

COURTSIDE: Bosanska Krajina Trial

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Genocide trial for crimes committed in Bosanska Krajina opens

The trial of Radoslav Brdjanin and General Momir Talic, accused of genocide and other war crimes committed in the Bosnian Krajina, north-western Bosnia, began at The Hague last week.

At the time of the alleged crimes, Brdjanin was president of Autonomous Region of Krajina - ARK - crisis staff, while General Momir Talic was commander of the 1st Krajina corps of the Bosnian Serb Army, VRS. A leading figure in the ARK police, Stojan Zupljanin, is also indicted, but he is still at large.

Brdjanin and Talic were arrested and detained two and a half years ago, but the large volume of material evidence has meant that preparations for the trial have taken a long time. For the same reason, the trial itself is expected to be lengthy.

In her opening address, prosecutor Joanna Korner said that implementation of the policy commonly described as "ethnic cleansing", but which in fact included a "wide spectrum of crimes, ranging from denial of the right to work, through deportation and persecution, to detention in camps and killings", began in ARK in 1992.

The motive, Korner stressed, was to carve a Serb state out of Bosnian territory - or extend Serbia to that part of the territory. That project included the permanent removal of the non-Serb population from the area.

The cruelty of methods and the extent of killings and other crimes, along with the coordination of political, military and police structures in committing crimes, clearly indicate an intention to destroy the national, ethnic and religious communities of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in that area, said the prosecutor.

The prosecutor identified a unique pattern whereby the Serbian Democratic Party, SDS, of Radovan Karadzic seized power in those municipalities which became part of ARK. The first step in the takeover of power was the declaration of an Assembly of Serb People, after which the JNA proceeded to arm the local Serb population.

Bosniaks and Croats were then required to sign statements of loyalty to the Serb authorities, most notably those working in the police.

The assembly was duly be transformed into a crisis staff which then issued an order for the disarming of all paramilitary formations and the surrender of privately held weapons, which, in practice, applied only to Bosniaks and Croats. Such orders spread fear and resistance among the non-Serb population and as such was a serious catalyst of conflict, according to the prosecutor.

The order to disarm was used as a pretext for Serb military and paramilitary formations to move into non-Serb areas, assemble the population, separate men and women, take the men to camps or summarily expel them from Krajina after forcing them to sign documents signing over their property to the Serb authorities. Many civilians were killed during these operations.

Any show of resistance to the establishment of SDS rule, however minor, was used as a justification for the use of force and the occupation of non-Serb communities, according to the prosecutor. Propaganda was a major weapon in justifying these actions, the value of which the ARK crisis headquarters was keenly aware.

In her opening address, prosecutor Korner dealt in detail with the destructive effect of propaganda and to that end read out the following document, which was issued in July 1992 by the crisis headquarters in Sanski Most, one of the municipalities which formed part of ARK:

"Dear Brother Serbs!

Do you know what our bloodthirsty enemies had been planning for us? What they had in mind was to gorge out our eyes, carve us up, hack our bodies to pieces, rape women and girls in front of their loved ones, carry out forcible circumcisions and destroy our religion - to crush us, just because we happen to be Serbs. Don't imagine that any family would have been spared. They had monsters ready and waiting to rape Serbian women and they had developed a system of killing each and every Serb. Soon we will display their terrible weapons, "Srbojsjeks" [Serb-cutters], medieval swords, sledgehammers, special knives, instruments for gouging out eyes and tools to carve us up.

A decent man shudders with horror!

In Vrhpolje, an Ustasha killed his own two young children, then turned around to shoot at the [enemy] army. When one of our soldiers fell into their hands, he was butchered in the most barbaric way.

They had been preparing a genocide against the Serbs, but did not get away with it because we saw what was coming. We warned our people and prepared them in time. The leaders of the Serbian Democratic Party are resolute in their aim to accomplish the task entrusted in them by the Serbian people.

Dear brothers, the war is not over yet!"

The first prosecution witness was Dr Robert Donia, a US expert in Balkan history, who has testified at several other tribunal trials (Blaskic, Kordic and Cerkez, Bosanski Samac). His testimony, frequently punctuated by objections from the defence and procedural problems, will continue next week.

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