

French officer accused of collaborating with Milosevic government

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Pierre-Henri Bunel, a former French intelligence officer, is appearing before a military tribunal charged with treason. Bunel is accused of handing over to Serbian intelligence secret plans for the Alliance's air strikes on Yugoslavia, one year before the bombing campaign commenced in spring 1999.

On October 19, 1998, Bunel was imprisoned in Paris without a trial. He was brought before a magistrate and charged; the story of his arrest broke on November 2 that year. At his original trial, the civilian court ruled that it had no jurisdiction over the case and transferred it to a military court. This move to a closed military court was imperative for the French ruling elite and its armed forces. Even then it has taken two years for the court to have "amassed" material against Bunel.

Bunel is no minor figure in French military circles. He received the *Légion d'honneur*, France's highest military decoration, for his intelligence work in Bosnia in 1995. He was attached to the French NATO delegation in Brussels in mid-1996, serving as head of staff to the delegation's senior military adviser, General Pierre Wiroth. He had access to most of NATO's classified information.

Speaking fluent Arabic, Bunel is an expert on the "Muslim world" who served in the Jordanian desert prior to the Gulf War and also undertook missions in Somalia and Rwanda on behalf of French imperialism. His latest book is entitled *Menaces Islamistes* (The Islamic Menace).

When arrested, officials said Bunel's activities were those of an "isolated individual". Bunel denies this, however. His legal defence explained in a statement, "What he did was not an act of treason. His actions were sponsored by a French service."

Neither Bunel nor his lawyers have indicated which arm of the French state they allege instructed him to

pass on secret files. Bunel has said, "I admit passing on information classified 'secret' to a Serb agent... But this was confidential information, not top secret: top secret in NATO is classified 'Cosmic'. I never passed on flight plans or operational orders." He continued, "I passed documents on to get certain key messages across. They were that France would take part in the conflict [in Kosovo], that the five principal NATO countries had agreed to strike Yugoslavia, and that if Milosevic did not withdraw his troops the carnage would be terrible."

According to Canadian journalist Steve Albert, Bunel told investigators, "He decided to hand over NATO plans after a meeting [with] Lieutenant-Colonel Jovan Milanovic in a Serbian restaurant in Brussels... Milanovic was sent to Brussels with the express purpose of finding out these plans." It was highly unlikely to have been a chance encounter and would have been arranged beforehand.

When Bunel was first arrested, he was accused of meeting with Milanovic on four occasions between July and October 1998 and passing on sensitive information, including operational orders, flight plans and target lists.

Defending his actions, Bunel wrote a book called *War crimes at NATO* * and set up a website in which he insists, "It is nonsensical to undertake a military action if it does not correspond to a political solution." Investigative reports published so far indicate that he was not acting alone, but on behalf of those within the French elite who were opposed to breaking political relations with Serbia and viewed participation in a US-led military attack in Europe as a betrayal of France's national interests.

There have been at least two other incidents said to prove collaboration took place between French military

intelligence and the former Yugoslav regime. In a report first aired on the France 2 news programme *Envoye Special* (Special Correspondent) in 1996, it was alleged that the commander of UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force) General Bernard Janvier, took part in secret negotiations with General Mladic and General Perisic, Commander in Chief of the Serbian Army, to obtain the freedom of captured French UN troops, in return for a promise not to order air strikes if Srebrenica were attacked.

In 1998 Washington accused Major Hervé Gourmelon of warning Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic that he was facing imminent arrest for war crimes, foiling a NATO plan to take him into custody. According to *Time* magazine, Gourmelon was a French spy who, in 1994, “while a press officer for UNPROFOR... was caught on hidden video rifling through the desk of UNPROFOR’s military commander, Gen. Michael Rose”.

It is well known that at the same time France was acting as part of the UN’s so-called “peace keeping” force during the period of the Bosnian War, it repeatedly carried out separate negotiations with the Bosnian Serbs and the Milosevic regime, in direct opposition to UN regulations and NATO policy.

The French authorities have always been reluctant to have their military personnel testifying in front of any court, particularly the international war crimes tribunal at The Hague, about the events in the Balkans. French diplomats and officials have never hidden the fact that they saw the Hague tribunal as an “American affair”, with French Defence Minister Alain Richard calling it a “spectacle”. According to some French commentators, testifying before it would reveal too much of the murky activities of the French military and secret services in the Balkans. They feared that indicted war criminals might cite documents or transcripts of telephone calls uncovering French duplicity or call on “friendly” French officers to testify in their defence.

The French establishment and military bureaucracy are divided over what attitude to take in the Balkans. In contrast to Germany, for example, France refused to recognise Bosnian independence for some time. Significant sections of the ruling class saw Serbia as a useful ally, which could play the role of a regional strongman in ensuring stability in the Balkans. As Paris read the situation after the 1992-95 Balkan wars, the

territories within Bosnia’s borders claimed by the Serbs would eventually go back to Serbia. There was open hostility at the extent to which the US was able to dominate Balkan events and to America’s preferred policy of encouraging separatist sentiments in order to undermine the Milosevic regime, which Washington viewed as an obstacle to securing its own hegemony. Some diplomats explained that the Dayton agreement was “an American show”, expressing the resentment of the French bourgeoisie at their eventually being forced to work within the parameters laid down by US policy decisions in the Balkans.

Even as the Bunel trial gets underway, French President Jacques Chirac has called on the people in the Serbian republic of Montenegro and UN-run Kosovo province to reject separatism and instead take part in a reform of the Yugoslav federation. Speaking at the Belgrade University, he insisted, “The split of the country can not be a peaceful and stable solution in the modern world... a solution can not be found in a policy of secession, in an approach... based on the logic of confrontation.”

Chirac is the first European head of state to travel to Serbia since the Western-backed coup that led to the fall of Milosevic in October 2000. Also directing his message towards Macedonia, he insisted, “A renewal of the Yugoslav federation, with respect to its integrity, is the best solution, not only for the stability in the region, but also for a development of harmonic relations between different parts of the Yugoslav society.”

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