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Creating a 21st-century heroic myth around a living person – example of the Croatian general Ante Gotovina

Domagoj KR PAN*

Abstract

One of the most important topics of Croatia accession to the EU was cooperation with International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in Den Haag. ICTY was created by the international community to prosecute war crimes committed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. In Croatia, there was an opinion that the court will prosecute only Serbia and there was a shock when the first indictments were sent for war crimes committed by Croatian forces. A personification of this process was general Ante Gotovina, who was accused among others as a member of a joint criminal enterprise but, in the end, he was found not guilty. At the same time, some parts of Croatian society and media started to build a mythical status around Ante Gotovina. This paper will analyze this type of media coverage and how it did shape opinion and consequentially created a modern myth around Gotovina.

Keywords: Homeland War, Ante Gotovina, ICTY, breakup of Yugoslavia, myth

Introduction

When people hear the word “myth,” they often think about ancient times or a period dating back to the dawn of civilization, and most might say that it cannot be created today since we rely on modern technology that helps us to persevere history. Such technology is useful because there is a lesser chance of separating facts from fiction. Today, people often harbor romantic views of the past; they are altering history, and certain stories from the recent past are becoming blurry. In former communist countries of central, eastern, and south-eastern Europe, following the fall of communism, there was a demand for a new beginning that would break up the chains that connected them with the communist rule. Their desire to distance themselves from the old regime was so strong, in some cases, that some people and events from the near or more distant past were becoming glorified as ideals that the new generation should follow. Furthermore, in some aspects, narratives about them became so

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exaggerated that it was difficult to decipher where the facts ended and the myth began. This kind of narrative became the founding myth of newly dependent countries.

Ante Gotovina was a Croatian general during the 1990s Homeland War. In the aftermath of the war, the International Criminal Tribunal's custody for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) accused him of the individual and command responsibility of crimes against civilians and rebel forces during the war's final days. He spent several years as a fugitive because he maintained his innocence. He was, in 2005, arrested and transferred to ICTY but was, in the end, acquitted on all charges. For Croatian citizens, Gotovina became the personification of Croatian efforts during the war. During his time as a prisoner, whatever was happening to him was perceived as happening to the country itself. Political parties used his image to build their narrative about the war. For right-wing parties, the prosecution of Gotovina was nothing short of an international conspiracy against Croatia. In their view, the international community was attempting to delete the border between the aggressor and the victim. In other words, they were trying to find Croatia's side guilty of war crimes. On the other hand, left-wing parties tried to use his example to show that there were crimes on both sides. Furthermore, they saw this as an opportunity to face the Croatian public with the dark side of the war conflict.

During that time, far-right parties began to rally around Gotovina's narrative that depicted him as a saint – not just as a person who had not committed or ordered any war crime but rather as a person who could not do wrong. As a result, Gotovina started to slip from a human to a demigod who, in their view, would return one day to the homeland and lead them into a new battle against all the state's enemies. The only problem with this way of thinking was that nobody asked Gotovina would accept this role. All the information came from people close to him or who were in contact with him, but no in-depth knowledge about his state of mind was available. He kept his private life away from the public eye and never presented himself as a celebrity. So, there was much disappointment when he returned from The Hague and home to live a peaceful life.

This paper will examine the myth that was built around Gotovina from his arrest in 2005 until his release in 2012. It will address the causes that became the foundation for the creation of this myth and analyze media coverage of Gotovina and his possible future upon return to Croatia. To better understand the narrative built around him, this paper will first present the causes that led to the outbreak of the Homeland War that would, in the end, elevate Gotovina to his current status.

1. The myth

One of the earliest forms of remembering history is an oral tradition. In the early days of human society, people would gather around and tell tales about their ancestries; however, those same stories drifted further from the truth over time. Tale-tellers would add new aspects to the story, while at the same time, others would disappear. Those same stories became devoid of objective truth and became myths. A myth expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms, it provides a pattern of behavior to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends, and establishes the sanctity of cult (Honko, 1984, p. 49). Furthermore, in myths, the main heroes are gods, demigods, or supernatural humans, while the stories of ordinary humans are usually contained in legends rather than myths (Bascom 1965, p. 9).

