the changed political circumstances, UNHCR still found it difficult to communicate with the refugees due to the strength of Abdic's propaganda. The refugee leaders accused the UN of bias when it tried to distribute accurate information. The "hard core" leaders, about 500 of them, controlled the camp and violently discouraged attempts to return or speak to outsiders. The refugees made decisions based on the incomplete and biased information provided by Abdic and his supporters.¹⁰⁹

Most observers agree that weapons did not pose a great problem in Kuplensko. Croatian police did not completely disarm the refugees but effectively prevented the group from entering any further into Croatia. As in Turanj and Batnoga, UNHCR lacked any means to disarm or control the refugees. The only military support extended to UNHCR was the United Nations Military Liaison Officer (UNMLO), which acted purely in an advisory capacity. The Officer could explain to the civilian UNHCR about the capability of certain weapons or how, in theory, military maneuvers might be carried out. Any disarmament procedures relied on voluntary compliance and brought in few weapons.¹¹⁰

Refugees began to return home when the influence of their leaders weakened. Once he lost Serb backing, Abdic's leadership was not strong enough to mobilize an army to retake Velika Kladusa. Within Kuplensko, Abdic maintained the loyalty of the refugees but he was unable to capitalize on that loyalty as he had done in 1994. Without the assistance of the Krajina Serbs, who had armed the refugees and policed the camps, Abdic's leaders could not compel unswerving obedience from the refugees for any extended period of time. Some of Abdic's leaders left the camps because they had connections in Croatia or Germany. Others were recruited into "key positions" in the Croatian army. People became discouraged and desired return. The presence of the Croatian police finally put an end to intimidation against return by Abdic supporters.¹¹¹

The majority of the refugees stayed in Kuplensko from August to December 1995. As winter approached, UNHCR focused on repatriating people from the ill-equipped camp. Refugee militants stopped the first group of returnees by surrounding the bus and threatening to blow it up. Croatian police accompanied later buses with a five car convoy to deter intimidation.¹¹²

By June 1996, about 10-15,000 refugees had repatriated peacefully to Velika Kladusa. Women, children, and the elderly usually returned first. Once they reported that the

¹⁰⁸ UNHCR official, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Jacquemet.

¹¹² Mostafa Khezry, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

situation was safe, former soldiers returned to their families. Few violent incidents were reported, although the returnees did face some harassment by political opponents and local police.¹¹³ Five thousand hard core followers of Abdic remained at Kuplensko, refusing to return. Those refugees saw “the camp, which was very close to the border with [Bosnia]—as an effective base for recruiting DNZ (Abdic) party support.”¹¹⁴ As one UNHCR official recalled, “they were a difficult bunch of people.”¹¹⁵

In order to break the political organization of the refugees who were living perilously near the Bosnian border, Croatia relocated the remaining refugees. The refugee leaders, showing their clout, refused to relocate unless ensured of the refugees’ right to vote in the 1996 Bosnian elections.¹¹⁶ Once the United Nations negotiated voting rights, many refugees went to Gasinci camp in eastern Croatia. They lived in a former army barrack while awaiting resettlement to third countries. About 1,200 of the refugees were transferred to Obonjan collective center on a rocky, desolate island.¹¹⁷ Both locations allowed the government to limit the refugees’ movements and contacts with possible militants in Velika Kladusa.

Rather than forming an army, the 5,000 hard-line refugees resettled to third countries. The militants were denied that option in 1994 at Turanj and Batnoga camps. By facilitating return of the compliant refugees, Croatia was able to separate out the trouble-makers and remove them from the border of their homeland. Increasing international acceptance of resettling Bosnian refugees offered a non-violent option to refugees who refused to return home peacefully.¹¹⁸

FINDINGS

What aspects of the Velika Kladusa refugee situation led to the spread of political violence across borders? The comparison of the first and second exoduses reveal many similarities between the two experiences. Focusing on the same group of refugees over time allows the researcher to disregard temporarily many plausible hypotheses about the causes of militarization. Two of the most common propositions include the beliefs that a mixed (civilian and non-civilian) population of refugees causes violence, and that manipulative, ambitious leaders can convince refugees to engage in violence (or hold the refugees hostage). According to the first hypothesis, when militant exiles mix with the refugees, the sending and receiving states may view the entire refugee population as a potential security threat. A mixed population also raises the likelihood of both voluntary and forced conscription of refugees. According to the second hypothesis, manipulation by leaders

¹¹³ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, November 1995, January 1996.

