

Ovcara Trial Makes Few Waves in Vukovar

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Historic trial stirs little interest in town that has come to symbolise Yugoslavia's tragedy.

At Vukovar's Den Haag cafe, opposite the hospital from which more than 200 Croats were removed and shot on November 18, 1991, none of the Serbs drinking coffee wanted to talk about the start of a trial in Belgrade for the crimes for which the town has become infamous.

If the café had been named after the Dutch town in which some Serbs have faced trial for war crimes committed in Vukovar in the 1990s, the customers do not seem to make a connection.

"It has nothing to do with me," a young man called Dejan said of the trial in Belgrade. "I didn't kill anyone nor did I do anyone wrong. I was only six when it happened."

Dejan said he was "tired of stories of war and war crimes. "I want to live a normal life like young people in other places. Here the only talk is of the war, crimes and the trial."

It has been thirteen years since the eastern Croatian town fell to the Yugoslav army and local Serb paramilitaries and the 200 or so Croats in the hospital were massacred at a nearby farm in Ovcara. It has been another six since the area was restored to Croatian rule.

But Vukovar remains a divided community. Serbs and Croats live side by side but separately. Everything is divided – even the their radio stations.

Sanja Vukicevic, of Serbian Radio Dunav (Danube), agreed with the young man in the Den Haag café. Local Serbs were tired of stories of war criminals, Hague indictees and of trials in general.

"When we conducted a poll on the streets of Vukovar about the start of the Ovcara trial, people did not want to talk about it," she said. "Everyone said they had more important things to worry about."

However, Jovan Ajdukovic, head of the Joint Council of Municipalities – an association of local councils with Serbian majorities – disagreed. The Belgrade trial was more important than many people realised, he said.

"When the people guilty of these crimes are identified, all the Vukovar Serbs will no longer be held to blame," he said. "That is why the trial is important, though it's also important to punish other criminals, including those on the Croatian side."

Some Serbs feel a deep resentment that - as they see it - Serbs have been singled out for blame. "Why do you ask about trials against Serbs?" one elderly man shouted. "Only Serbs are on trial in the Hague, in Croatia and now in Serbia as well. Why not ask about crimes Croats committed against Serbs in Vukovar before the war?"

In fact, investigators from the Hague tribunal and from the Croatian justice system are doing just that, by

exploring the crimes committed against Serbs in Vukovar in the summer of 1991, when the most important person in town was Tomislav Mercep.

Vukovar's district state prosecutor Bozidar Piljic opened a file in 2002 to collect information on the Serbs who vanished in the Mercep era. At least 19 were taken prisoner at the time and every trace of them was lost.

Mercep remains at liberty. Under the late president Franjo Tudjman, he was made a deputy interior minister in 1991 before becoming head of the country's war veterans' association two years later. Since 1996, he has led the Popular Party, even running for the post of state president. He denies any involvement in war crimes.

Among Vukovar Croats, feelings about the trial are as muted as they are among the Serbs. "There's nothing more to say," said Vesna Katic, whose own brother was killed at Ovcara.

Zlatko Modalek said the trial held more significance for local Serbs than Croats. They were often called "Chetnik criminals" although most had nothing to do with the crimes in Vukovar or with the Chetniks, he said.

"When the real perpetrators of crimes are convicted for Ovcara and other war-time atrocities, no one will have the right to call anyone else a criminal," he said.

Zeljko Troha, manager of the local language school, said the trial had come too late to strike a chord with people. "Other things are more important to us now, such as jobs," he said. "Both Serbs and Croats attend my school. It would do better if people had more jobs and money but there are no jobs in Vukovar."

Before the 1991 siege reduced the town to rubble, the Borovo factory complex, churning out footwear and rubber products, was among the biggest firms in the former Yugoslavia, employing 25,000 people.

Now it has 200 workers. Borovo shoes won an award this year at a trade fair in Belgrade, but the firm is not likely to recover its former prominence. Director Antun Oklopčić steers clear of pronouncements about trials. "We do not do politics," he said. "We are only interested in production and profits."

One of the factory's woman workers said she had heard about the trial on television but paid little attention. "You can't help the dead," she said. "What matters to me is having a job and a regular salary."

Among Vukovar Croats, only the soldiers who actually fought in the town during the siege seem to follow the trial with attention - men like Danijel Rehak and Dragutin Glasnović, who were there until Vukovar fell on November 18, 1991.

Rehak said he was confident that the Belgrade court would punish the perpetrators of the atrocity in Ovcara. "They know the international community is closely watching the course of the trial," he ventured. "I hope the trial will also reveal the names of the others who were responsible."

His friend Dragutin agreed; the court would test Serbia's willingness to try those whose crime was to belong to another ethnic group. "They wanted to exterminate Croats, which is nothing but ethnic cleansing," he said.

Work has been underway since early March on excavating another mass grave in eastern Croatia. At Tordinci, some 10 kilometres west of Vukovar, Croatian investigators believe they have found another mass grave that is larger than the one in Ovcara.

Colonel Ivan Grujic, chief of the Croatian government's Prisoner and Missing Persons Department, said Serbian witnesses who had been involved in moving human remains to the Tordinci grave had informed them of its location.

Grujic said he believed 208 Croatian civilians, killed in 1991, had been buried at one location in Tordinci and later moved to another site in 1997 by the Yugoslav army.

If the figure is correct, Tordinci will be the largest of the 137 mass graves found so far in Croatia as the Ovcara site holds 200 bodies.

About 150 km south-east of Vukovar, in Belgrade, where the people indicted for the crimes in Ovcara are on trial, a former Yugoslav army officer said he was reluctant to recall the story of Vukovar's fall.

"The memory of Vukovar is painful for me because it was hell," he said. "We destroyed an entire town. We believed we were defending Yugoslavia, which was a delusion, and a lesson we shouldn't forget."

A fellow officer added that from a military perspective, the Vukovar operation was of little value. "It was irrational to destroy a town and to sacrifice so many people to capture it," he said.

This officer said he was convinced the former leaders of Serbia and Croatia, Slobodan Milosevic and Franjo Tudjman, had an interest in prolonging the battle "to ensure Serbs and Croats hated each other forever".

Few people in Vukovar, it seems, are going to be glued to their radio or television sets in order to catch reports of the Ovcara trial. Either they do not appear to care, or are very restrained - even those who one might have thought would care the most.

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