There are several roles that a myth has to fulfill. Person, places, and events depicted are considered sacred, which makes anyone brave enough to bring its validity into question is regarded as an enemy of the community. An essential part of myths is people whose duty is to keep the story alive. They must make sure that the community participates in its proper commemoration. In other words, a myth does not exist on its own; there is a correlation between the myth and the ritual (Segal, 2004, p. 61). This connection is meaningful because the community has to have collective memory about the past to survive. Furthermore, it has a sacred duty to transfer a message to the new generation because myths have people's subjective truth communicated through stories, symbols, and rituals (Sinha, 2016).

One of the challenges for people who want to move past the mythological era is that the community might consider them an enemy and excommunicate them. Even if they have all the facts that can prove a mythological story is false or has been presented falsely, it is still not enough for the community because there is a crucial difference between facts, fiction, and myths. Facts are everybody's truth, fiction is nobody's truth, and myths are somebody's truth. (Shaikh, 2018). This definition of truth is a functionalistic part of myths. Secondly, there is euhemerism in myths since storytellers repeatedly elaborate upon historical accounts until the figures in those accounts gain a godlike status. (Bulfinch, 2004, p. 194) In other words, something happened, but through time, it mutated into a myth. Finally, allegory or personification is part of mythology. For example, objects or philosophical concepts such as the Sun or judgment in ancient Greece were associated with the god Apollo or Athens (Honko, 1984, p. 45).

It may seem odd that we are discussing myths in the modern era because we live in times when things are well documented, and there are enough sources that diminish the value of oral tradition.

However, in recent times, there has been a rising interest in oral history because, to understand how people remember and understand the past, historians have to explore the history outside of written documents. Tosh (2002) groups oral materials into two categories: oral reminiscence – the first-hand recollections of people interviewed by a historian, usually referred to as oral history, and oral tradition, i.e., the narratives and descriptions of people and events in the past which have been handed down by word of mouth over several generations.

Of course, someone could argue that when historians explore an individual's life, they should look into his personal papers to understand his way of thinking since public opinion about someone could be based on erroneous assumptions that take root in the public conscience. However, in more recent, this might pose a challenge given that certain significant public figures did not leave a paper trail of their lives, and historians have to collect the impressions and recollections of such figures from their surviving colleagues and associates (Tosh, 2002). Tosh (2002) maintains that there are two social functions that oral traditions have to fulfill. First, they could serve as a means of teaching the values and beliefs which are integral to a particular culture, such as the proper relationship between humans and animals or the obligations of kinship and affinity. They might also serve to validate the particular social and political arrangements which currently prevail, such as the distribution of land or the pattern of relations with a neighboring people.

This is where we can find the connection between the oral tradition and the ritual. Oral tradition helps simplify important cultural points that become the foundation for the ritual. The ritual is merely the codification of key cultural aspects already known in a particular society.

2. The breakup of Yugoslavia and the Homeland War

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (hereinafter: Yugoslavia) was a country in southeast and central Europe that existed from 1945 until 1992. It was composed of six republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Macedonia, and two autonomous provinces within Serbia: Vojvodina and Kosovo. It was a one-party communist state with a strong cult of personality embodied by its president, Josip Broz Tito, who was considered one of the country's founding parts. His passing in May 1980 became the beginning of the end for many people.

During the 1980s, two crises struck Yugoslavia: economic downturn and the rise of nationalism. Yugoslavia had had one of the biggest and strongest growths globally since the 1950s, but its cost was very high because growth comes thanks to foreign creditors (Woodward, 1995). At the beginning

of the 1980s, the accumulated debt was difficult to repay (Crampton, 1997, p. 386). At the same time, Yugoslav companies were not following the world's economic trends, so they started taking even more credit to pay their workers and avoid bankruptcy. Unfortunately, instead of investing this money in production and resources that could help the companies stay viable in the international market, the money was used for payments to workers and the growing bureaucracy. An important factor in economic troubles was widespread corruption. The most famous case of this management was the Agrokomerc affair from 1987 when it became public knowledge that managers of Agrokomerc had issued promissory notes without collateral, forcing the state to assume responsibility for their debts when the company finally collapsed (Crampton, 1997, pp. 386-87). The living standard began to decline as inflation exploded from 21% in 1979 to 160% in 1987 (Crampton, 1997, p. 388). In addition to the federal economic problems, animosity started to grow between the republics.

