

Mladic Witness Denies Plagiarism

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Former general admits that he used Wikipedia as source for his evidence.

A witness in the trial of Ratko Mladic this week denied that he plagiarised parts of an expert report he wrote for the defence.

Mitar Kovac, a former general in the Bosnian Serb army, provided a lengthy document “on the command authority of General Ratko Mladic in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina”. In his report, he maintained that the conflict was triggered by then Bosnia president Alija Izetbegovic’s intent to establish an Islamic state. This, he argued, developed into “the chaos of civil war”.

Although he acknowledged that “all the three peoples in BiH [Bosnia and Herzegovina] were exposed to ethnic cleansing and crimes”, Kovac claimed that a systematic campaign of “propaganda” was launched against the Bosnian Serbs.

In his evidence, Kovac also described the structure of the Bosnian Serb army, which he said allowed for a lot of “flexibility and creativity” when it came to decisions on military action.

In the conclusion of his report, he wrote, “There is not a single order, command or any other commanding document from which one could conclude that General Mladic ordered, instigated or planned illegitimate actions of his forces, the commission of mass crimes or the terrorising of civilians. There is not a single document among the numerous ones issued by General Ratko Mladic that does not order legitimate action and conduct of the VRS [Bosnian Serb army] towards the civilian population and prohibit fire on civilian facilities in accordance with international law.”

Kovac said that “vast efforts have been invested in drawing up this report in the service of fairness and justice”.

Prosecutors allege that Mladic planned and oversaw the 44-month siege of Sarajevo that ravaged the city and left nearly 12,000 people dead. Mladic’s army is accused of deliberately sniping at and shelling the city’s civilian population in order to “spread terror” among them.

The indictment – which lists 11 counts in total – also alleges that Mladic is responsible for crimes of genocide, persecution, extermination, murder and forcible transfer which “contributed to achieving the objective of the permanent removal of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats from Bosnian Serb-claimed territory”.

In his cross-examination, prosecutor Adam Weber asked the witness whether every paragraph of the report was the “product of your own analysis and work”.

“Yes,” the witness replied.

“Is there any paragraph in your report where you significantly borrow text from another source without attributing either the conclusions or the text to another source?” the lawyer asked.

“There are no such documents,” Kovac replied. “Passages are marked where they contain positions taken based on some other analysis or document, and I listed the expert reports that I used the most, both from the defence side and the prosecution side.”

Weber then raised a number of areas where he said Kovac had lifted text directly from other sources without attribution.

The first was the case of the so-called “Romeo and Juliet” murders in Sarajevo in May 1993 in which Bosko Brkic and Admira Ismic, a Bosnian Serb and a Muslim, were shot dead.

“You do not attribute any of this information to Wikipedia, do you?” the prosecutor asked.

“It’s not only from Wikipedia; it’s from several stories, cross-referenced information, and the one that was closest to me is stated in the footnote – as you can see it here – from the newspaper Slobodna Dalmacija,” Kovac replied.

Weber then asked the witness to examine the text once more, noting that only a single phrase differed from the wording that appeared in Wikipedia.

Kovac disagreed, again asserting that he had paraphrased information from Slobodna Dalmacija.

However, in response to a question later asked by Presiding Judge Alphons Orié, Kovac agreed that Wikipedia had been one of the sources for his expert report.

Weber went on to ask the witness whether he had reviewed all the source material referenced in the footnotes of his report. Kovac said that he had done so.

“We found you often appeared to have drawn on the analysis of Radovan Radinovic,” Weber said. “We counted up – General Radinovic was the most commonly referenced source in your report and there appear to be at least 84 references to his previous reports.”

The witness acknowledged that he had “mostly” used Radinovic, adding that another important source had been former Hague tribunal prosecutor Richard Butler.

Radinovic, a former high-ranking officer in the Yugoslav People’s Army, JNA, has testified as a defence witness in several other trials at the tribunal.

Weber then handed the witness, the chamber and the defence team copies of a document listing some examples of “overlapping paragraphs” which were around 75 per cent identical.

“I don’t see a problem – if even that percentage is true – if the same words were used, considering that it’s the same event,” the witness said.

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