10 Wars for Independence: Slovenia and Croatia 1991–95

SLOVENIA

National Liberation through a Public Relations Campaign

National independence, within the framework of Balkan national ideologies, should be achieved through a struggle for national liberation from a foreign occupier. Not surprisingly, the leaders of the nationalist parties, which came to power in Slovenia and in Croatia in mid-1990, started to plan for a military action against the Yugoslav federal...

Map 3 Yugoslavia in 1991
army – which they regarded as an occupier – well in advance of their co-ordinated proclamations of independence in June 1991. Yet the two governments failed to co-ordinate their military preparations or actions, possibly because the Croatian government, engaged in its fruitless attempts to take over areas under Croatian Serb control, was initially at pains to avoid or to minimise the intervention of the Yugoslav federal army in the rest of Croatia. In contrast to the Croatian government, the Slovenian government planned a military confrontation with the Yugoslav federal army immediately following its proclamation of independence.¹ Through its intelligence network in the Yugoslav army’s headquarters, the Slovenian government learned of the army’s plans to counter the Slovenian take-over of Yugoslav federal institutions in Slovenia. The Yugoslav army high command viewed Slovenia’s planned secession as part of a foreign, primarily German, plot to partition federal Yugoslavia and thus to weaken its armed forces; in its view, the Yugoslav army’s constitutional duty was to preserve the territorial integrity of the country and thus to prevent, by force, any such partition.

The benefits of military confrontation for the Slovenian government were to be both symbolic and practical: the struggle against the previously rather invisible occupier would unite the Slovenian nation in its determination to achieve full independence from the Yugoslav state and, more importantly, would lead to a European intervention and an international recognition of independence. The refusal of the US and the EC to recognize any unilateral secession of Yugoslav republics was at the time seen as the principal obstacle to the international recognition of Slovenia’s independence.² But the Slovenian government, through its contacts in Austria, Germany and other European countries, was assured that the EC would not refuse to intervene and mediate in a military conflict that would endanger peace in Europe.³ Any such mediation was bound to recognize the Slovenian government as an independent party to the conflict and thus break the EC resistance to its international recognition. The Slovenian campaign for independence, including the military confrontation, was thus conceived as a co-ordinated public relations campaign aimed at the domestic patriotic audience, European governments and their media-exposed electorates as well as the allegedly hostile forces – the officers and conscripts of the Yugoslav federal army.

While a few influential Slovenian politicians disapproved of the plans for a military action, preferring a negotiated path to independence, they suspended their opposition to the plans partly as they were