¹¹⁴ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, June/July 1996.

¹¹⁵ UNHCR official, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

¹¹⁶ Quang Bui, interview by author, Geneva, July 1998.

¹¹⁷ Goran Andjelic, interview by author, Split, Croatia, June 1998.

¹¹⁸ The United States eventually accepted about 1,000 of the Velika Kladusa refugees.

can include propaganda or coercion that mobilizes refugees to engage in military activity, convincing them that a peaceful return home is not possible.

At first glance, both those hypotheses offer plausible explanations of the refugees' militancy following their first flight from Velika Kladusa. In both the first and second refugee experiences, the population included non-civilian elements. Most of the male refugees had experience as soldiers, and some even fled in uniform.¹¹⁹ The refugees also followed a manipulative and ambitious leader, Fikret Abdic, throughout their ordeals. The refugee leaders controlled the refugees' access to information and ability to leave the camp. However, because these similarities existed across the two instances of refugee flows studied here, one cannot claim that either the effects of a mixed population or manipulative leaders were solely responsible for militancy in the Velika Kladusa case. It is possible that a non-civilian population and ambitious, powerful leaders are necessary conditions for militarization, but clearly they are not sufficient, since they existed throughout both refugee situations, when the refugees were militarized and when they were not.

The most striking difference in the two refugee situations is the external political environment, particularly the attitude of the receiving state toward the refugees. The Velika Kladusa case highlights the importance of external political conditions that interact with the presence of a mixed population and manipulative leaders. The refugees' political goals did not change between their first and second exiles. The means to carry out those goals changed dramatically, however. In the first departure from Velika Kladusa, Fikret Abdic held complete control over his followers and, by virtue of past financial deals, had some clout with the Krajina Serbs. The combination of Serb artillery and Abdic's soldiers gave the Serbs a temporary advantage over the Bosnian 5th Corps. The receiving "state," the Republic of Serb Krajina, was hostile to the sending state and had the means to arm the refugees for a challenge. In contrast, the 1995 surrender to the Bosnian 5th Corps and the Croatian rout of the Serbs left Abdic with no strong external supporter. Although defeat did not dull the intense loyalty of the refugees to Abdic, the Croatian Special Police limited the extent of possible manipulation and mobilization.

The attitude and relative military capability of the receiving state significantly determined the level of militarization. In the first exile, Krajina Serbs exercised strict control over the camps. Unlike the Croatian government, however, the Serbs used their power to encourage political violence and shield the refugees from international interference. Croatia, the receiving state in the second exodus, possessed both the ability and the willingness to secure the camps. Croatian Special Police guarded the camp and restricted the movements of the refugees, not hesitating to shoot at escapees. Although there were combatants living among the refugees, they were too afraid of the Croatians to organize themselves. Former soldiers removed their uniforms and tried to blend in with the other refugees.¹²⁰ The police also forcefully repatriated some of the men to Bihac. UNHCR

¹¹⁹ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1995.

¹²⁰ Only their combat boots gave away their military status. UNHCR official, interview by author, July 1998.

efforts to winterize the Kuplensko camp were hampered by the “extremely strict control imposed by the Croatian Special Police.”¹²¹ Political willingness and capability of the receiving state to discourage militarization differentiated the two camp experiences.

The experience of the Velika Kladusa refugees suggests the importance of a relatively powerful receiving state that is hostile to the sending state. Such a state may be willing to arm refugees or at least turn a blind eye to political violence. Since military activity by refugees contravenes international law and risks alienating humanitarian donors, militarization often requires a patron powerful enough to shield the refugee population from the disapproval of the international community.¹²² In the Velika Kladusa case, the presence of non-civilians and manipulative refugee leaders led to cross-border violence only when combined with a sympathetic and powerful receiving state.

