

Martić Provoked Croatian Conflict

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Former Serb leader tells how defendant organised the Krajina revolt.

Defendant Milan Martić was responsible for starting the war in Croatia in 1991, Martić's former political rival Milan Babić testified this week.

Martić, who held various leadership positions in the so-called Serb Autonomous District of Krajina, SAO Krajina, is charged with leading the notorious local police force, known as "Martić's police", and other armed forces in the expulsion and murder of non-Serbs in Croatia between 1991 and 1995.

Babić, who was president of the SAO Krajina before being replaced by Martić in January 1994, is currently serving a 13-year sentence in an undisclosed location having pleaded guilty at the tribunal to the persecution of Croats in Serb-occupied regions of Croatia during 1991 and 1992.

Before giving evidence against Martić, Babić - who has already testified against former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević and the ex-Bosnian Serb parliamentary speaker, Momčilo Krajišnik - re-read his guilty plea, in which he begged his "brother Croats" to forgive their "brother Serbs".

"Those were my words then and are still my words now," he added.

The prosecution then turned to the ongoing question of who had initiated the Croatian conflict.

Babić said that from as early as 1990, Martić had led the Serb rebellion in Croatia. Martić had been the first to use armed force to provoke the Croats, and had drawn the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, into the conflict to aid the Serb side, said the witness.

The witness supported this allegation by recalling Martić's self-publicising boasts, such as his promise that the Croatian chequerboard insignia would not be seen in Knin, the Serb's rebel capital, for "as long as [he was] alive".

Babić also attempted to absolve his role in the conflict once again by claiming that in August 1991, Martić's men had tricked him into announcing a state of war in Krajina by falsely stating that Croatian special forces were advancing on Knin.

When he realised that this was not the case, he apparently tried to revoke the announcement but it was too late. Babić testified that by the time he knew the truth, the so-called "log revolution" in Krajina had already begun.

The witness said that as the revolution got underway, Martić had established immediate control of barricades used to block off tourist routes to Dalmatia on major Croatian roads. Babić described how Martić had implemented a policy of persecuting Croats, first by searching their houses and arresting them.

When asked to refer to specific attacks on Croats, the witness said that Martić and former chief of Serbian State Security Service, SDB, Franko Simatović, had together shelled the Croatian village of Lovinac in September 1991.

Babić insisted that this was an attempt to pursue Milošević's political goals, and added that the whole Serb rebellion in Croatia had been "orchestrated" by Belgrade.

Though president of SAO Krajina, Babić said that actually behind the scenes a parallel command structure held sway. As evidence of this, Babić described a meeting he had attended in Belgrade with Martić and Milošević, where the Serbian president had apparently "demanded" that Babić hand over control of the Krajina armed forces to Martić.

The former Krajina president said repeatedly that he had not had "any control" over Martić, who only obeyed orders from Simatović and another SDB member, the notorious Captain Dragan Vasiljković, who was leader of a special unit known as the "Kninjas".

Babić explained how he had eventually persuaded Milošević to withdraw Simatović from Krajina, but the SDB chief was quickly brought back after Milošević reminded Babić that Simatović's father had acted against Croatian Nazi collaborators during the Second World War.

"Milošević publically pledged that Yugoslavia would be preserved, and secretly worked on occupying territories so that they could be incorporated into the new Serbian state," the witness said.

According to Babić, Martić was indisputably one of the Milosevic's men who supported the creation of a "Greater Serbia".

Babić's testimony is expected to continue throughout next week.

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