

Courtside: Serbia's Dirty War

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By Chris Stephen in The Hague (TU 309, 14-18 April 2003)

The word, which means Spider, would put her straight through to the private line of Frankie Simatovic, commander of the Red Berets.

That was all she needed. Simatovic's Red Berets were Milosevic's most elite force, part of Serbian State Security, or RDB - Milosevic's secret police.

"Arkan always said that without orders from the state security, the Tigers never went anywhere," the secretary this week told the war crimes court.

Milosevic has always insisted that, as president of Serbia, he had no control over events in the war in neighbouring Bosnia.

Evidence this week in his trial suggests that he did - through waging his own secret war, with Arkan's soldiers as his point men.

Simatovic was the man who gave Arkan his missions, arranged his transport, and paid his men with millions of German marks delivered to secret bases in huge sacks. In a major coup for prosecutors, they have persuaded the secretary to tell her story.

She gave her testimony amid tight security. Screens were lowered to shield her from the press, her image on the closed-circuit court cameras was scrambled, and her name was not mentioned - instead she was referred to only as Witness B-129.

It soon became clear why she needed this protection, as she laid bare the network Milosevic allegedly used to commit war crimes.

"When I would say the word Pauk they would transfer me to Frankie's office," she told the court. "There were two telephone numbers. One telephone was linked to his office (Simatovic), to his secretary, Sladjana. The other number was a duty number of the state security of the republic of Serbia."

This was the starting point for special operations in Bosnia. Officially, Milosevic had no connection to the war raging there: he was the president of Serbia. But unofficially, say prosecutors, he masterminded the war using the RDB to send orders and cash to Arkan's paramilitaries.

B-129's job was to run the office for Arkan who commanded a force of paramilitaries called the Serbian Volunteer Guard - nicknamed the Tigers. Most of the men were from Serbia proper. In 1992, they had led the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia. By 1993, they were established not in Serbia, but in Serb-occupied Croatia, in a base at Erdut - enabling them to claim no connection to Serbia.

But in fact, they were Milosevic's point men. When crises blew up in Bosnia, Milosevic turned to the Tigers.

The witness described one operation in which they were sent to help Fikret Abdic, a renegade Muslim who had turned against the mostly-Muslim Bosnian army around the pocket of Bihac.

Abdic was in trouble - government forces were hammering his troops, so he called for Milosevic to come and help. But Milosevic could not be seen to be helping him - Belgrade was under sanctions and its borders were monitored by the UN. In fact, the country was within a whisker of being totally cut off by the West, which suspected, but could not prove, that Milosevic was running the war in Bosnia.

"The state security, where it did not have enough men for the front, would take members of the Serbian Volunteer Guard," she said. So secret was this particular operation that it was put under direct RDB command.

In addition to the Tigers, Red Beret commandos were sent as well - all of them instructed to take off their shoulder flashes in case they were killed or captured. And even the commander, Arkan, was forbidden from leading his men into battle in case someone saw him.

Instead, a key Red Beret commander, Milorad Lukovic, nicknamed Legija, took direct control. "Arkan did not go because most people knew what Arkan looked like," she said. "So they were led by Legija."

This evidence is crucial: Legija later became the commander of the Red Berets, and is currently on the run in Serbia, accused of the murder of former prime-minister Zoran Djindjic.

The Bihac operation saw the troops attack Bosnian forces around Velika Kladusha. Two Tigers were killed.

Getting into Bosnia could present a problem - UN patrols guarded all the bridges across the Drina river. But the RDB gave Arkan the solution, handing him a special interior ministry number plates. All Arkan need do to bring weapons into Bosnia, was to fix the plates to whatever vehicle he was using, and the UN would wave them through.

And then there was the money: Milosevic was grateful. Very grateful. The secretary described how the Tigers would be paid in German marks, sometimes arriving in sacks of 3-4 million. It was her job to help count it.

"Cash arrived at the headquarters from the state security in Belgrade," she said. "Money was delivered about ten times, and there were three to four million Deutschmarks. Because I and a couple of others counted (it)."

Their job was to put it into envelopes for the soldiers - 1,500 marks per envelope, a month's pay. It was a fortune at the time. Ordinary Serb soldiers earned about 5 marks a month in Serb currency.

"We put it in envelopes for the soldiers in Erdut," she said. "The rest went to Arkan's safe. Sometimes Arkan would bring the cash himself. He would just tell me that he had brought the money from the RDB and it was up to me to organise the counting and to make sure that all the soldiers in Erdut received their salaries."

The RDB were not the only ones supporting the Tigers. So too were the Yugoslav army, the JA. Officially, of course, the JA were the national army, and were outside the control of the president of Serbia. In fact, say prosecutors, they followed Milosevic's orders - even helping with his dirty war in Bosnia.

"The Guards were often told to contact him," she said, asked about JA general Dusko Loncar, the boss of the forces around Erdut. "He supplied us with weapons, fuel and part of the money."

Other cash came from Arkan's smuggling operations, she said - which Arkan ran in partnership with Abdic.

And yet another Yugoslav government department - the customs service - were involved in helping Arkan to smuggle alcohol and tobacco into the country, she said.

Erdut was one of the most lavish bases in Yugoslavia, but discipline was tough. Twice she remembered seeing Tigers given 100 lashes for violating Arkan's strict rule against drinking inside the base. And she said Arkan, together with Abdic and the RDB, operated a prison near Velika Kladusa where "most of the prisoners succumbed to their wounds from beatings".

An idea of how important the Tigers were came in December 1995, when Arkan celebrated a religious ceremony by buying ceremonial pistols for his officers.

Later, some of the officers drove in a car from Croatia into Serbia proper - where they were stopped by traffic police near the city of Novi Sad. The police found the guns and put the men, officially listed only as civilians, in jail.

The next day the secretary got a call - asking for her to get in touch with Simatovic's office to get the men released. The call was made, and the traffic police were told to forget the law. The men were let go, although their guns were kept.

Another phone call was made. And two days later, the Serbian police themselves delivered the pistols to Arkan's office - proof, if any were needed, of just how influential Tigers were in Milosevic's Serbia.

Sitting in Arkan's office gave the secretary a special inside look at the Tiger operations, which included stories soldiers would tell her about the murder and torture of Muslims and the smuggling operations.

Milosevic challenged the evidence - he has little choice. He accused her of having help in putting together her testimony, saying it was implausible that she remembered events from so long ago so clearly. Her reply was that the horrors she was exposed to were impossible to forget.

Her evidence may be the most crucial yet produced in this trial: prosecutors have already proved the extensive war crimes committed by Serb forces in Bosnia. This evidence provides what they hope will be the key link between these crimes and Milosevic, sitting far away in Belgrade.

The witness gave no evidence about Milosevic: her testimony ties the war crimes to Simatovic, and beyond him to Jovica Stanisic, the head of the RDB. Previous witnesses have said that Stanisic was Milosevic's right-hand man.

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Location: Serbia

Croatia
Bosnia and
Herzegovina

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