

= Plitvice Lakes incident =

The Plitvice Lakes incident (Croatian : Krvavi Uskrs na Plitvicama or Plitvički krvavi Uskrs , both translating as " Plitvice Bloody Easter ") was an armed clash at the beginning of the Croatian War of Independence . It was fought between Croatian police and armed forces from the Croatian Serb @-@ established SAO Krajina at the Plitvice Lakes in Croatia , on 31 March 1991 . The fighting followed the SAO Krajina 's takeover of the Plitvice Lakes National Park and resulted in Croatia recapturing the area . The clash resulted in one killed on each side and contributed to the worsening ethnic tensions .

The fighting prompted the Presidency of Yugoslavia to order the Yugoslav People 's Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija ? JNA) to step in and create a buffer zone between the opposing forces . The JNA arrived at the scene the following day and presented Croatia with an ultimatum requesting the police to withdraw . Even though the special police units which captured the Plitvice Lakes area did pull out on 2 April , a newly established Croatian police station , staffed by 90 officers , remained in place . The police station was blockaded by the JNA three months later , and captured in late August 1991 .

= = Background = =

In 1990 , following the electoral defeat of the government of the Socialist Republic of Croatia , ethnic tensions worsened . The Yugoslav People 's Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija ? JNA) confiscated Croatia 's Territorial Defence (Teritorijalna obrana ? TO) weapons to minimize resistance . On 17 August , the tensions escalated into an open revolt of the Croatian Serbs , centred on the predominantly Serb @-@ populated areas of the Dalmatian hinterland around Knin , parts of the Lika , Kordun , Banovina regions and eastern Croatia . They established a Serbian National Council in July 1990 , to coordinate opposition to Croatian President Franjo Tuđman 's policy of pursuing independence for Croatia . Milan Babić , a dentist from the southern town of Knin , was elected president . Knin 's police chief , Milan Martić , established paramilitary militias . The two men eventually became the political and military leaders of the SAO Krajina , a self @-@ declared state incorporating the Serb @-@ inhabited areas of Croatia .

In the beginning of 1991 , Croatia had no regular army . In an effort to bolster its defence , Croatia doubled the size of its police force to about 20 @, @ 000 . The most effective part of the force was the 3 @, @ 000 @-@ strong special police that were deployed in 12 battalions adopting military organisation . In addition there were 9 @, @ 000 ? 10 @, @ 000 regionally organised reserve police . The reserve police were set up in 16 battalions and 10 companies , but they lacked weapons .

In an effort to consolidate territory under their control , Croatian Serb leaders organised a political rally at the Plitvice Lakes on 25 March 1991 , demanding the area be annexed to the SAO Krajina . Three days later , on 28 March , SAO Krajina special police seized the area , and with the help of armed civilians , removed the Croatian management of the Plitvice Lakes National Park . The force deployed by the SAO Krajina to the Plitvice Lakes was estimated to be approximately 100 @-@ strong . The region was relatively sparsely populated and there was no obvious threat to Serbs there . Journalist Tim Judah suggests that the move may have been motivated by a desire to control a strategic road that ran north @-@ south through the park , linking the Serb communities in the Lika and Banovina regions .

= = Timeline = =

Croatia deployed special police forces , specifically the Lučko , Rakitje and Sljeme special police units based in and around Zagreb , supported by additional police forces drawn from Karlovac and Gospić to retake the Plitvice Lakes area . The Croatian police force , commanded by Josip Lucić , used several buses and passenger cars , as well as an armoured personnel carrier to approach the Plitvice Lakes area . The main 180 @-@ strong group of the Rakitje Special Police Unit (SPU) , directly commanded by Lucić , arrived in dense fog , along the main road from Zagreb via the

Korana River bridge . The bridge was secured by the Lučko unit shortly before midnight on 30 / 31 March 1991 . An auxiliary force approached the Plitvice Lakes via Ličko Petrovo Selo , while the Kumrovec SPU was deployed in the area between the lakes and Gospić , where it captured the Ljubovo Pass to secure the right flank of the main effort . The total attacking force comprised approximately 300 troops .

The approaching convoy was ambushed at a barricade set up by the SAO Krajina force near Plitvice Lakes before 7 : 00 in the morning of Easter Sunday , 31 March 1991 . The SAO Krajina force attacked the vehicles carrying the Croatian police and held their position until they fell back to the national park post office two and a half hours later . The Croatian advance , additionally hindered by deep snow , was achieved at a cost of six wounded . The attacking force secured its objectives by 11 : 00 am . As the attacking operation reached its completion , the Croatian military sustained its first combat fatality of the Croatian War of Independence , when Josip Jović was killed by a machine gun covering retreating SAO Krajina troops . Shortly afterwards , the Yugoslav Air Force dispatched a Mil Mi 8 helicopter to attend to wounded on both sides , and it left the area after an hour and a half . The helicopter was dispatched by Colonel General Anton Tus , head of the Yugoslav Air Force at the time , following a request by Josip Boljkovac , Interior Minister of Croatia . As the fighting around Plitvice ended , sporadic gunfire was reported near Titova Korenica , to the south . The same afternoon , a Croatian police station was established at the Plitvice Lakes and Tomislav Iljić was appointed its commanding officer . The station was staffed by approximately 90 police officers who were redeployed from Gospić .

