

Balkans: Vukovar Massacre Trial Begins In The Hague

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By Robert Parsons

The trial has begun at the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague for the former Yugoslavia of three former Yugoslav army officers charged with a massacre in the Croatian town of Vukovar in 1991. Veselin Sljivancanin, Mile Mrksic, and Miroslav Radic deny the charges of murder, torture, and persecution. The siege of Vukovar was one of the key events in Croatia's 1991-95 war of independence. Prosecutors say that after the capture of Vukovar, the Yugoslav Army (JNA) handed over several hundred Croats to rebel Serbian forces. Of these, at least 264 were shot and buried in mass graves.

Prague, 11 October 2005 (RFE/RL) -- It was one of the most savage incidents in a remarkably savage war. Few realized it at the time, but what happened in Vukovar in the cold, wet autumn of 1991 was a herald of what was yet to come.

It had been a sleepy provincial town on the banks of the Danube -- just a few kilometers from the border with Serbia. But when Croatia's war for independence began in July 1991, Vukovar found itself on the front line -- a strategic target for the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army (JNA).

In August, the JNA began a siege of Vukovar that was to last three months and that would raze the town. Ian Traynor of Britain's "Guardian" newspaper witnessed its fall.

"We arrived in Vukovar the day before it fell -- around the 17th or 18th of November 1991. The city itself was a picture of utter devastation. There wasn't a tree, there wasn't a building, there wasn't anything in the town that had not been shelled and wasn't wrecked. We were walking over corpses. There were spectral columns of people shuffling out of the basements that they'd been stuck in for two or three months under the Serbian shelling," Traynor said.

But the worst was yet to come.

[PHOTO]: One of the defendants in the trial, Miroslav Radic (epa)

After the surrender of Croatian forces, several hundred people, among them soldiers, took refuge with the patients and the medical staff at the Vukovar hospital, hoping to be evacuated under the protection of international observers.

But the JNA had other plans. According to the indictment read out in The Hague, on 20 November 1991, soldiers under the command of Colonel Mrksic, Major Sljivancanin, and Captain Radic took some 400 people from the hospital and moved about 300 of them to a pig farm in the nearby settlement of Ovcara. Once there, the JNA officers transferred them to local Serbian paramilitaries.

As news of what was happening leaked out, former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance -- then the UN peace mediator in the conflict -- tried to get to the hospital to see for himself what was going on. Traynor was with him.

"We met Sljivancanin on the outskirts of Vukovar when he was trying to prevent Vance and his delegation from entering the city on the pretext that it was unsafe. In fact, at that very moment, dozens of people were being dragged out of the hospital and taken away to the Ovcara farm outside of Vukovar, where they were executed and put into mass graves," Traynor said. "Sljivancanin had a blazing row [argument] with Cyrus Vance, which we witnessed, [with] Cyrus Vance demanding, 'I am going into the city, and I want in now,' and Sljivancanin was playing for time." "The city itself was a picture of utter devastation. There wasn't a tree, there wasn't a building, there wasn't anything in the town that had not been shelled and wasn't wrecked."

Today, Dragutin Glasnovic is the head of the Association of Croatian Returnees, a body that oversees the return of refugees to their homes. He was among those taken to the pig farm at Ovcara on that November day in 1991.

"I met Sljivancanin in Ovcara, and he shouted at us that we were war criminals. Sljivancanin didn't take into account that there were civilians among us -- women, children, and old people. He behaved in the most awful and inhumane manner. Many were subsequently moved to other camps -- altogether 7,000 people -- and many were executed," Glasnovic said.

In fact, it is believed that 264 people were killed at the Ovcara farm -- many of them after enduring brutal torture at the hands of Serbian paramilitaries.

After more than seven years on the run, though, Vukovar caught up with all three men. They were arrested in Serbia and transferred in 2002 and 2003 to the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

The trial is expected to last six months.