Slovenia and Croatia were the most developed republics in the federation, so their income contributed to the development of the less fortunate republics. Simultaneously, Serbia demanded even more payment from Croatia and Slovenia, arguing that they needed to help more than ever (Crampton, 1997, p. 388). With regards to the average worker, his earnings dropped by 25% from 1979 to 1985, while, in 1988, the emigrant remittances to Yugoslavia totaled over \$4.5 billion (USD), and by 1989 reached \$6.2 billion (USD) (Massey and Taylor ,2004, p. 159).

Yugoslavia was ethnically very diverse. Serbs were the biggest ethnic group, but they did not form the majority. There was some "bad blood" left from the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, a state that had existed between the two world wars, and from World War II, there was much inter-ethnic fighting between those who supported Nazi collaboration governments and those who opposed them (Ramet 2006, ch. 4). Tito's idea was that, through economic development, these wounds would heal. That is why one of the main slogans in Yugoslavia was "Brotherhood and unity!" (Cro. "Bratstvo i jedinstvo!"). However, the economic crises of the 1980s showed that this was merely a facade. Consequently, a new rise of nationalism became one of the primary and most important causes of Yugoslav wars in the 1990s.

3. Anti-bureaucratic revolution

In the second half of the 1980s, Slobodan Milošević rose to power in Serbia. He used the people's disappointment of elites to consolidate his power in Serbia, followed by his move to take control of Yugoslavia. In Kosovo, a region with an Albanian majority, the situation was very intense because they were many rumors that Albanians were raping Serbian women and sweeping away any

trace of Serbian history and culture (Crampton, 2013, p. 148). Milošević's loyalists put in motion an amendment that would cut Kosovo's autonomy and delegate Serbia's power. Albanians boycotted the vote in the Kosovo parliament, but it did pass. (Krieger 2001, p. 522) This was unconstitutional because this vote needed a two-thirds majority in Kosovo's Parliament to pass (Krieger 2001, p. 522). In the second autonomous province situation was equally intense. Milošević's loyalists organized a protest in Novi Sad, the capital of the province (Milosavljević, 2003, p. 325). After the local government could not handle the situation, they resigned, and Milošević's loyalists gained control of the region (Milosavljević, 2003, p. 325). The final part of this act happened when Milošević's loyalists took over Montenegro in January 1989 (Milosavljević, 2003, p. 329).

One of the consequences of this movement was that Yugoslavia's Presidency, the country's highest political body, could not function properly anymore. There were eight members, one from each republic plus two from autonomous provinces, with half of them under Milošević's control. If other republics had tried to put any proposal that went against Milošević's interest, they were vetoed, which led other republics to consider their options, ranging from attempts to reform Yugoslavia to their full independence. Other republics put an independence proposal forward because Milošević was attempting to turn Yugoslavia into a centralized country with Serbian hegemony. In his 1989 speech on Gazimestan, Kosovo, during the commemoration of 600 years of the Battle of Kosovo between the Ottomans and Serbs, he drew a comparison with the need to fight for Serbian identity once again (Sell, 2004, p. 88). In his mind, if other republics did not meet his proposals, then the armed conflict would be the sole solution. He exploited Great Serbian nationalism, believing that all Serbs must live in one country to gain control. His political platform was based on myths about orthodox Serbs being threatened by Muslims, Croats, and the West (Obućina, 2011, p. 34).