An additional difference between the first and second refugee experience is the alternatives available to the refugees. Three factors limited the options of the refugees in the first exodus. Their own leaders refused to countenance a peaceful return, the international community declined to resettle them elsewhere, and their host state was an impoverished, war-torn renegade territory that offered few long-term benefits for residents. From Kuplensko, dismal as it was, the refugees’ choices were not as circumscribed. The different options available in the first and second refugee experience suggest that more attention should be paid to the alternatives open to refugees.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

The experience of humanitarian organizations in the Turanj and Batnoga camps highlights the challenges inherent in providing both security and assistance to refugees. Three paths of action are available to NGOs and UNHCR when confronted with potentially militarized refugees, such as the Velika Kladusa group. Humanitarian agencies can attempt to prevent, reduce, or ignore militarization of refugee populations. Within each category of policy—prevention, reduction, and passivity—there are a variety of options. Two important conditions that determine the humanitarian response are the level of available resources and the attitude of the receiving state.

With adequate resources and the cooperation of the receiving state, militarization could be prevented at the outset of a refugee movement. By screening the exiles as they cross the border, UNHCR (in tandem with a security force) could separate refugees from soldiers or other non-refugee exiles. Camps or settlements would be established to ensure separation between militant exiles and the refugee population. Screening and separating the exile population would reduce the risk of attacks on refugees by the sending state and limit the

¹²¹ UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy, September 1995, October 1995, and November 1995.

¹²² For example, the Organization of African Unity prohibits any refugee from “subversive activities” against any member state of the OAU. It specifically outlaws “any activity likely to cause tension between Member States, and in particular by use of arms, through the press, or by radio.” OAU, *Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa*, Article 3, 1969.

refugees' exposure to manipulation and conscription.¹²³

Efforts to prevent militarization are frequently hampered by lack of cooperation by the receiving state and the inadequacy of security forces, however. In the past, neither the receiving state nor the international community (for instance, the Security Council) has been eager to implement a forceful screening process. Prevention obviously works best when separation of a mixed civilian and military exile population requires a minimum of force. Successful prevention also requires adequate warning of refugee movements, in order to prepare screening processes and secure camps. Prevention is less likely when humanitarian agencies are surprised and overwhelmed by refugee flows.¹²⁴

Once refugees have become militarized, policy prescriptions include reduction and management of violent activity. Possible responses by humanitarian agencies range from information campaigns to hiring private security to withdrawal of assistance. As in prevention, the variables of adequate resources and receiving state cooperation can hinder attempts to reduce or manage militarization. NGOs and UNHCR often cannot summon the necessary resources to ensure security for refugees. In a recent policy paper, UNHCR affirmed that "the problem of security in refugee-populated areas should...be regarded as an issue for which a multiplicity of actors share responsibility."¹²⁵ Many of the protection policies create dilemmas for UNHCR and NGOs as they attempt to balance security and humanitarian assistance. Critics of the current system of humanitarian assistance, such as the human rights organization Africa Rights, suggest that UNHCR and NGOs should condition aid on security guarantees, in order to prevent its misuse.

The experience of Rwandan refugees in Zaire from 1994 to 1996 generated much of the current debate about humanitarian assistance. During that crisis, UNHCR attempted to counteract militarization among the refugee population by hiring members of the Zairian armed forces as police. The experiment proved a mixed success and was resorted to only as a desperate measure when the Security Council refused to help demilitarize the refugee population.¹²⁶ Africa Rights condemned the assistance program because it clearly aided Rwandan exiles who had participated in the genocide and then evacuated the Hutu population in order to destabilize the new Tutsi government. Africa Rights suggested that UNHCR should have resolved conflicting claims between justice and humanitarianism in Rwanda by "linking the provision of assistance to the refugees with the extradition of

¹²³ For suggestions on security measures, see Karen Jacobsen, "A 'Safety-First' Approach to Physical Protection in Refugee Camps," *Rosemarie Rogers Working Paper Series* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, MIT), May 1999, and Jeremy Ginifer, "Protecting Displaced Persons through Disarmament," *Survival* 40, No. 2 (Summer 1998), 161-176.

