

Hague Catches Up with Mascot of Croatian Right

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Indicted by the tribunal, Mirko Norac continues to be lauded by many Croats as one of the heroes of their war of independence.

Mirko Norac, charged by the Hague tribunal with war crimes this week, is still regarded by a significant proportion of Croats as a national hero.

The tribunal indictment alleges that the 36-year-old retired general committed atrocities in the Croatian army's Medak Pocket operation in 1993, whose aim was to break the rebel Serb grip on the area.

The pocket was of major strategic importance for Croatia because it traversed an important road connecting the western and the eastern part of the Adriatic coast. Norac commanded a brigade whose troops killed one hundred Serb civilians, set fire to their homes and plundered their property. He is said to have made no attempt to punish the perpetrators of these crimes.

Norac is currently in prison in Rijeka, Croatia's largest seaport, awaiting the result of an appeal by lawyers against a 12-year sentence he received in March 2003 for the 1991 murder of at least 50 Serb civilians in Gospic. He was the town's military commander at the time.

When the Gospic indictment was issued, Norac first hid for a few days and then surrendered to police on February 21, 2001.

The Norac trial, at the Rijeka district court, was one of the most difficult tests for the Croatian judiciary, as the proceedings were carried out amid loud protests from various associations of war veterans who claimed he was innocent.

When the indictment was first issued, right-wing extremists organised mass demonstrations in Split, some fifty kilometres from Norac's home village of Otok.

At one demo, attended by more than 100,000 people, many wearing T-shirts with the slogan "We are all Norac", the centre-left government of the time was accused of treachery, and there were fierce denunciations of then prime minister Ivica Racan and president Stjepan Mesic. Thousands of demonstrators shouted, "Hey Mesic and Racan, you'll be eaten by black crows!" It was clear at the time that the rally was aimed at toppling the government.

Norac, who became a general at the age of 28, is typical of the new military establishment that emerged after the 1991 war. He didn't attend an army academy, signing up with the reserve police force at the outbreak of the conflict. He became a member of the anti-terrorist unit Lucko, whose members were regarded as elite troops and fought in many Croatian battlefields. In September 1991, he left to become military commander of Gospic.

He rose to the rank of general at the age of 28 - the second youngest in the Croatian army - and was lauded as a national hero.

He acquired the title Duke of Alka, a prized honour bestowed by the organisers of the “The Sinjska Alka”, an annual game - commemorating the Austro-Hungarian victory over the Turkish army in 1715 - in which men in traditional costumes ride on horseback at full gallop, trying to thrust a ring (alka), hanging from a wire, with their lances.

At the beginning of 2001, President Stjepan Mesic sent Norac and six other generals into retirement over the publication of an open letter criticising the authorities. Under Croatian law, members of the army cannot interfere in the political life of the country.

Norac is unmarried, but prior to his arrest had been engaged to Branka Slavica, a well-known television journalist and editor of the Croatian television news broadcast Dnevnik. When his initial indictment thrust him into the headlines, she stepped down from her post citing conflict of interest.

General Janko Bobetko, a tribunal indictee who was saved from the Hague by his death in April 2003, called Norac his favourite general. On his deathbed Bobetko said he wanted Norac - who had just been convicted of the Gospic murders - to carry the cross at his funeral. But Judge Ika Saric, who conducted the Rijeka trial, refused to let him out of prison.

At his trial, Norac seemed calm, shy and somewhat confused. He pleaded not guilty to the charges. It's too early to say whether he will do likewise for the Medak pocket crimes.

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