In Croatia, the Communist party allowed the first free democratic elections in 1990, and the winner of this election was The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), whose president Franjo Tuđman became the president of the Presidency of Croatia (Bideleux and Jeffries, 2007, p. 197). In December of the same year, the Croatian Parliament adopted a new constitution in which it defined Croatia as a country of the Croatian nation and other minorities (Bonacci, Skenderović and Jareb, 2004, pp. 737-39). The problem was that Serbs in Croatia were placed in the minority category, although the old constitution defined them as a nation. Milošević used all these changes in Croatia to fuel the old prejudice between the Croats and Serbs, while at the same time, on the Croat side, there were people who were also in the same state of mind. As a result, Serbs in Croatia created their own Serbian Autonomous Oblast Krajina (SAO Krajina), and many Serbian politicians left the Croatian Parliament to join it. (Caspersen, 2010, p. 55). The situation was on the brink of war. Croatia declared its

independence in 1991 (Brown and Karim, 1995, p. 117). The Serbs' response was to declare the independence of SAO Krajina, now called The Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK), in which they created parallel structures of government (Armatta, 2010, pp. 160-64). The final goal of RSK was to unite with Serbia and form a new country called Greater Serbia, where all Serbs would live while expelling other nations (Tomasevich, 1975, pp. 167-68). RSK ceased to exist in August 1995 after Croatian forces completed Operation Storm (Ahrens, 2007, p. 174).

4. Ante Gotovina

The biography of Ante Gotovina before the Homeland War is very scattered and mostly unknown. There are not many reliable sources about his early life or, to be more specific, when he left Yugoslavia and returned in 1991. He was born in Tkon on 12 October 1955, but his family moved to Pakoštane (Vuković, 2012). When he was 17 years old, he left Yugoslavia to serve in the French foreign legion. Later, Gotovina received his French citizenship, and, at some point in the 1980s, he moved to Columbia, where he got married and had a daughter (Vuković, 2012). The most famous book that describes his early life is *The Warrior – An adventurer and general* (Croatian: *Ratnik – pustolov i general*) by Nenad Ivanković. The book is not an actual biography but rather an adventurous novel about Gotovina's life. Therefore, unless Gotovina decides one day to tell us his life story, the public will be left guessing what is fact and what is fiction.

Ante Gotovina returned to Croatia in the summer of 1991, when he, as a volunteer, joined the 1st brigade of the Croatian National Guard (*Cro. Zbor narodne garde* or ZNG), later nicknamed "Tigers" (Lučić, 2015, p. 474). He was wounded in December 1991 during the fight in western Slavonia (Lučić, 2015, p. 204). At the beginning of 1992, the fighting ceased in Croatia, and around one-third of Croatia territory was under RSK. Croatia's land territory was cut in half between Dalmatia and northern parts of Croatia. The only connection was by the sea or the island of Pag, which has a bridge connecting it with Dalmatia. That is why in January 1993, the Croatian army began with Operation *Maslenica* that finally connected northern and southern parts of Croatia and during which Gotovina earned praises for his actions as a commander (Bobetko, 1996, p. 369). Until 1995, he commanded a Croatian force in south Dalmatia and Livno in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where he successfully defended the city of Livno (Jularić, 2015). He rose through ranks and, in 1995, he became Lieutenant General and commanded over the sector South headquartered in Split (Marijan, 2007, p. 69).

5. Operation Storm

Beginning in 1992, UN peacekeepers (UNCRO) were located along the border zone of Croatian and RSK forces. For the international community, there were no questions about whether Croatia has the right to incorporate occupied territory within her international recognition borders. RSK political and military leaders refused all calls for peaceful resolutions of conflict. After rejecting the Z-4 Plan, the plan that guaranteed significant autonomy of RSK, the Croatian side was granted the right to engage in military action (Ahrenes 2007, pp. 171-73). Operation “Storm” (*Cro. Operacija Oluja*) started at 5 a.m. on 4 August 1995, and three hours before the operation itself, the Croatian side informed UNCRO of the imminent Croatian offensive (Marijan, 2007, p. 129). Under Ante Gotovina, the troops in sector South had the task to liberate Knin, the capital of RSK. The HV 4th & 7th Guards Brigade entered Knin around 11 a.m. on 5 August 1995 (Marijan, 2007, pp. 72-73). Major fighting ended on 8 August, when the 21st Kordun Corps Army of RSK surrendered to Lieutenant General Petar Stipetić (Marijan, 2007, pp. 111-12).