¹²⁴ For example, on 28 April 1994, over 200,000 Rwandans crossed into Tanzania in 24 hours. Ray Wilkinson, "The Heart of Darkness," *Refugees* 110 (Winter 1997), 5.

¹²⁵ Quang Bui, *Ensuring the Civilian and Neutral Character of Refugee-Populated Areas: A Ladder of Options* (Geneva: Center for Documentation and Research, UNHCR, July 1998).

¹²⁶ For an in-depth assessment of the Zaire situation, see Joel Boutroue, "Missed Opportunities: The Role of the International Community in the Return of the Rwandan Refugees from Eastern Zaire," *Rosemarie Rogers Working Paper Series* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Studies, MIT, 1998).

leading extremists to face trial for crimes against humanity and the disarming and demobilization of the remnants of the Rwandan Armed Forces.”¹²⁷

Along similar lines, Ben Barber argues that by ignoring militarization, NGOs and UNHCR unwittingly affect the military balance between combatants. He recommends that “demilitarization of camps should be a requirement for humanitarian aid.”¹²⁸ If militants would rather sacrifice the refugees than disarm, the alternative is forceful demilitarization by an external security force. The options for procuring security forces include United Nations troops, unilateral interventions,¹²⁹ local police, and private (mercenary) guards. In addition to political will, effective security requires training, equipment, and funding. In the absence of adequate security, UNHCR and NGOs face the difficult choice of providing humanitarian assistance (which may enable militarization) or withdrawing aid from a vulnerable population.¹³⁰

Recognizing the political and military difficulties involved in coercive demilitarization, Barber suggests alternate measures including camp isolation and targeted assistance (for instance, only to women and children). Many refugee experts suggest locating camps away from the border in order to reduce security tensions. Critics, especially in the receiving state, counter that moving refugees away from the border will hinder return. Self-settlement of refugees, as opposed to gathering people in camps, may reduce the likelihood of militarization. However, the need for camps will not disappear, especially when large or sudden flows of people require assistance.

For a variety of reasons, humanitarian agencies may choose to sidestep, or ignore, the issue of militarization. Philosophically, many NGOs oppose the presence of armed guards or security details for humanitarian missions.¹³¹ NGOs and UNHCR may not perceive the military activity as a problem if the refugees store arms and train outside the camp boundaries. In some cases, the military activity may have the active support of a superpower or influential donor. During the 1980s, humanitarian agencies ignored militarization in southern Africa in the face of widespread support for the political aims of the African National Congress (ANC) and the South-West African People’s Organization (SWAPO).

Practical and ethical reasons may influence UNHCR to ignore signs of militarization. Legally, the refugee receiving state, not the humanitarian agencies, must provide security. Without support from the receiving state, unarmed humanitarian organizations have little control over military activity. Militarization that is condoned by the refugee receiving state or a powerful donor state further limits the options of UNHCR and NGOs. Finally,

¹²⁷ Africa Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance* (London: Africa Rights, 1995 revised edition), 1100.

¹²⁸ Barber, 13.

¹²⁹ Such as the French “Operation Turquoise” in Rwanda.

¹³⁰ For a discussion of the dilemmas of humanitarian aid, see Mary B. Anderson, *Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace—or War* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1999).

¹³¹ Thomas G. Weiss, “Nongovernmental Organizations and Internal Conflict,” in Brown, ed., *International Dimensions*, 435-460.

