

## **Army Commanders Knew POWs Faced Execution**

**Author:** [Goran Jungvirth](#)

Witness says Mrksic and Sljivancanin did nothing to protect Vukovar Croats.

A former Yugoslav army officer told the Hague tribunal this week that Mile Mrksic and Veselin Sljivancanin knew that local Serb paramilitaries planned to kill Croat prisoners of war captured during the battle for Vukovar.

Bogdan Vujic, a military intelligence officer with the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA at the time, testified that neither Mrksic nor Sljivancanin made any attempt to stop the execution of prisoners by paramilitaries. He added that Mrksic was in command of the military zone which included the hospital, and that Sljivancanin warned his officers "not to be surprised if some Chetniks [Serb paramilitaries] will slaughter some Ustashas [a derogatory term for Croats]".

The accused, with JNA officer Miroslav Radic, are known as the "Vukovar Three" - for their alleged roles in the murders of at least 264 Croats captured at the Vukovar hospital. After they were taken prisoner by the JNA, the prosecution alleges the victims were sent by bus to the nearby Ovcara farm, where they were executed by members of various Serb territorial defence units and paramilitary groups. Victims included hospital staff, patients and prisoners of war.

Vujic was tasked with moving prisoners from the Velepromet detention centre, where they were taken after the hospital, to the Serbian prison Sremska Mitrovica. Apart from the main execution site at Ovcara, witnesses have identified Velepromet as another location where prisoners were murdered.

During a heated cross-examination by Mrksic's defence counsel Miroslav Vasic, he denied that he bore personal responsibility for the bloody events at Velepromet. He insisted that he had saved 800 prisoners, all under threat to his own life from the local Serbian Territorial Defence, TO, and the Chetnik paramilitaries.

"I couldn't save those who were [taken by paramilitaries] or killed behind Velepromet's fence," Vujic told Vasic. "I accomplished my assignment."

Vasic countered, "If some of the prisoners were killed, you didn't accomplish your mission."

In a heated exchange, Vasic continued to claim that Vujic was responsible for the deaths, because he failed to arrest the Chetniks who confronted him at Velepromet. The witness replied, "how could I arrest them when Mrksic and Sljivancanin placed them there?"

He told presiding judge Kevin Parker about pressure he had come under in 1999 to testify for the defence at a Belgrade military trial of a number of JNA officers alleged to have been involved in the massacre at Vukovar. Vujic confirmed that the defence team in the tribunal case had also tried to get him to testify on their behalf.

Vujic appeared as a prosecution witness in the Belgrade trial, where his testimony was much more limited than the evidence he presented at The Hague. He explained that it had been hard to speak the truth in the Belgrade court, because all Serbian officers were warned they would be considered traitors if they

admitted what had really happened at Velepromet.

The defence suggested that Vujic had only agreed to testify for the prosecution because he faces a possible indictment in connection with his role as a former JNA investigator who was present in many Serb detention camps during interrogations of Croatian prisoners.

Vujic insisted he was investigating “crimes committed on both sides” at camps like Begejci in Serbia, notorious among Croats for the terrible conditions and mistreatment of prisoners.

“I consider that I did my share in the war crimes' investigation,” said Vujic, adding that he had made complaints about the conditions in Begejci and informed the camp's commander, who was dismissive of the problems, telling him “that German prisoners from the Second World War had been kept there”.

Vujic also confirmed that he had interrogated Dr Vesna Bosanac, head doctor at the Vukovar hospital, after she was transferred to Sremska Mitrovica.

She told him that Croatian forces had made their headquarters in the hospital several days before the city fell. This supports the defence argument that it was only active Croatian military members, not civilians and wounded, who were taken from Vukovar's hospital.

Responding to defence questions about Croat attacks before the conflict around Vukovar started, Vujic described the activities of a group of Croats led by Tomislav Mercep, who allegedly kidnapped local Serbs and organised a reign of terror against the Serb community in and around Vukovar. The defence alleges this triggered the JNA action in Vukovar.

Vujic confirmed that he had found out about these activities during the interrogation of a member of Mercep's group arrested in Serbia on suspicion of planning “terrorist” actions.

Vukovar resident Vilhelm Rudolf was the week's second witness, giving his evidence in a remarkably short 30 minutes – during which time he said a lot.

“Major Sljivancanin [decided] - on the recommendation of local Serbs - who would be taken by bus to the execution site and who would not,” said Rudolf, who was saved from the “bus of dead” by a Serb doctor who knew his wife, an employee at the hospital.

The trial continues next week.

Goran Jungvirth is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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