Croats and other non-Serbs were killed or expelled from the RSK territory during the war. In 1991, the RSK government initiated a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Croat civilians, and 84,000 Croats fled the Serbian-controlled region (Blitz 2006, 244). The number of displaced people ranges from 170,000 to 250,000, while the number of killed amounted to several thousand (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Serbs committed other war crimes. During Operation Storm, there was a mass exodus of Serbs from RSK; around 200,000 people left this area (Prodger, 2005). Serbian civilians left in the newly liberated place of former RSK became victims of war crimes: six civilians in Grubori were killed almost a month after the operation had ended (Petranović, 2020).

Consequently, ICTY began investigating Croatian actions before, during, and after Operation Storm. One of the primary pieces of evidence for prosecutors was the Brijuni transcripts – a set of recordings from the islands of Brijuni, where the final meeting of Croatian political and military leaders took place before Operation Storm (Matković, 2014, p. 130). The Chief Prosecutor Carla del Ponte issued indictments against three senior Croatian commanders, Lieutenant General Ivan Čermak, Lieutenant General Mladen Markač, and Lieutenant General Ante Gotovina (Ivanković 2015). Čermak was commanding the Croatian Army’s Knin corps, and Markač the special police. The three were charged under individual, joint criminal enterprise (JCE), and command responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity (Ivanković, 2015). The Prosecutor considered President Franjo Tuđman, Minister of Defence Gojko Šušak, General Janko Bobetko, the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, and his successor Zvonimir Červenko also part of JCE. However, they

had died before the official indictment. After interrogation, the ICTY dropped charges against Rear Admiral Davor Domazet Lošo, the Chief of counterintelligence, and Lieutenant General Petar Stipetić, the commander of Sector North (Ivanković, 2015).

6. Fugitive years

Gotovina's life from July 2001 until December 2005 is shrouded in mystery. There are many stories about where he was and with whom. The Croatian reporter Ivo Pukanić conducted in 2003 an interview with Gotovina (Pukanić 2003). In that interview, Gotovina stated that he was ready to talk with prosecutors in Zagreb, not in The Hague if he was granted the status of a suspect. Since his time in the French Foreign Legion, he learned to respect different ethnicities (Pukanić, 2003). The Croatian government forbade him to talk with prosecutors in the late 1990s (Pukanić, 2003). After publishing this interview, the Croatian police interrogated Pukanić, but he refused to reveal who had helped him contact Gotovina, citing newspaper ethics. Gotovina's lawyer confirmed the interview had taken place (Duspara, 2003). Gotovina's arrest has been a hot topic since the moment the Croatian date for opening talks on EU membership became connected with Gotovina's arrest (Bowley, 2005). In other words, negotiations between Croatia and the EU would not start before Gotovina had been arrested. The Croatian government repeatedly denied any knowledge of Gotovina's whereabouts. The Spanish police arrested him in the Canary Islands on 7 December 2005 during dinner (Ivanković, 2015). They found two fake passports that had stamps from Tahiti, Argentina, China, Chile, Russia, the Czech Republic, and Mauritius (The Guardian, 2005).

During this period, the foundation of the Gotovina myth started to grow. In January 2000, in Croatia, six left-wing and central parties formed a new government. Election results were a significant blow to HDZ (Croatian: Hrvatska demokratska zajednica or HDZ) and all other right-wing voters. HDZ had been the leading party in Croatia since elections in 1990, and Franjo Tuđman was one of the founders and the first leader of the party. Soon, nationalists began accusing the new Prime Minister Ivica Račan, leader of The Social Democratic Party of Croatia (*Cro. Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske* or SDP), of betraying Croatian nation ideals in an attempt to bring Croatia back into a new form of Yugoslavia and criminalizing the Homeland War (Mautner, 2007). Ivo Sanader, the new leader of HDZ, used this accusation to rebuild HDZ's political power. In 2001, after the Croatian Prosecutor indicted Mirko Norac, another Croatian general, a mass protest erupted against war crimes. In Split, Croatian veterans and others held a big rally.

