

Serbs Were Victims of Fundamentalism

Author: [Ana Uzelac](#)

Former UN peacekeepers tell Milosevic trial that they saw only “victims” of Croat, Muslim and Albanian aggression.

Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic returned to the Hague courtroom this week to continue presenting his defence in the highest-profile war crimes trial since the Second World War.

Two French witnesses, who had served as UN peacekeepers in the region, opened the proceedings after the festive recess with yet another alternative take on the Balkan wars of the Nineties.

During their two days of testimony, French nurse Eve Crepin and her partner, former French army military doctor Patrick Barriot, depicted Serbs in the former Yugoslavia as the victims of Croats, Bosnian Muslims and Albanians alike, and insisted they only engaged in “legitimate self-defence” during the Balkan wars.

They accused Bosnian Muslims of killing UN soldiers and their own civilians in order to earn the sympathy of the international community; denied the 1995 genocide of Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica, and finally insisted that Bosnia was a hotbed of Islamic fundamentalism which had played host to Mohammad Atta, one of the men involved in the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Crepin and Barriot insisted that western politicians, media and non-governmental organisations alike had deliberately overlooked this version of “reality” and said that the Milosevic trial epitomised the injustices suffered by Serbs throughout the Nineties.

But the two presented little solid evidence to back up many of their often spectacular claims, and presiding Judge Patrick Robinson had to warn Milosevic that some of the testimony heard this week “came across as a conversation with a cup of tea on the veranda” and was not of much value to his case.

The former Yugoslav president seemed undeterred by these remarks and continued to pursue his line of questioning with verve and an increasingly short temper that earned him several harsh reprimands from the bench.

Crepin and Barriot told the court that they had decided to offer their help to the people in the Serb-controlled part of Croatia, who they thought were being ignored by other aid organisations, in mid-1994.

At the time, Barriot was still in the French army, but said he was attached to a civil security unit. The couple spent a few weeks every three to four months doing volunteer work in the region.

They both worked in a hospital in the town of Glina until 1995, and the two medics later worked in Bosnia and Kosovo and were also present in Serbia during the NATO air strikes in 1999.

They told the court that during their time in the Serb-controlled parts of Croatia, they saw only an exhausted and terrified Serb population, living in the shadow of a looming Croatian offensive and in fear of a recurrence of the violence their ancestors suffered during the Second World War.

The Serbs, they said, were only defending themselves and their “ethnic territories” and had lived and worked in harmony with the local Croat population.

The witnesses spoke at length about the Croatian offensives Flash and Storm that in May and August 1995 resulted in the expulsions of the vast majority of Serbs from the region, and said wartime Serb sufferings had been ignored by the international community.

Milosevic said he hoped their testimonies would disprove the part of the indictment against him in which he is accused of plotting with Serb leaders in Croatia to remove non-Serb population from these areas and later attach them to Serbia proper.

However, the events that he is accused of took place in 1991 and 1992 - well before the witnesses even came to the region. In a separate Hague tribunal case, Croatian Serb leader Milan Babic pleaded guilty last year to the persecutions of Croats in an attempt to establish ethnically pure Serb territories at the time.

However, the most controversial parts of this week’s testimonies referred to events in Bosnia.

The witnesses said that they had travelled to Bosnia in 1995, visiting Serb refugees and helping a French television crew obtain interviews with Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic - now the tribunal’s most-wanted war crimes fugitives.

At the time Barriot was still a French army officer, he said, and as such he maintained contacts with some members of the French military and civilian intelligence services in the field.

Barriot claimed that Bosnia was the hub of a large Islamic terrorist network, the members of which had connections with Algerian GIA and to the al-Qaeda organisation.

The witness insisted that the ruling Bosnian Muslim party and the country’s wartime leader Alija Izetbegovic were “coordinating” this network, which included Mohammad Atta among its members.

As corroboration, he produced a copy of a document from September 2001, in which the Bosnian interior ministry informed the government of an Interpol request to check whether Atta had been present in a village near the town of Maglaj in 1999. However, the subsequent investigation found no evidence to support this claim.

Barriot also insisted that Muslims had systematically attacked UN soldiers in Sarajevo and even organised the city’s three civilian massacres in an attempt to blame Serbs and obtain western political and military aid. He claimed that two-thirds of the 56 French soldiers killed in Bosnia had in fact been murdered by Muslim snipers.

Milosevic insisted that Barriot’s testimony showed that Serbs in Bosnia were forced to defend themselves against “Islamic fundamentalism”. But the witness could not identify the sources of these claims and presented no documents to corroborate them.

Instead, he asked the court to rely on his good name and the fact that he - as a former French officer and a man still professionally involved in his country’s fight against terrorism - had contacts that allow him to access such information.

The witness also testified at length about a meeting he had with Bosnian Serb army chief Mladic in September 1995, two months after the Srebrenica massacres.

Mladic, he said, had denied that the systematic executions of Muslim prisoners had followed the fall of the UN enclave. Instead, he said that a hundred Muslims at most may have been murdered in “revenge killings”, and that another few thousand had fallen in a “battle” that allegedly raged in the night after the fall of the enclave on July 11, 1995.

The witness told the court that Mladic had also denied taking any orders from the Belgrade government - in other words, from Milosevic himself.

This prompted the presiding judge to remind the former Yugoslav leader that he could “always invite General Mladic to come and testify” on his behalf.

“If you plan to arrest him I will certainly not do so,” Milosevic replied curtly.

The two French aid workers also spoke of the time they spent working in a hospital in Kosovo in the summer of 1998, the year before the NATO bombardments and the massive expulsions of Albanians that followed. There, too, they said, they only saw intimidated Serbs and aggressive Albanians.

In the hospital in the town of Pec, where the two worked, “there were more Albanian nurses and doctors than Serb”. The witnesses also claimed that the only patients they treated in the state-run hospital were Serbs wounded by Albanian guerrillas - or Albanians punished by their own community for being loyal to or even simply being friendly to the Serbs.

Ana Uzelac is IWPR’s project manager in The Hague.

Location: [Balkans](#)
[Serbia](#)
[Kosovo](#)
[Croatia](#)

Focus: [International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/serbs-were-victims-fundamentalism>