

## **Serb Officer Refused Srebrenica Death Squad Order**

**Author:** [Rachel Irwin](#)

Witness says he was told to find troops to carry out killings, but would not do so.

A former Bosnian Serb officer described this week how he refused to obey an order to provide troops to kill Bosniak prisoners during the 1995 Srebrenica massacre.

Prosecution witness Srecko Acimovic, who commanded the second battalion of the Zvornik Brigade in 1995, was testifying against wartime Bosnian Serb army commander Ratko Mladic.

Mladic is accused of planning and overseeing the massacre of more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys after his forces captured the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica in July 1995.

The indictment further alleges that he 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”.

According to a summary of the witness’s previous evidence which was read aloud in court by the prosecution, Acimovic learned that prisoners had been killed outside the Rocevic school and went to see what had happened.

When he arrived, the soldiers stationed there appeared to be inebriated. He heard prisoners “shouting from the gym, pleading for water and to use the bathroom”.

The witness said he asked the soldiers where the prisoners had come from and who had brought them there, but they refused to answer and also denied him permission to speak to their commander.

Acimovic eventually got in touch with Vujadin Popovic, chief of security of the Drina Corps, who said the prisoners would be exchanged the next day, according to the summary of evidence.

Popovic was convicted of genocide in 2010 and sentenced to life in prison.

The summary of evidence went on to state that Acimovic then returned to the school and tried to persuade the soldiers to give the prisoners water and let them go to the bathroom, and eventually they agreed to do so.

The witness then returned to his command, and early the next morning – between 1 and 2 am – he received a “coded telegram ordering the detachment of a platoon of soldiers for the execution of prisoners at the school”. The witness sent a reply refusing the order, and when another telegram arrived instructing him to inform other commanders in the battalion of the order, he refused again.

The witness then received a call from Drago Nikolic, chief of security of the Zvornik brigade, who told him the “order had come from above and had to be followed”. Nikolic said he had until seven in the morning to comply, but the witness replied that he would not carry out the order.

Nikolic was convicted of aiding and abetting genocide in 2010, and was sentenced to 35 years in prison.

According to the summary of evidence, the witness was instructed to go to the Rocevic school that morning. When he arrived, he found a dozen corpses in the school yard.

Popovic was at the school and he instructed the witness to see whether there was anyone else willing to take part in the executions. The witness refused to do so, and suggested that the prisoners be returned to where they came from or taken to the barracks in Kozluk. After that, the witness returned to his headquarters, leaving the other members of his battalion behind at the school.

After reading out the summary, prosecuting lawyer Abeer Hasan asked Acimovic about the sequence of events, and about his first conversation with Popovic.

“Popovic informed you that the prisoners were to be exchanged the following day, correct?” Hasan asked.

“I was looking for some answers and I told him what was going on in Rocevic. He told me not to make a drama of it and that the prisoners would be exchanged. And that somebody is taking care of it,” Acimovic said.

“Did he tell you who that ‘somebody’ was?” Hasan asked.

"I suppose he meant the unit that was in the school yard guarding the prisoners in the gym," the witness said.

The prosecutor also asked him about the two telegrams he received, and the witness said the first one had arrived when he was asleep, and a colleague decrypted it.

"The telegram required us to provide a platoon of soldiers who would be used to execute prisoners," Acimovic said.

"What did the second telegram state?" Hasan asked.

"Since we had responded with a telegram refusing that original instruction, the customary practice was to send a dispatch saying, 'Familiarise company commanders with content of telegram as well.' It was telling us again to carry out the order," the witness said.

"When you say 'carry out the order', which order are you referring to?" Hasan asked.

"To provide a platoon of soldiers for that purpose," the witness said.

"Were both telegrams orders?" Hasan asked.

"Yes," Acimovic replied.

During the cross-examination, Mladic's lawyer Branko Lukic asked the witness about the soldiers guarding the prisoners at the school, and whether he knew who they were.

"I didn't know at the time, but later I learned that they were soldiers from Bratunac and some members may even have been from Visegrad," Acimovic said.

"Is it correct that they didn't even want to talk to you when you addressed them?" Lukic asked.

"Yes, because they didn't know me; I wasn't their superior officer. I couldn't issue any tasks to them or talk to them," Acimovic said.

Lukic asked the witness whether was ever "held accountable" for refusing orders.

"No. No one ever initiated proceedings against me," the witness said.

The trial will continue next week.

### **Rachel Irwin is IWPR's Senior Reporter in The Hague.**

**Location:** Bosnia and Herzegovina

**Topic:** International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

**Focus:** ICTY - Ratko Mladic Trial

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