There, Sanader accused the SDP government of betraying Croatian soldiers, presenting himself and HDZ as the only power in Croatia who could protect the veterans and Croatia as a state (Polšak Palatinuš, 2018). These protests helped Sanader to gain momentum and win the 2003 parliamentary elections. Although Sanader's government helped to arrest Gotovina, this did not stop them from using his public persona to generate support in the 2007 parliamentary polls. They showcased themselves as the party who would help Gotovina prove his innocence and protect the memory of the Homeland War memory (Jungvirth, 2007).

7. Gotovina's trial

During the trial against Gotovina, Čermak, and Markač in The Hague, there were other ongoing trials for war crimes committed by both sides in Croatia, including debates about the Homeland War. If somebody had tried to point out some wrongdoings from Croatia's side in the war, the nationalist groups would label that person as a traitor. Gotovina's face became, in a way, a part of everyday life. His picture was put on T-shirts, billboards, wall paintings. Many songs were written about Gotovina that mentioned him either directly or indirectly, such as:

*If Ante is guilty, then we are also guilty, as well
as all those who died bravely for us.
He was betrayed by those who chickened out,
Ivica and Stipe, and other faggots.*

*Ako je Ante kriv, krivo smo i mi,
i svi oni što su za nas hrabro ginuli
Izdali ga oni što su glave skrivali,
Ivica i Stipe i slični pederi.*

Gotovina became part of the Croatian way of life. The trial started in 2008 and finished in 2010 (Pavić, 2010). News coverage from the trial placed Gotovina in the foreground because of his recognizability. If there was a report from ICTY or a story related to the prosecution, in most cases, his picture was the only one published.

Furthermore, Gotovina's picture took up the most space in newspapers, while Čermak and Markač were hardly visible. For example, in *Jutarnji list*'s report on the news about the closing arguments in 2010 entitled *Gotovina must wait a bit more (Cro. Gotovina mora još malo pričekati)*, the picture of Gotovina was published as part of the article while omitting the other two generals or their picture (Pavić, 2010). Čermak and Markač were mentioned in the article's text, but for someone merely looking at the headlines, it seemed as if only Gotovina was put on trial.

The announcement of the first-degree verdict was expected on 15 April 2011. Several weeks before the verdict, the veterans decided to hold a rally for Gotovina the day after the verdict. In the case of an acquittal, this rally would be turned into a celebration; however, it would turn into a protest if he were found guilty. Gotovina's lawyer, Luka Mišetić, informed the press that Gotovina did not want any demonstration on his behalf (V.P.P. 2011). The leader of the rally, Željko Sačić, told the media that he believed that Mišetić was talking on his own and not on Gotovina's behalf and that maybe Mišetić was expressing this view because the Croatian government was afraid of the rally (V.P.P. 2011). ICTY's first-degree verdict found Gotovina and Marakač guilty and sentenced them to 24 and 18 years, respectively, while Čermak was acquitted (Corder, 2011). The protest erupted in Croatia following the verdict and, since Croatia was a candidate for accession into the EU, only 23% of people agreed with joining the EU following the ruling (Butković, 2011).

The announcement of the appeal verdict was expected on 16 November 2012. The day before the ruling, there were many gatherings all over Croatia, especially in churches, to show support for Gotovina and Markač (PSD 2012). The Appeals Panel of the ICTY presided over by Theodor Meron, acquitted Gotovina and Markač on all charges (Simons 2012). After the announcement, there was an outburst of celebrations around Croatia. For many, this was a moment when the war was finally over. Now, there was confirmation that Operation Storm was legitimate and that Croatian's military and political leaders were not members of JCE. That same day, Gotovina and Markač returned to Croatia, where they were welcome on the Ban Jelačić square, the central square in Zagreb, Croatia's capital.

In his speech, Gotovina said that the war was over and that people should turn to the future. He talked about the state's help and that the Homeland War was now a part of history and a founding stone for our future (HINA, 2012). Yet, many veterans did not look favorably on his speech. The article counted all his sins since he left The Hague, including thanking Croatian institutions, not mentioning Tuđman and Šušak, declaring that the war had come to a close. The prosecution of Croatian veterans remained (V.P.P. 2012). They expected Gotovina to join them and enter the political arena to reform Croatia in the way they found it suitable. Nevertheless, Gotovina shattered all these expectations and chose to live a private family life, and turned to run a private business (Bogelić, 2019).

