

## **Wronged General to Walk Free**

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Tihomir Blaskic was a tolerant man who was shocked by infamous massacre.

The Bosnian Croat general who will walk free from prison next week was “appalled” by the massacre that he would ultimately be convicted – and then cleared – of ordering.

Tihomir Blaskic, 43, is expected to leave prison for Zagreb on August 2 after the tribunal appeals chamber dismissed the most serious of the charges against him and reduced his sentence from 45 years to only nine – most of which he has already served.

The initial sentence sent shock waves around the region when it was passed in March 2000, not only in Croatia, where many see Blaskic as a hero, but elsewhere by others who spoke of the defendant as a highly disciplined character who had been appalled by news of the massacre in the Bosnian village of Ahmici.

More than 100 Muslim civilians were killed in the attack on April 16, 1993 by Bosnian Croat forces, which left almost all the village’s 180 Muslim homes in ruins and its mosque razed. The trial chamber found Blaskic guilty of command responsibility for this and other attacks but the appeals chamber dramatically reversed this decision this week.

His wife Ratka, who was in the public gallery with their three young children, cried out with joy when the appeals judgment was read out.

Blaskic was born into a working-class family on November 2, 1960 in the village of Brestovsko, in the Kiseljak municipality of Bosnia. His father was a former miner and his mother a housewife, and their constant financial worries helped steer the young Tihomir in the direction of a military career, for the Yugoslav National Army, JNA, granted free education to those who signed up.

He received his first commission, as second lieutenant, after graduating from the Belgrade military academy in 1983 and rose to become captain four years later. His plans to sit exams for promotion to major in 1990 were wrecked by the beginnings of the war in Yugoslavia. After Slovenia and Croatia seceded from the crumbling federation, he left the JNA in August 1991 to join his young family in Vienna.

From Austria, he kept in close contact with the Kiseljak crisis headquarters, which was composed of five Bosnian Croats and four Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), and in mid-1992, he returned to become the regional staff commander of Croatian Defence Council, HVO, for the central Bosnia area.

He was replaced by Ante Prkacin in November 1992 and the following month Blaskic was appointed commander of the HVO’s operational zone in central Bosnia, in which role he stayed until May 1994, when he was made a major-general and named HVO deputy chief of staff, later taking over as chief of staff in August that year.

During the trial proceedings, several witnesses testified in Blaskic’s defence that he was not a bigoted man and had not displayed any intolerance towards people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Blaskic received medals for his participation in 1995 in two major military operations in Croatia, codenamed “Flash” and “Storm”. But his supporters argued that these were given only for his role as head of the relevant HVO units and were not intended to mark any particular contribution.

Blaskic’s track record of working with Bosnian Muslims and the international community during the 1995 Dayton peace process was also noted.

The former BBC journalist Martin Bell appeared as a defence witness at Blaskic’s trial in February 1999 and read from notes he had made at an April 27, 1993, press conference following the Ahmici massacre.

Under questioning from defence counsel Russel Hayman, Bell said Blaskic had told him that “he was horrified. He was going to do something about it, that ‘a commission is being set up to investigate the atrocities. Whoever did it [did so] in an organised, systematic way...and therefore controlled by someone. The culprits must be identified and brought to justice’.”

Bell added, “Colonel Blaskic said that he was appalled.”

Blaskic’s defence counsel, Anto Nobile, has always argued that the 45-year sentence was not commensurate with what was proved in the trial. “It was not proven that Blaskic ordered war crimes in any way,” Nobile said at the time. “On the contrary, he was trying to prevent them.”

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