

## **Ex-Volunteer Testifies to Seselj's Influence**

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Former combatant describes the impact the Serb nationalist leader had on him during the Croatian war of the early Nineties.

A Serb man who took part in the 1991 siege of Vukovar told the Hague tribunal this week how a speech by ultra-nationalist leader Vojislav Seselj helped convince him to sign up to fight the Croats.

Seselj, leader of the Serbian Radical Party, is charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, including acts of persecution, extermination, murder and torture in Croatia, Bosnia and northern Serbia between 1991 and 1993.

According to the indictment, Seselj “made inflammatory speeches in the media, during public events, and during visits to the volunteer units and other Serb forces in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, instigating those forces to commit crimes”.

Seselj regularly made speeches in the early Nineties to rally political support.

One such address, delivered in summer 1991 and concerning the threat of the “Ustashe”- a term describing Croatian Nazi collaborators in the Second World War that in the early Nineties was used to refer to Croatian nationalist paramilitaries - left a lasting impression on witness Goran Stoparic.

“[Seselj] warned of the danger of the resurrected Ustashe who had risen like vampires from the grave. He spoke of a threat of a new genocide,” Stoparic told the tribunal.

“Listening to Mr Seselj, I concluded that this really was the situation and as a man - as a Serbian citizen - I had to play an active role.”

The trial resumed this week after a three-member panel appointed by tribunal President Fausto Pocar dismissed a prosecution motion for the disqualification of Judge Frederik Harhoff.

The trial was suspended last week for the panel to consider the request, which was based on the grounds that Judge Harhoff had served on the Danish Helsinki Commission for Human Rights in 1993. While working for the human rights group, he had interviewed a prosecution witness due to testify in this trial.

This week, Stoparic told the tribunal how he had served as a Serbian Radical Party volunteer in the “Leva Supoderica” unit during the 1991 assault on the Croatian city of Vukovar.

Serb forces besieged the city of Vukovar for three months in 1991, and according to a number of witnesses, bombarded it with mortars on a daily basis. After the defence of the city collapsed, Serb forces killed about 200 Croats they took from a military hospital.

The witness said the Serbs wanted to destroy Croat paramilitary forces and establish control over the Vukovar area. But he went on to describe how he saw his compatriots mistreat people.

“There was simply evil and the situation could not always be controlled,” he said. “For a while, they were able to behave inappropriately, mistreat people and even kill them, until the military police came along.”

He then described how an unannounced visit by Seselj to his unit on the front line at Vukovar provided “great encouragement” to the troops.

“I was pleased Mr Seselj had come to visit us. He was not afraid to come to the front line. We all trusted him. He was a leader,” said Stoparic.

He told the court how Seselj raised the men’s spirits and fired off shots in the direction of Croat forces “as a symbolic gesture”.

He went on to explain how Croats were taken prisoner and sent to enormous hangars at Velepromet, just outside the city, and said he had heard that many were killed there.

“I heard about that. People who are prone to do that kind of thing are liable to brag about it,” said Stoparic, singling out a fellow fighter nicknamed Topola from his unit, who told him he had shot someone.

“I saw the dead body of this man [killed by Topola] the next day by the railway,” said the witness.

According to Stoparic, Topola also took two Croat prisoners away from Serb military police. He killed the first and the other he “mistreated in different ways”.

The witness also said he had heard that Topola had thrown a 20-year-old woman down a well on the grounds that she and her husband were Croat extremists.

“Everybody said he raped her, killed her and threw her into the well,” the witness told the court.

According to the prosecution’s pre-trial brief, Seselj reacted to Topola’s crimes by saying, “There’s nothing I can do now. Disarm the man and send him home, he’s tired.”

Stoparic also told the tribunal that a fellow Serb was abused and expelled as a spy because he was a member of the Serbian Renewal Movement, a monarchist party.

“They processed him physically. He was tied up in the basement [of the commander’s house] and it lasted a day,” said Stoparic.

The witness insisted, however, that this behaviour was not typical of all members of the Serbian Radical Party during the early Nineties.

“An enormous number of people were honourable, brave, courageous soldiers. There are always people who are not good among them,” said Stoparic.

“These were individual cases that led to these atrocious crimes... Among the wheat, there are always some grains that are no good.”

Simon Jennings is an IWPR reporter in The Hague.

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