The Presidency of Yugoslavia met in an emergency session the same evening to discuss the clash . At the insistence of Serbia 's representative on the Presidency , Borisav Jović , the JNA was ordered to intervene , gain control in the area and prevent further combat . The Serbian parliament also met in an emergency session , treating the clashes as a virtual casus belli and voting to offer the Krajina Serbs " all necessary help " in their conflict with Zagreb . The following day , the SAO Krajina adopted a resolution to the effect that the territory was incorporated into Serbia , whose constitution and laws were adopted for use in the Serb held areas of Croatia . Croatian authorities accused Serbia 's president , Slobodan Milošević , of stage managing the unrest in order to break Croatia 's resolve to declare independence unless Yugoslavia was transformed into a loose confederation . They also accused him of attempting to coax the JNA to overthrow Croatian government .

= = = JNA intervention = = =

On 1 April , the JNA established a buffer zone to separate the belligerents at Plitvice Lakes , deploying elements of the 1st and the 5th Military Districts . Those were an armoured battalion of the 329th Armoured Brigade based in Banja Luka , a battalion of the 6th Mountain Brigade based in Delnice , a reconnaissance company and a mechanised battalion of the 4th Armoured Brigade based in Jastrebarsko and Karlovac , a battalion of the 306th Light Anti Aircraft Artillery Regiment based in Zagreb , a signals company of the 367th Signals Regiment based in Samobor , a company of the 13th Military Police Battalion based in Rijeka and an anti aircraft artillery battery drawn from the 13th Proletarian Motorised Brigade based in Rijeka . Finally , the 5th Military District set up a forward command post at the Plitvice Lakes . The JNA force at the Plitvice Lakes was commanded by Colonel Ivan Timać .

The commanding officer of the 5th Military District , Major General Andrija Račeta , in overall command of the JNA intervention , told the media that his men were not protecting either side and were there only to prevent ethnic confrontations for an indeterminate period . However , the Croatian government reacted furiously to the JNA move . Tuđman 's aide , Mario Nobile , claimed that the JNA had told Croatian officials that it would engage the police if they did not leave Plitvice . In a radio address , Tuđman said that the JNA would be regarded as a hostile army of occupation if its course of action remained unchanged . On 2 April , the JNA handed the Croatian authorities an ultimatum , requesting the police leave Plitvice . The special police left Plitvice the same day , but the 90 officers staffing the newly established police station remained in place .

= = Aftermath = =

Police officer Josip Jović was the only Croatian fatality in the incident . The SAO Krajina force also suffered one killed in the fighting ? Rajko Vukadinović , who was the first Croatian Serb combat fatality in the war . A total of 20 people were wounded , seven of whom were the Croatian police . The Croatian forces captured 29 SAO Krajina troops , 18 of whom were formally charged with insurgency . Among the prisoners was Goran Hadžić , later to become the President of the Republic of Serbian Krajina , although he was quickly released . Hadžić 's release was explained as a goodwill gesture by the authorities , but Boljkovac claims he was released because he was collaborating with the Croatian authorities in 1991 . Approximately 400 tourists , most of them Italian , were evacuated from the Plitvice Lakes after the fighting .

The clash at the Plitvice Lakes worsened the overall situation in Croatia and led to an escalation of the conflict . Even though the Croatian and Serb forces were separated by the JNA at the Plitvice Lakes , the situation in the area continued to deteriorate following the clash . In nearby Plaški , Croatian police personnel left the local police station and were replaced by Serb officers . Both SAO Krajina and Croatian forces set up several roadblocks on the Saborsko ? Lička Jasenica ? Ogulin road . By summer , the blockades were extended to the north of Plaški and south of Saborsko , where Croatian authorities established another 30 @-@ strong police station on 2 April . Only JNA vehicles were permitted to pass the roadblocks , and that brought about a shortage of food , medicine and electricity in the area .

On 2 May , the Serb Democratic Party , the ruling party in the SAO Krajina , organised a protest march to the Plitvice Lakes and a political rally demanding the Croatian police withdraw from Plitvice . The march , led by Babić and Vojislav Vukelić , was prevented from reaching the Plitvice Lakes by the JNA and forced to return to Titova Korenica . The JNA imposed a blockade of the Plitvice Lakes police station on 1 July , on the pretext that the Croatian police had abducted and imprisoned two JNA officers . By 6 July , the SAO Krajina forces and the JNA commenced attacks on the Ljubovo Pass southeast of the Plitvice Lakes , on the Titova Korenica ? Gospić road , driving the Croatian National Guard back and capturing the pass by the end of the month . Throughout the summer , the JNA continued to engage Croatian forces in Lika using the units deployed to the Plitvice Lakes in April . The fighting escalated further on 30 August , when the JNA captured the Plitvice Lakes police station and the following day when the Battle of Gospić began .

Jović is largely viewed in Croatia as the first casualty of the Croatian War of Independence . A monument dedicated to him was erected in his birthplace of Aržano in 1994 . After the war , a monument was erected at the site of his death , where annual commemorations of the clash are held . The clash and Jović 's death are commemorated annually at the Plitvice Lakes .