8. Building a myth around *Gotovina et al.*

After the traumatic experience of Yugoslavia's breakup and the Homeland War, the Croatian society was looking for a new beginning in nation-building. As Yugoslavia became regarded as

something terrible, it was the right time to find a new flag to rally behind. Heroes from the Homeland War became the central point of this narrative. Every war is a traumatic experience, and post-traumatic stress disorder does not only happens to soldiers but to civilians as well. People searched for a sign that would bring balance to their lives, and Croatian soldiers were the answer. The ICTY started to prosecute war crimes from both sides, while most Croats expected that only the aggressors, the Serbian side, would be charged. As a result, people began questioning ICTY's good intentions because they were asked to consider the possibility that the person in whom they put their hope, faith, and prayer was a war criminal. For most people, this leap of faith was unacceptable.

The army veterans were among the first to start to question any critic of the Croatian side's involvement in war crimes. Some people have trouble coping with trauma, and for them, the best way to cope with it is to re-live those events. Commemorations became their meaning in life. Every year, dates such as the 5th of August are the central point of army veterans' gatherings to spend time with their former brothers in arms and retell war stories. The 5th of August is the day when Croatia commemorates the liberation of Knin, and it is officially considered as Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day and the Day of Croatian Defenders. The narrative about the war was formalized through time, and questioning some of its parts became highly undesirable. To the new generation, who did not have this experience, or others who wished to distance themselves from the war, this seemed repetitive. It did not necessarily mean that they did not respect the Homeland War or were not patriots; they simply tried to move forward with their lives and have something to look forward to in the present and future. Remembering the war would not help them find employment or put food on the table. So, they voiced their dissatisfaction with Croatia's current situation and the repeated mentioning of the war. It may have seemed to some army veterans that the whole year was one big commemoration and that they were living from one remembrance to another.

In the situation where two groups have a different view of the same thing, certain opportunistic politicians decided to capitalize on this discontent. They took hold of the narrative, accusing thereby the critics of being traitors. One of the consequences was that a new community was formed. The membership in it was connected with the level of respect for the Homeland War. However, they needed a symbol that would stand as personification or allegory. This would become the role of Gotovina – his impeccable career as a soldier who started from the bottom and climbed his through ranks on account of being a skilled commander. In the oral tradition, Gotovina's image had fulfilled two social functions. His career record was ideal for teaching the values and beliefs on how to be a patriot. Also, his innocence validated the affirmation that Homeland War was a justified, defensive

war for the independence and integrity of the Republic of Croatia against the aggression of the joint Greater Serbia forces.

One of the reasons why the oral narrative has had such a significant impact is that Gotovina did not provide any private papers that could shed light on his in-depth thoughts. That is why, regarding almost all information about his biography, historians must rely on recollections and impressions from his associates and colleagues. Gotovina was not interested in becoming a public persona. He did not wish to give an interview about his war days or talk a lot about politics. In a way, he was a blank slate on which people could write what suited them best. This is the reason why, for example, when Gotovina's lawyer thanked the public on Gotovina's behalf for the demonstrations but informed them that Gotovina did not want any organized in his name. Because of this, the lawyer was attacked as the person who does not speak in Gotovina's name. This example shows how strong his name had become as a symbol when even his lawyer's word was not enough to convince people. The person who was in contact with Gotovina daily was less informed about his intentions and wishes than the people who may have communicated with him once a year if even that often. Gotovina was no longer the person who had his own opinion; the others' opinions became his. This is why some were shocked when he returned to Croatia and decided to lead a private life. It was expected that he would lead the way in the fight against everything terrible in Croatian society, but at the same time, there was no proof that he was interested in it. He never said that he would be the leader of this movement or was interested in being involved in it. Again, others had decided what Gotovina wanted without any substantial evidence. This is how myths work since it does not matter what the actual person thinks but rather what the community wishes him to think.

