

Witness Backs Seselj's Conspiracy Theory

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Prolonged bombardment of Vukovar was designed to “help” Croatia, witness says.

A former soldier said this week that although the Yugoslav People’s Army, JNA, could have seized Vukovar in a day, it kept shelling the city in an apparent ruse to support Croatia.

“The First Guards Brigade of the JNA was more powerful than the entire Croatian army at that time,” said a prosecution witness identified as VS 022, who was testifying at radical politician Vojislav Seselj’s trial in The Hague.

“The shelling only helped the Croats, because it stopped Serb infantry forces from clearing the town of rebels,” he claimed.

Yugoslav and Croatian forces battled for control of Vukovar from August 25 to November 20, 1991, before it fell to the JNA, which was commanded from Belgrade and, in this fighting, was allied with irregular Serb paramilitaries on the ground.

During the siege, Yugoslav troops bombarded the city with thousands of shells, causing widespread destruction. Statistics from the Vukovar hospital say 1,624 people were killed and 2,557 people were wounded as a result of the fighting, in which 1,800 Croatian troops fought to defend some 15,000 civilians.

Seselj, the president of the Serbian Radical Party, SRS, is charged with inciting Serbs to fight Bosniaks and Croats as part of a “joint criminal enterprise” to force non-Serbs out of parts of Croatia and Bosnia, and with encouraging the creation of a homogenous “Greater Serbia”.

In court, Seselj agreed with the witness’s testimony. “This conspiracy by the JNA leadership gave the Croats a propaganda weapon against the Serb people and the army,” he said.

When judges asked the witness why JNA troops would want to help Croatia, with which they were fighting, he replied, “I really don't know that; it was probably some political deal, but I am 100 per cent sure that’s what happened.”

The witness, a Serb born in Vukovar in eastern Croatia, told the court he joined the JNA First Guards Brigade as a volunteer to help fight the “Croatian rebels” in September 1991, and later joined the Vukovar territorial defence force.

He explained that although there were several Serb military formations in the city, they were all under a cohesive command.

“The JNA forces, the territorial defence and the volunteers were all under the command of the First Guards Brigade and Colonel Mile Mrksic. The SRS volunteers were also placed under his command,” he said.

The witness said an SRS volunteer unit came to Vukovar in October 1991. "Their commander was called Milan Lancuzanin 'Kameni', but I didn't have much contact with them as I heard they were mostly criminals," he said.

The prosecution accuses Seselj of responsibility for crimes committed by SRS volunteers in November 1991 at the Ovcara farm, where more than 200 captured Croats were tortured and murdered.

Although witness VS 022 admitted being present at the farm on the day of the murders, he said he took no part in the mistreatment or murders of detainees.

"[More than] 300 Croats were forced to walk a gauntlet of Serb volunteers and soldiers who were beating them with sticks, bats and metal bars. I was shocked. I couldn't believe this was happening and I couldn't stop it," he said.

"When the detainees were all inside the hangar, I went in and managed to get several Croats I knew out and save them, because I knew there would be executions. Afterwards, I went out as I didn't want to be a part of that. I just stood by the door so that no one could leave," said the witness.

When asked by the judges who he thought was responsible for the order to murder the detainees, the witness answered, "I presume someone high above, perhaps the Serb Krajina government."

During cross-examination of the witness, Seselj said that responsibility for the Ovcara killings lay with the JNA.

Two former JNA officers, Veselin Sljivancanin and Mile Mrksic, have already been found guilty by the Hague tribunal for crimes committed in Ovcara.

The witness was also asked about Seselj's visit to Vukovar in November 1991.

Although he was not affiliated with the SRS party, the witness said he "agreed with Seselj's plans for a Greater Serbia".

"[Seselj] is a great Serb leader. Me and the other soldiers were thrilled he came to see us, we cheered and waved as he passed by," he said.

Asked by the judges whether he believed Seselj had effective control or influence over the soldiers and volunteers in Vukovar, the witness replied that Seselj did have authority.

"He left a great impression on all the soldiers there, and if he'd given an order, we would have obeyed," he said.

However, the witness denied the prosecution's claim that Seselj gave speeches in Vukovar inciting soldiers to violence.

"We were always under threat of fire, so it wouldn't have been possible. I never heard anything about that - and I would have attended a speech if he'd given one," said the witness.

He added that Seselj never asked Croat forces to surrender via a speakerphone, as the prosecution claimed.

"I read about that in the papers after the war, but I never believed it, because I didn't notice it back then."

Seselj was in a buoyant mood during this week's proceedings, laughing and thanking the witness for telling the truth and not lying like other "fake witnesses brought by the prosecution".

The prosecution protested against witnesses being called "fake" and the judges ordered Seselj not to use such language.

Seselj replied that he had "no fear of the court or of the judges" and said he would call witnesses whatever he liked.

The trial continues next week.

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