

Regional Report: Vukovar Serb Killings Investigated

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Dozens of Serbs are said to have been murdered by Croatian paramilitaries shortly before Vukovar fell.

Zagreb has launched an investigation into the murder of Serbs in Vukovar in the months before the infamous battle that saw the town destroyed just over a decade ago.

Vukovar is better known for Serb atrocities against Croats: Serb forces destroyed most of the town during the three-month battle to capture it in late 1991.

When it fell, more than 200 patients were taken from the town hospital by Serb forces and shot.

But Serbs have long complained about atrocities committed against them in the months leading up to the attack.

In this period, spring and summer 1991, Tomislav Mercep, secretary of a Croat ad-hoc administration, People's Defense, ran the town as a personal fiefdom

According to data collected by non-government organisations in Vukovar, during Mercep's rule 86 Serb civilians disappeared or were killed.

Mercep, at the centre of the new investigation, was a senior official in the Croatian Democratic Party, HDZ, the hard line nationalist movement who's president, Franjo Tudjman, led the country to independence in 1991.

He recently quit nationalist politics and now heads a Croat veterans association.

It is alleged that Mercep used paramilitary units to terrorise Serbs in the town.

Under his reign, armed thugs cruised the streets, arresting Serbs and blowing up their homes and cafes.

In one incident, they took three Serbs to the banks of the Danube, shot them and threw their bodies into the water.

As a result of Mercep tactics, 13,734 Serbs fled Vukovar in the summer of 1991, according to records of refugee arrivals in Belgrade.

Evidence of the bodies in the Danube first surfaced when Croatian national guardswoman Ksenija Piplica was arrested and put on trial for war crimes by a Belgrade military court in July 1992.

She gave the court a detailed description of how on July 30, 1991 several members of the Croatian national guard, the ZNG, her among them, transported three detained Serbs in a pick up truck to the Danube, executed them, then pushed their bodies into the river.

In one newspaper interview, immediately after the fall of Vukovar on October 18, 1991, Mercep admitted that there were cases of "people losing lives" in actions he led.

Croatia's investigation is in one sense setting an important precedent, showing Zagreb's willingness to investigate crimes by its own side against others.

But there is speculation that Croatia is also motivated by the fear of embarrassment as The Hague has also begun investigating Mercep.

There are rumours in Zagreb that war crimes charges will follow in the spring: Croatia, already accused of failing to send some prominent suspects to The Hague, wants to get in first with its own investigation.

Otherwise, fear the authorities, the memory of the suffering of the Croats of Vukovar might be tarnished by news that Croats also terrorised Serb residents without the Zagreb authorities acting.

Witness statements say Mercep formed the first Croat armed units in Vukovar, and oversaw the systematic arrest and kidnap of Serbs, many of whom disappeared. This provoked an exodus of Serbs.

The horrors were too much for the Croat authorities in the town. On August 18, 1991 Marin Vidic, appointed by Zagreb to administer Vukovar, wrote a letter to Tudjman complaining about Mercep's behaviour.

In a document marked as "official secret", Vidic, who is an ethnic Croat, warned Tudjman about Mercep's units unlawfully breaking into Serb apartments, robbing, confiscating private vehicles, and spoke of forceful interrogations often ending in execution.

One Vukovar Serb woman told IWPR of how it felt to be living under Mercep's reign of terror. "By late afternoon, just as people were coming back from work, the town would eerily become deserted," she said.

"When night fell, people went to their basements to escape the explosions and gun shots. If you heard the squealing of car tyres in front of your house, you could be certain that in few minutes some Serb café would be blown up.

"Serbs were scared and they started leaving the town. They became more numerous when word spread around about disappearances and executions."

Among those arrested by Mercep's men was Doctor Vojislav Stanimirovic, leader of Independent Democratic Serb Party, but his life was saved because he had friends among influential Vukovar Croats.

"Before the attack of the JNA (Yugoslav army) on Vukovar, Mercep's men imprisoned Serbs in the basement of the Territorial Defense building, and the weight-lifters club," he said. "From there some people completely disappeared. About this there are living witnesses even today, not only Serbs that were

then imprisoned, but also Croats who knew what was happening at the time."

Mercep's tactics were too much for Zagreb: in early August 1991, he was arrested and taken to the capital.

But when war broke out, he was released – and then promoted, becoming an advisor in then ministry of internal affairs.

As battles raged in the late summer, he went to Pakracka Poljana and Gospic battlefields, places where war crimes are alleged to have been committed.

After the war, Mercep became a deputy in the Croatian parliament, and in 2000 he ran for president of Croatia, but won negligible number of votes.

He left the HDZ and founded his own party - the Croatian People's Party. But it remained tiny, with no influence on the political scene. Now he is the president of one of numerous veterans' associations.

Hague investigators have collected evidence about what was happening in Vukovar while run by Mercep.

Investigations were held three times in 1996, and once in 1997, while Vukovar and the entire Croatian Danube region was under the temporary administration of United Nations.

The Croatian authorities certainly knew what Mercep was doing, because in the end they themselves arrested him. But the horrors committed by the Serbian forces made the prospect of a war crimes investigation into Mercep's atrocities politically undesirable.

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