

Bosnian Serb Forces Not Behind Wartime Mosque Destruction - Witness

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Engineer tells court that demolitions were carried out in a haphazard rather than systematic way.

A defence witness for former Bosnian Serb army chief Ratko Mladic told Hague judges this week that the wartime destruction of mosques was due to collateral damage or plain vandalism, and was not part of a deliberate policy.

Dragic Gojkovic, a former engineer with the Bosnian Serb army (VRS), authored a report in which he concluded that army units under Mladic's command were not involved in the destruction of buildings outside active combat zones.

The defence had enlisted Gojkovic to contest the findings of prosecution witness Andras Riedlmayer, an expert on Islamic architecture, who testified two years ago about the numerous mosques and Catholic churches destroyed during the conflict. (See **Mladic Trial Witness on Wartime Desecrations in Bosnia.**)

Mladic, commander of the Bosnian Serb army from 1992 to 1996, is charged with the "destruction of cultural monuments and sacred sites" in relation to 11 Bosnian municipalities.

Prosecutors allege that Mladic is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which "contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory". He is accused of planning and overseeing the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that left nearly 12,000 people dead, as well as the massacre of more than 7,000 men and boys at Srebrenica in July 1995.

At the start of his testimony, Gojkovic made clear that his own expert report was based on the one that Riedlmayer submitted to the tribunal.

He complained that he had only been given seven hours to complete the "huge task" of writing his report, but that he had studied Riedlmayer's data "very carefully".

However, Gojkovic said that after he examined the most "characteristic" examples of the 94 buildings cited in Riedlmayer's report, it was clear that their destruction had not been carried out by experts.

"I looked at their demolition, which was done in what I would describe as a criminal way without any particular model, system or method," he said.

The commonest demolition method was to target the minaret, he said, which did not make structural sense.

"In most cases when mosques in BiH [Bosnia and Herzegovina] were demolished, it was minarets that were attacked first and foremost, and too much explosive was being used - enough to destroy the entire building," he said. "Now it depended on where the explosives were placed. A minaret would fall either on the building itself or to the side. Secondly, in most cases when minarets were destroyed, the roofs were damaged too. Also in many cases, after the building was destroyed, it was also torched; or rather it is very difficult to ascertain whether buildings were burned before or after the demolition.

"At any rate, explosives were placed inside the minaret and at the level of the roof - if I can put it that way - so that the explosives would usually damage the roof or blow it away, and then due to the weather conditions, rain, snow etc, you don't know what was destroyed by explosions and what was due to the passage of time and the weather conditions. On the basis of photographs only, it is hard to establish that."

Prosecuting lawyer Arthur Traldi focused his cross-examination on undermining the witness's entire report. He noted that although Gojkovic testified that there was a great deal of information missing from Riedlmayer's report, he had not included any additional information in his own study.

"I only dealt with the way in which buildings were demolished. Riedlmayer dealt with spirituality, history and whatever else," Gojkovic replied.

Traldi asked him to point out one new piece of information in his report that had not been in Riedlmayer's document. The witness was unable to do so.

Traldi then turned to the witness's contention that ten mosques were destroyed during combat, while 84 were destroyed after the Bosnian Serb army withdrew from the area in question.

He accused Gojkovic of presenting the trial chamber with a "false dichotomy" by excluding information showing that some buildings were destroyed after the fighting was over but at a time when "the VRS maintained clear control of the area".

The witness repeated that he had only used the information contained in Riedlmayer's report.

The prosecution said it was unacceptable that he had no other supporting evidence.

"You have offered the trial chamber, in the body of your report, unsupported conclusions which you do not explain and which, you now testify, you do not know whether they are true or not," Traldi said.

The witness acknowledged that he may have "made some errors" but maintained that his data was "90 per cent correct".

Traldi turned to specific examples of destroyed mosques, including in Novoseoci in the Sokolac municipality and Sanica in Kljuc.

He noted that in Novoseoci, the trial had heard evidence that the village had been "cleansed" and that "the male residents were massacred".

"Did you consider evidence like that in determining whether to list something as during combat operations or after 'withdrawal'?" he asked.

Gojkovic repeated that he had only drawn on the evidence set out in the prosecution report and had "looked at the techniques, the manner and proportions of the building, the manner in which the building was demolished".

He added that throughout the war, the Bosnian Serb army would have remained in liberated areas for between five and ten days before handing over to the civilian authorities.

Once again, Traldi asked how the witness had been able to judge whether the army had withdrawn or not.

Turning to the example of the Sanica mosque, destroyed on June 26, 1992, Traldi asked, "Did you consider the Sanica mosque as having been destroyed during combat operations or after VRS withdrawal?"

The witness was unable to answer.

"What I'm putting to you, sir, is that [in] coming to this conclusion you have essentially made numbers up," the prosecutor said. "You have no basis for it, and you are providing the trial chamber information that you have no basis for providing. That's the truth right?"

The witness denied this.

Traldi now turned to the conclusion which Gojkovic drew in his report that "the destruction of these cultural sites was an uncontrolled spate, not part of the chain of command".

“So just to make sure I understand your evidence, it’s your evidence that violence committed against every Muslim and Croat cultural site that either you or Mr Riedlmayer looked at in these 12 different municipalities – different areas of Bosnia at different times – was either some sort of grassroots movement of people desecrating mosques and churches or a coincidence,” Traldi said. “Is that right?”

“Precisely,” the witness responded.

The prosecutor asked whether Gojkovic had studied any of the comments that wartime Serb leaders had made regarding mosques and churches.

The witness said he personally believed there was no need to do so, but that he had spoken to Dragan Davidovic, the Republika Srpska (RS) minister for religious affairs, at the end of the war.

“He claimed to me that the leaders of the Bosnian Serbs did not take part in this [destruction]”, Gojkovic said, adding that Davidovic had also publicly condemned the “criminal” 1993 demolition of the Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka.

Traldi then read from an article which appeared in the New York Times on August 21, 1992 and which included a quote from Simo Drljaca, the then chief of police in Prijedor.

Drljaca was shot dead in 1997 during an attempt to arrest him for war crimes.

““With their mosques, you must not just break the minarets, you’ve got to shake up the foundations because that means they cannot build another. Do that and they’ll want to go, they’ll just leave themselves,”” Tradli quoted Drljaca as saying. “This is not the sort of statement that you would have considered in coming to your conclusion that the Bosnian Serb authorities were disconnected from the destruction of mosques, is it?” he asked.

The witness said that Drljaca “was certainly an extremist” but that his comments did not represent the views of all RS leaders.

Traldi put it to the witness that he had in fact “failed to consider statements by actual authorities, and relied on one conversation you had with a gentleman named Davidovic in coming to this conclusion”.

The witness denied this, going on to emphasise that Bosnian Muslims and Croats had also served under him in the VRS, and that he and his commanders had “never dreamed” of demolishing cultural or religious sites.

“Do you think that I as commander would be destroying the buildings of soldiers who are waging war together with me? Does that seem logical to you?” he asked.

The trial will continue with the testimony of Mladic’s wife, Bosiljka Mladic.

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