

Courtside: Milosevic Trial

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By Chris Stephen in The Hague (TU 299, 03-07 February 2003)

The problem, thus far, is that the wars of Bosnia and Croatia took place in countries outside Yugoslavia, where Milosevic was president of the largest republic, Serbia.

Unofficially, prosecutors say Milosevic, nevertheless, had control of Serb military units in these countries. But on paper, he did not. Even the presence of Yugoslav army units in Croatia provides no official link – since the Serbian president was in charge of police, not army, units.

But one exception emerged last week, when a witness claimed that Serbian territorial defence units had been sent into action in Croatia.

In his testimony, General Aleksander Vasilejevic said that when the Yugoslav army ran short of men due to desertions during the 1991 Croatian war, it turned to its territorial defence units for replacements.

These bodies, made up of former soldiers, were created during Tito's communist regime to ensure Yugoslavia could be defended in depth against any invader.

Tito had arranged for these units to be commanded by the regions – hence Serb units would be under the command of Serbia, not Yugoslavia.

Testimony was given that in October 1991 the Territorial Defence of Serbia offered its help as the army battled at Vukovar and sent troops to the battlefield. General Vasilejevic - who is accused of conspiring with the former Serb president to commit certain war crimes - said this mission needed Milosevic's order.

Evidence that Milosevic had control of Yugoslav army units came from two letters.

One was from Milan Martić, former interior minister of the self-declared Croatian Serb republic of Krajina, RSK, dated June 9, 1993, asking Milosevic as Serb president to “use your authority and position” to get spare parts and ammunition for his army.

The second letter was from the president of the RSK, Goran Hadžić, dated June 24 of the same year, saying “Dear Mr President. I draw your attention to problems we are unable to solve by ourselves and which represent urgent problems of the army of RSK”. He listed ammunition, spare parts and procurement.

General Vasiljevic listed paramilitary commanders he said were under the command of the Serbian interior ministry.

In 1990, Franko “Frenki” Simatović trained volunteers in Serb-held parts of Croatia on behalf of the Serbian interior ministry.

One year later, the Serbian interior ministry's state security department brought Dragan Vasiljkovic - nicknamed Captain Dragan - from Australia for the same purpose and set him up in a camp at Golubic, Croatia.

Also in 1991, Vojislav Seselj, head of the Serbian Radical Party, was engaged by Jovica Stanisic, head of the state security department, to take Serb volunteers to fight in Croatia.

Vasiljkovic said he had no direct proof of this last allegation, but based it on Seselj's own comments in a BBC documentary and the fact that afterwards Seselj "never denied it".

Another commander using Serb volunteers and commanded by the interior ministry was Zejlko "Arkan" Raznatovic, who was in command of a unit of paramilitaries called the Tigers. The witness said Arkan's unit was answerable to the interior ministry, not the army.

Vasiljevic recalled how, on a visit to the interior ministry, he was told to leave his firearm at the door after Arkan had walked into the building carrying a machine gun. When he complained about this inequality of treatment, one guard told him, "Well, you are not Arkan."

Another prosecution witness taking the stand was former United Nations diplomat Charles Kirudja, who served in Belgrade in 1994-1995 as representative of Yasushi Akashi, special representative for the UN secretary general - the top UN envoy in Yugoslavia.

Kirudja said he had never met then president of federal Yugoslavia, Zoran Lilic, because Milosevic was actually the man in command - despite being the president of Serbia only on paper.

Kirudja told the court that he and Akashi had met with Milosevic to discuss UN missions in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, because they felt the Serbian leader had direct command in these places.

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Location: Serbia
Croatia
Bosnia and
Herzegovina

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