

Martić Trial Focuses on Serb Fears

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Former Serb official speaks of Serb anxieties in the prelude to the Croatian war.

Judges hearing the trial of the former leader of the rebel Serb authorities in Croatia, Milan Martić, were told this week that Krajina Serbs “did nothing wrong” and were “only defending themselves” during their war with Croatian forces.

The claims were made by defence witness Ratko Licina, who introduced himself as the information minister of the Serbian Autonomous District of Krajina, SAO Krajina, government in exile.

Licina was a prominent member of Krajina’s ruling Serb Democratic Party, SDS, and told the court that he fled Krajina during the Croatian army’s Operation Storm in 1995 - aimed at regaining control over territory occupied by rebel Serbs - and has lived in Serbia ever since.

He is the second witness the defence has brought to court since the opening of their case on July 11 this year.

Martić lawyers are hoping to prove that it was the Croatian government who provoked the war with Krajina Serbs in 1991, not the other way around.

The defendant - who was the president of SAO Krajina during the war - is charged with leading the local police force and other armed forces in the expulsion and murder of non-Serbs in Croatia between 1991 and 1995.

He is also accused of deliberate destruction of homes and other public and private property, and unlawful attacks on Zagreb in 1995.

Throughout his testimony this week, Licina tried to portray Krajina Serbs as innocent victims of anti-Serb propaganda.

He said Serbs were terrified by an atmosphere charged with “Croatocentrism and Serbophobia” which he claims prevailed in Croatia after the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, led by the late Franjo Tuđman, took power in 1990.

Croatian Serbs “who have strong memories of the Second World War” feared they would be stripped of all their constitutional rights in the new Croat state and possibly even killed, said Licina.

The witness informed the court that there were 37 per cent of Serbs in Croatia before the Second World War, but “that number was cut down to 12 per cent through genocide committed by Croatia’s fascist Ustasha regime” during that conflict.

He insisted Serbs in Krajina didn’t want history to repeat itself, and vowed never to become an easy target again.

When prosecutor David Black in his cross examination of the witness suggested that the SDS heavily exploited Serbs' "bitter memories from the Second World War " in order to gain their support, Licina avoided a direct answer and said he could see "nothing wrong in that".

"It is natural that we keep those memories alive, just as Jewish people keep reminding the world of what happened to them....," he said.

Black then asked the witness about his impressions of Jovan Raskovic, one of the founders of SDS in Krajina. He said Raskovic was "a psychiatrist who healed Serb people" and was always moderate in his views and speeches.

But Black then played in court a video recorded on August 17, 1990 in Krajina, which showed Raskovic delivering a speech to a crowd of angry Serbs cheering, "We'll kill Ustashas! We'll kill Tudjman!"

Raskovic was then seen saying, "Don't ask weapons from me - if you need them, I'm sure we'll find someone who will give them to you."

In another video played in court, apparently recorded a year later, Raskovic was heard saying that "Serbs will never march to the execution sites again - they will resist genocide this time".

Black's suggestion that it's obvious "Raskovic is inviting Serbs to put up an aggressive resistance to the Croatian state" enraged the witness.

"What were we supposed to do - maybe let ourselves be killed?" he said, visibly irritated.

Throughout his testimony, Licina maintained that all blame for the 1991-95 bloodshed in Croatia should be placed on the Croats.

He told the court that even Tudjman said in one of his speeches that "there wouldn't have been a war in Croatia if we hadn't wanted it".

Licina's testimony contradicted that given by prosecution witness Milan Babic in February, who said Martic, a leader of the Serb rebellion from 1990, had been the first to use armed force to provoke Croats, and had drawn the Yugoslav People's Army, JNA, into the conflict to aid the Serb side.

Babic, former Martic's rival and president of SAO Krajina before being replaced by Martic in January 1994, committed suicide in the Hague tribunal's detention center in spring this year.

In order to further support the prosecution argument that the war in Croatia was not merely a Serb response to Croat provocations, Black showed Licina an interview with Raskovic published in Serbian and Croatian newspapers in 1992. In that interview, Raskovic apparently said he felt "responsible" because he

“made preparations for this war, even though they were not military preparations”.

“If I hadn’t created this emotional strain in the Serbian people, nothing would have happened,” he is quoted as saying.

“My party and I lit the fuse of Serbian nationalism not only in Croatia, but in Bosnia as well.”

But Licina appeared to be unmoved by these words - whose authenticity he didn’t deny - and said it was important to note that Raskovic had given this interview shortly before his death.

“It is possible he was disillusioned with something,” he said calmly.

The Martić trial continues next week.

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