

Court Told Storm Crimes 'Not Ordered' by Croat Generals

Author: [Velma Šarić](#)

A former Croatian soldier describes a post-battle atmosphere of euphoria and lawlessness and says generals were not responsible for crimes against civilians.

An ex-soldier who fought under former Croatian general Ante Gotovina testified at the Hague tribunal this week that crimes committed during the 1995 Operation Storm were not planned or organised by the army but fuelled by a desire for revenge.

Gotovina and fellow Croatian generals Ivan Cermak and Mladen Markac are accused of orchestrating the killing of dozens of people and the shelling and torching of Serb towns and villages as Croat forces retook the Serb-controlled Krajina region in August 1995 during the Operation Storm counter-offensive. An estimated 150,000 ethnic Serbs fled their homes at the end of the action in kilometre-long columns of cars, tractors and carts, many never to return.

Veselko Bilic, a former member of the 15th Patriotic Regiment, said, "Crimes against Serb civilians during Operation Storm were not ordered by generals of the Croatian army but out of revenge, under the influence of alcohol and euphoria because of victory, and were carried out arbitrarily by individuals.

"I admit that I took part in crimes and a murder of an old Serb woman, but I did it on my own behalf, not following someone's orders. There was no order from the top for us to do this."

The operation to retake the territory began at dawn on August 4, 1995 and ended four days later with a resounding victory for the Croats. Prosecutors allege that the three generals were behind an orchestrated campaign of looting and destruction of property meant to drive out the local population, including the torching of houses belonging to Serbs and the unlawful killing and inhumane treatment of Serb civilians.

Bilic said that the situation after the operation was chaotic and lawless.

"After Storm, days of madness and drunkenness came and it was very difficult, in fact impossible, to control the crazy mass of soldiers of such different dispositions," he said.

"Everyone had weapons. This bunch of drunken people did whatever they wanted to, including certain crimes. It was simply impossible to establish true control over them on the ground."

As an example, he gave the behaviour of himself and his fellow soldiers.

"We drank alcohol, ate ham and lamb, were thirsty all the time. We were absolutely ready to undertake anything because there was this euphoria in the air as we had defeated the enemy," said Bilic.

He added that such a state in his case was provoked by "the loss of eight family members".

"I consider that criminals and murderers like myself and all those who committed crimes should be

indicted before this court, and not these generals here," said Bilic, referring to Gotovina, Markac and Cermak. "These are innocent people who could in no way control a crazy mass of soldiers. This was not done by the army, but by individuals such as myself."

Asked by defence lawyer Luka Miletic to explain the looting and burning of Serb homes, Bilic said, "The homes were not looted, but rather the Croats were taking back their property previously taken by the Serbs."

"Many had recognised their belongings. Some found cows, sheep, some even recognised their chickens. I didn't consider this to be stealing, as they had taken it from us. Civilian and military police would prevent this, but they were helpless and in rather small numbers. We knew every hole in the forest, and they were at the main checkpoints. We could go through any time we wanted someone not to see us."

Bilic was sentenced to eight years in prison by a Croatian court for the murder of Dara Milosevic, an old woman from the hamlet of Pavici in September 1995, and to one year for the rape of a Serb woman from the village of Gorica. His murder sentence was reduced by decree by late president Franjo Tudjman after he had served three and a half years. The rape case is still at the appeal stage.

He said the murder of Dara Milosevic was a "purely random case. Everyone in the Krajina were enemies in my eyes, everyone over 18. So what was I supposed to tell her, perhaps 'Good evening, granny'? After all they did to me?"

He denied that he had raped a woman with a group of fellow soldiers, saying, "We did act arrogantly, but there was no rape."

He committed both crimes in a Croatian army uniform, but said that at the time he was out of his commanders' control.

"At the beginning of Operation Storm, I followed my superiors' orders, but afterwards I did everything following only my own judgement," said Bilic.

The trial continues next week.

Velma Saric is an IWPR- trained reporter in Sarajevo.

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