There were not many media sensationalist articles about Gotovina's fugitive years. There are still many uncertainties about who financed his fugitive time. After the investigators examined his fake passports, they found that he was all around the world, for example, in French Polynesia, Mauritius, Argentina, and the Dominican Republic (Mamić, 2014). The journalist never went deeper into the story to find out what he did there. In the media, Gotovina was connected with the criminalization of Operation Storm. The media never had much control over the myth since the people had their own opinion, and for almost everybody, there was no question about his innocence. After the first ruling, the poll showed that 95% of people thought the verdict was unjust, although the Croatian and European politicians claimed that this was a verdict against Gotovina, not against the Croatian state or its people (Butković, 2011). So, the media tried to give an objective explanation of the verdict and its consequences, but the ordinary people had already made up their minds.

This way of thinking could be found in similar cases of building a myth around a still-living person. During the final stage of the battle of Waterloo, Pierre Cambronne was captured. However, according to some reports he made his famous statement: "La garde meurt mais ne se rend pas!" ("The Guard dies but does not surrender!") (Boller and George, 1989, p. 11). This phrase made him a living legend in France. These words were even put on the base of his in Nantes after his death (Boller and George, 1989, p. 12). The only problem was that until his death, Cambronne claimed that he never said these words, but popular opinion was already made. This is another example of how a myth is constructed. Cambronne and Gotovina did not want to become famous people. Their actions showed that their way of life is different from public opinion. Still, even the hard evidence provided by these guys could not change their public persona image. The belief is sometimes stronger than any reasonable or logical evidence the other side could bring to the table, even if that other side is the person in question.

The Remembrance Day of Operation Storm is always connected with Gotovina and sector South, which was important because Knin, the capital of RSK, was located there. Still, if Stipetić had not defeated the enemy in sector North, Operation Storm would not have been considered successful since its main objective was to fully liberate the Croatian territory. Since Gotovina became such a powerful symbol of the war, his image had become almost synonymous with Operation Storm, and other participants are regarded as almost second-class.

When the ICTY commenced with the trial, it was too much for people to accept. Accusing Gotovina of war crimes felt like every Croatian citizen was put on trial. The name of the case was *Gotovina et al.*, so even the ICTY unintentionally helped build a future myth around Gotovina since they named him a critical part of the case. At the same time, Čermak and Markač did not receive the same treatment. It would have been better if the ICTY had called the case *Gotovina, Čermak, and Markač*. Also, the accusation from the EU that Croatia is hiding Gotovina further fueled the myth around him. After he had been captured, the documents showed that he was traveling around the world. Still, only the Croatian government was considered inefficient in locating and capturing Gotovina. Some other fugitives from the ICTY were arrested in their homeland, while Gotovina was seized in Spain. In Gotovina's case, international reactions helped to convince people that this was a kind of fight between David and Goliath.

Today, Gotovina is still a well-respected person in Croatian society. He does not make many public appearances, but the political parties still try to gain his support. During the presidential race in 2019, the public wanted to find out who would get his vote, but he successfully dodged the questions. Instead, he reaffirmed his commitment to his family and business (Zdelar, 2019).

Furthermore, the media attention shifted away, and now most articles about him are published to mark the anniversary of his arrest or acquittal.

Conclusion

In the last decade of its existence, Yugoslavia was in turmoil, culminating in a war. After the war experience, Croatian society looked for ways to start a new life. The conflict itself proved to be an excellent foundation for the newly independent Croatia, with Ante Gotovina becoming the allegory for the Croatian side of the conflict. His modesty in public appearance and unknown past helped him build a modern folk hero's reputation. When he returned to Croatia, he was in a position to ask for anything, and he would receive it because, at that moment, he was no longer perceived as human but at least a demigod if not a god. His family and choice to lead a private life have granted him an even higher status among most people because he showed them that he had remained a simple man. Although his peaceful approach burst a few dreams, his image has remained so strong in the public conscience that his physical presence is no longer required. It seems safe to say that Gotovina belongs to everybody. Whatever he says or does will not matter in the long run because he is already a legend, and every legend eventually grows into a myth. Facts from his life are not crucial for the average person's opinion because, as somebody once said, *when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.*"

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