

## **Court Hears of Ethnic Change in Knin**

**Author:** [Julia Hawes](#)

But defence witness says there was no policy to move Croats into deserted Serb homes.

A defence witness testifying in the trial of former Croatian army general Ivan Cermak denied this week that the Croat authorities had sought to prevent the return of the Serbian population to the Krajina region of Croatia to reclaim property after Operation Storm.

Petar Pasic, formerly the Croatian government's civilian commissioner for Knin, told the Hague tribunal that the number of Serbs in Knin dropped from 90 per cent to less than 10 per cent in the months following Operation Storm. The Croatian population rose from eight per cent to 90 per cent.

Cermak is accused, along with generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markac, of responsibility for crimes committed against Serb civilians during and after Operation Storm, a Croatian military offensive aimed at retaking the Serb-held Krajina region in August 1995.

The indictment alleges that Gotovina, Markac and Cermak participated in a joint criminal enterprise, along with then Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, the former Croatian minister of defence, Gojko Susak, and others.

The goal was the permanent removal of the Serb population from the Krajina region by means of force, fear, persecution, forced displacement, deportation, and destruction of property, the indictment says.

According to the indictment, Tudjman appointed Cermak commander of the Knin Garrison on August 5, 1995. In this position, Cermak was charged with maintaining order within the Croatian army, HV, units operating in the garrison, as well as civilian police, it says.

Cermak is also accused of permitting ongoing criminal activity during Operation Storm, failing to establish order among his subordinates, and providing false assurances to the international community that actions to stop such crimes were being taken. He has pleaded not guilty to all charges.

In his statement to the defence, Pasic said that Cermak dealt primarily with civilian issues, and that the military police were not subordinate to Cermak.

Prosecutor Katrina Gustafson asked if Pasic was aware that according to the indictment, Cermak issued orders to members of the HV and Croatian ministry of the interior, MUP, including the military and civilian police.

"I wasn't aware of that," Pasic said. "Members of the military police did not participate in meetings with me and Mr Cermak."

Gustafson asked Pasic if he had any knowledge about the authority or function of a garrison commander, under the rules and laws that applied at the time of Operation Storm.

“As far as I know, a garrison commander does not have any special authorities save for supplying units currently deployed in the area... where that person serves as garrison commander,” Pasic told the judges, adding that Cermak’s authorities fell “within the purview of the civilian sector”.

In his statement to the defence, Gustafson read, Pasic said that the Knin garrison command issued blank passage papers, which Cermak gave to him to distribute to residents wishing to return to Knin after Operation Storm.

“Did General Cermak have the authority to issue these passes?” Gustafson asked.

“I don’t know whether he had the authority,” Pasic told the judges. “But... these passes were a positive development.”

Gustafson read from Pasic’s statement to the Office of the Prosecution, OTP, in which he said that Serbs who left their homes during Operation Storm were required to make an official request to return to Croatia by December 1995. If they failed to do so, the statement read, their home became the property of the state.

Gustafson clarified that Pasic was referring to a law issued on September 20, 1995, detailing the taking over of the administration of property abandoned by Serb citizens. In accordance with article 11 of the law, Gustafson said, Serbs were required to physically return to Croatia to make the request to have their property returned to them.

Pasic said that he received requests from “Croats and Serbs alike” who were trying to reclaim property. Pasic told the judges some Serbs abroad sent documents through a notary public about their claim to property. He did not say whether such documents were effective in re-establishing those citizens’ claims to their property.

Gustafson read from Pasic’s statement to the OTP, in which he described Croats returning to Knin. According to the statement, Pasic said that Knin was “soon very full”.

According to Pasic’s statement, Gustafson said, Knin’s demographics changed considerably in the months after Operation Storm. She asked Pasic if that was true.

“In 1991... 90 percent of the population were Serbs,” Pasic told the judges. “In 1991, only 250 Croats lived in Knin.”

Pasic told judges that “the ratio was reversed” in 1995, with Croats eventually comprising 90 per cent of the population in Knin.

Gustafson cited one of several letters written by Cermak to Pasic that were accompanied by written requests of native Croats who were interested in living in Knin. One letter, written on August 30, 1995, asked Pasic to “study seriously the... letters and solve the citizens’ requests”.

Gustafson asked Pasic if he remembered receiving such letters.

“Not so many from General Cermak as I did... from the county office,” Pasic said, referring to the local housing committee, composed of Croatian members of the interior and defence ministries who made decisions on those requesting residence in Knin.

Gustafson pointed out that in Pasic’s testimony to the judges on October 8 he said that there were no obstacles to Croatian Serbs who wished to return to their homes after Operation Storm.

“It’s the case, is it not, in the months after Operation Storm, thousands of Croatian Serb refugees trying to return were prevented from returning by Croatian authorities?” Gustafson asked Pasic.

Pasic denied this. They had to obtain Croatian documents, Pasic said, and “a number of Serbs” who returned during that time had documents issued by the government.

Gustafson read from a report by United Nations special rapporteur Elisabeth Rehn written on November 7, 1995, in which Rehn discussed the law of temporary takeover of property.

According to Rehn, Gustafson said, a majority of ethnic Serb refugees would not be able to meet the deadline to reclaim their property in Croatia. Rehn reported that thousands of Serbian refugees waiting in Hungary were being prohibited from returning by bureaucratic measures instituted by Croatian officials.

Refugees had been turned back at the border, despite having proper documentation, Rehn reported. She added that the requirement that refugees make a request to reclaim their property from within the Croatian borders was an “insurmountable obstacle”, Gustafson read.

Pasic, who said he was aware of the report, told judges that he did not agree with Rehn’s findings.

Gustafson asked Pasic if there was a policy to move Croats into homes that had been vacated by Serbs who left the Krajina during Operation Storm.

“No, there wasn’t,” Pasic told the judges.

Gustafson read from Pasic’s statement to the OTP in which he said that the minister for reconstruction and development, Jure Radic, had instructed Pasic to house any returning Croats in Knin, but that Knin was very full.

The prosecution had given evidence, Gustafson said, that Croats moved into Knin from other regions and that the demographic picture in Knin changed after Operation Storm. Gustafson asked Pasic how he could “reconcile that evidence with [his] statement that there was no policy to move Croats into deserted Serb homes”.

“I still stand by the opinion that there was no policy of expelling Serbs and putting Croats instead,” Pasic told the judges.

The trial continues.

Julia Hawes is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

**Location:** Croatia

**Topic:** Courtside

---

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/court-hears-ethnic-change-knin>