UNHCR policy-makers are likely to feel ambivalent about encouraging (or forcing) refugees to return, even if that seems the only solution to militarization.¹³²

The Croatian response to the Velika Kladusa refugees in 1995 demonstrates that participation in political violence is not a foregone conclusion, even among previously militarized groups. Strong security measures by the receiving state, in this case backed up by pressure from the United States, limited the threat posed by the hard-line refugee leaders. The loss of external support convinced most refugees to demilitarize and accept a peaceful return or resettlement to a third country. Despite their weaknesses, international organizations can play vital supporting roles in demilitarization by developing information programs to counter propaganda and pressing for early planning to thwart militarization of refugees. In the absence of restraint by receiving states or external security guarantees, however, international humanitarian organizations must operate within the constraints of regional political forces, if they choose to operate at all.

¹³² On forced repatriation, see Anne Bayefsky and Michael W. Doyle, *Emergency Return, Principles and Guidelines* (Princeton: Center for International Studies, Princeton University, 1999).

TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

- 1989** Collapse of the Soviet Union
- June 1991** Slovenia and Croatia declare independence from Yugoslavia
- July 1991** War between Serbia and Croatia begins
- March 1992** Bosnia declares independence from Yugoslavia
- April 1992** War in Bosnia begins
- March 1993** Muslim/Croat conflict
- Sept 1993** Abdic declares Autonomy from Sarajevo
- Mar 1994** Muslim and Croat alliance—Washington Framework Agreement
- Aug 1994** Bosnian Army expels Abdic and followers to Batnoga and Turanj
- Dec 1994** Refugee army retakes Velika Kladusa with Serb assistance
- July 1995** Formal Croat and Muslim alliance; Srebrenica massacre
- Aug 1995** Krajina Serbs defeated and the Abdic group expelled to Kuplensko
- Nov 1995** Dayton Peace Agreement
- 1996** Most Abdic refugees return home peacefully

Appendix 2

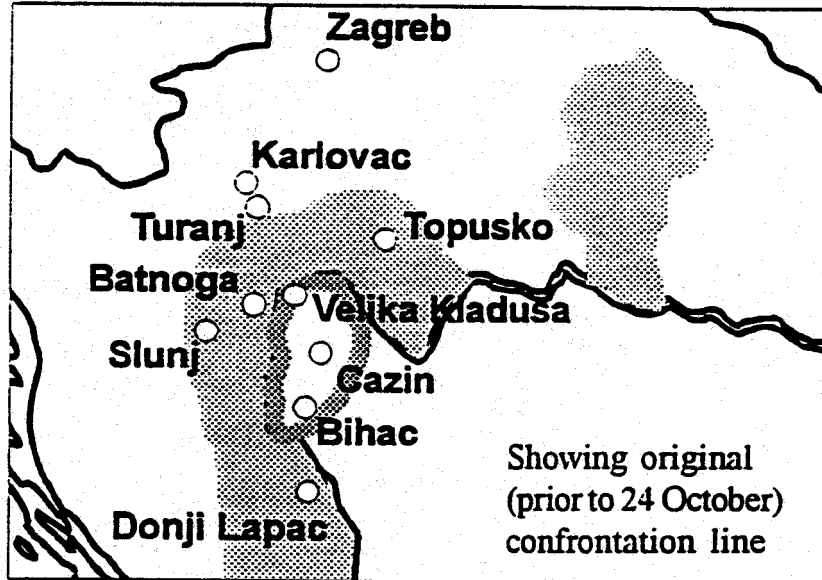
Croatia, Showing UN Protected Areas, and Bosnia-Herzegovina



Source: Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution, 1995)

