

Ratko Mladic trial: with a clap and a cut-throat gesture, the 'Butcher of Bosnia' faces justice

Ratko Mladic, the so-called Butcher of Bosnia, finally faced trial accused of genocide and murder among other charges. Bruno Waterfield was in The Hague to witness the chilling scene unfold.



Ratko Mladic with his Serbian army - in Srebrenica, Yugoslavia on July 12, 1995 Photo: Art ZAMUR/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

By Bruno Waterfield, The Hague

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The gesture was slow, deliberate and aimed at the bereaved mother in the public gallery – two fingers pressed together and drawn in a cutting motion across his throat.

It was in this way that Ratko Mladic – the man known as the Butcher of Bosnia and who many believe responsible for the first genocide on Europe's soil since the Holocaust – addressed one of those who had come to see him face justice.

The former Bosnian Serb army commander had set the scene for a defiant first appearance on Wednesday at his full trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague from the outset.

Wearing a dark grey suit and looking trimmer but more frail than the bulky, bulldog-like figure famous in many photographs, he walked in and gave the thumbs-up to the gallery, clapping at his accusers.

He then sat down to hear exactly why he had been brought before the court. Mladic is accused of ordering the slaughter of 8,000 unarmed Bosnian Muslim men and boys from Srebrenica in July 1995 as well as executing the 1992-95 siege of Sarajevo in which 10,000 civilians were killed by his snipers, artillery and mortars.

In all there were 11 counts – two of genocide, and others of murder, extermination, inhumane acts, terrorism and taking hostages. They are war crimes allegedly carried out in Bosnia's civil war in which 100,000 people were killed and 2.2 million others left homeless.

But it was just before the first rest break – 72 minutes into proceedings – that for his victims, two decades later, memories of Mladic came back when he caught the eye of members of the Mothers of Srebrenica.

Using the cut-throat sign he looked into the eyes of Munira Subasic, 65, whose son and 21 other relatives were killed by Bosnian Serb soldiers under Mladic's command.

"It brought me immediately back to 1995 and Srebrenica and I saw that this war criminal had not changed at all. He showed, by looking at us and making that gesture, that he wants to kill us again," she told *The Daily Telegraph*.

Mrs Subasic recalled the day when she had first looked into the eyes of Mladic while begging and clutching at him in a desperate attempt to stop his soldiers taking her teenage son away with them. "I saw the same murderer, who is proud of the things he has done there. He does not seem sorry for what happened," she said. "I was begging him and fighting him to leave me my child, to let him stay with me."

Branko Lukic, Mladic's lawyer, defended the conduct of his client who had to be told by the judge that he would be screened off from the public if there was any further "interaction".

"He told me that the lady gave him the finger," said Mr Lukic. "It is easy to provoke a man who has suffered three brain strokes."

Mladic, 70, is appearing at the ICT where Radovan Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb leader and his commander in chief, is also on trial.

Both are held to be responsible for a campaign of ethnic cleansing to rid multi-ethnic Bosnia of Croats and Muslims to create a "Greater Serbia".

Dermot Groome, the UN prosecutor, revealed that personal notebooks belonging to Mladic would be presented as evidence to prove that he and Karadzic drew up detailed plans of military conquest and violent ethnic cleansing.

"His notebooks were recovered from his family home in Belgrade by police that were searching for him. His contemporaneous notes of events will be an important source of evidence in this case," said Mr Groome.

Excerpts from the opening days of the Bosnia's war in 1992, scrawled in Mladic's own handwriting, were shown noting "war objectives, relationship to non-Serbian inhabitants" and the Bosnian Serb campaign "to separate from the Muslims and Croats forever".

Mr Groome opened the prosecution's statement with the chilling story of Elvedin Pasic, a 14-year-old boy, early in the Bosnian conflict in November 1992.

Elvedin was captured with his father and mother in the woods around the village of Vecici, trying to flee advancing Bosnian Serb troops who had clashed with Muslim fighters nearby.

After being stripped of their ID papers and valuables, the family was held with others in a local school when, as at Srebrenica, Mladic's soldiers separated women and children from men and teenage boys.

"His father said, get out and go with the women and children you might survive if you do. Elvedin left and never saw his father again," said Mr Groome.

"His father and uncle, with their hands bound behind their backs with wire, were murdered."

The 150 Muslim men and boys were killed.

"By the time Mladic and his troops murdered thousands in Srebrenica three years later, they were well-rehearsed in the craft of murder."

Mladic fled into hiding after the war and spent 15 years as a fugitive before international pressure on Serbia led to his arrest last year. Now his home for what is expected to be a two-year trial is a one-man cell in a Dutch jail with food and medical care that would likely be the envy of many in Bosnia.

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