Appendix 3

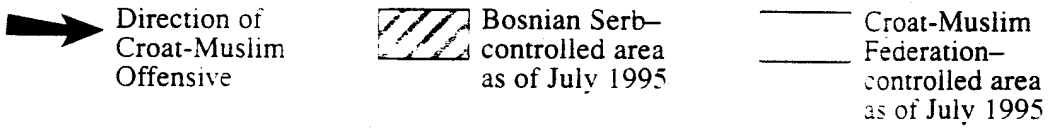
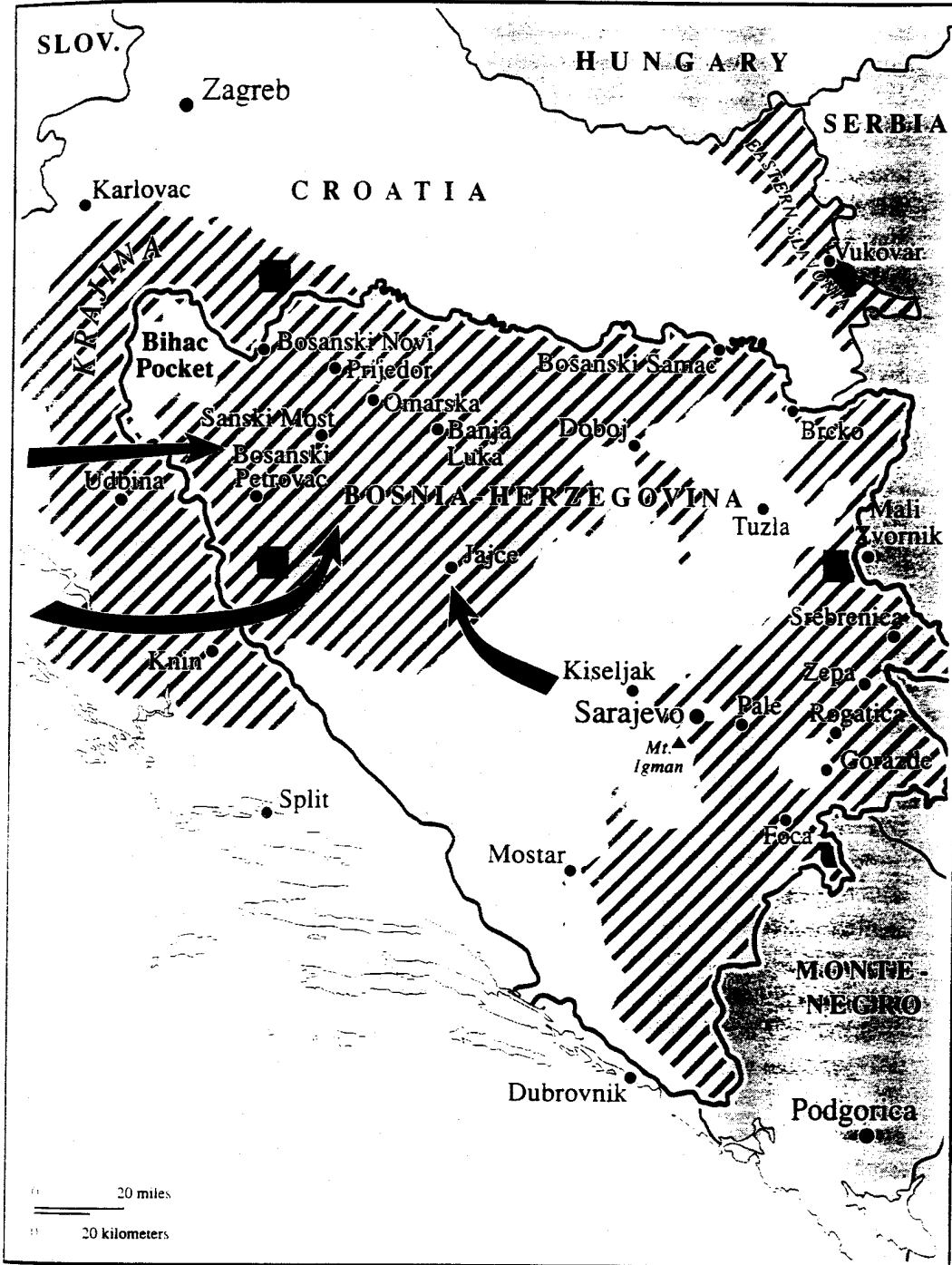
Velika Kladusa and surrounding towns, (Serb-held areas shaded)



Source: *Information Notes on Former Yugoslavia*, UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy for Former Yugoslavia—External Relations Unit, November 1994 (update).

Appendix 4

The Western Offensive, August–September 1995



Source: Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*, (New York: Random House, 1998)

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