

# Milosevic trial: Croatia's President Mesic gives evidence

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At the beginning of this month Croatian President Stjepan (Stipe) Mesic gave evidence against Slobodan Milosevic at The Hague war crimes tribunal. Mesic is the first head of state to testify at the tribunal. He was president of the former Yugoslavia in 1991. His presidency lasted less than a year before Yugoslavia was broken up.

Milosevic is on trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for crimes against humanity. He faces five counts of war crimes in Kosovo and has been indicted on another 61 counts of war crimes, including genocide in Croatia and Bosnia. The first part of the trial has dealt with charges pertaining to Kosovo and ended in September this year. The court is now dealing with the events in Bosnia and Croatia.

Mesic described Milosevic as an “emotionless warmonger.... I never saw him show any emotions, all he had was the goal he was implementing. He could have desisted from the option of war, but he never took any action to stop it.”

Mesic held Milosevic responsible for creating a “Greater Serbia”. He was the first of over 170 witnesses that will be called for this stage of the proceedings. Richard Dicker of Human Rights Watch said of his testimony somewhat cynically, “Those documents [statements by Mesic] aren’t enough to convict Milosevic, but he wouldn’t expect them to be. The only documents by themselves that would do the job would be the documents that said kill all those damn Croats in Krajina (signed) Slobo.”

Mesic’s testimony provoked a fierce response from Milosevic, who began to cross-examine him on the second day of his evidence. He accused Mesic of being responsible for crimes committed by Croatian troops against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). He said to Mesic, “You betrayed Yugoslavia, you contributed to its dissolution.” He went on to accuse Mesic of

atrocities and ordering the burning of Serb villages.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no political sympathy for Milosevic, whose pro-capitalist policies helped open the FRY up to Western intervention and then helped whip up the ethnic antagonisms that were manipulated by the United States and Europe to destroy it. But his substantive charges against Mesic are true. There was virtual silence in the Western press on Mesic’s testimony because the last thing they would want to come out in the trial are details of how the major powers armed paramilitaries in Croatia in order to destabilise Yugoslavia.

Mesic, 65, is a nationalist who from an early age had wanted a more independent Croatia. In the early 1970s he was jailed for two years by the Yugoslav government for promoting Croatian nationalism by supporting the 1971 Croatian Spring Movement. Franjo Tudjman, the late ex-leader of Croatia, was also in this movement. He was imprisoned again for nationalist activity for a year in May 1975. One of his favourite sayings at the time was, “Croats tread their path to the Adriatic with their own sabres and all the rest followed in their footsteps.”

During the trial Milosevic accused Mesic of being recruited by Croatian secret services whilst in prison. Mesic denies this. Mesic continued his nationalist activity well into the 1980s. During this period he argued for a confederation of independent states, one of them being Croatia, but in many respects this was just a cover for advocating Croatia’s breakaway.

Economic as well political reasons were behind this call. To justify secession Mesic said, “Everyone was dissatisfied with Yugoslavia. Serbia claimed that they were the ones who funded others. Croatia was saying its hard currency [\$10 billion of foreign currency reserves largely from tourism on Croatia’s Adriatic coastline] was being siphoned off to Belgrade. If everybody was dissatisfied why not have a new model.”

Elsewhere in his testimony he said, “Croatia was not on

a footing of equality because it was not able to handle the foreign currency that it earned. So we didn't have clean bills and arithmetic. And what I took part in was financial fairness with respect to Croatia and Yugoslavia and to clear up the accounts.”

When multi-party elections were held in Croatia, Mesic joined Franjo Tudjman's HDZ party. In 1990 he became prime minister of Croatia. It is in this period that he was implicated in an arm smuggling programme for the Croatian state. In 1991 in a report for the FRY government by Colonel Aleksander Vasiljevic, the Yugoslavian counterintelligence service officer in the JNA, Mesic was named as someone who had taken part in arms smuggling. The accusations the report levelled at Croatia revealed the extent to which the JNA had infiltrated the covert weapons distribution programme. It accused Croatia of importing arms from warehouses in Hungary, under the cover of an import-export company called Astra. An illegal paramilitary force was developed, an armed wing of Tudjman's ruling party the HDZ ( See Laura Silber and Alan Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, Penguin and BBC Books, 1995).

These arms would be used later on to prosecute Croatia's fight for a breakaway state and later its expansionist aims in Bosnia. This was done with the direct help of Germany and the United States, with whom Mesic along with Tudjman collaborated. Since then the Western powers have sought to gloss over the atrocities committed by Croatia in order to justify their intervention on the basis of preventing ethnic cleansing by Serb forces.

Ever since the end of the Bosnian war the US has been plagued by fears that its role in sponsoring Croatian atrocities will be uncovered and has insisted on confining prosecutions to Serbian, Bosnian Serb or Bosnian Croat war crimes. But the tribunal has made repeated efforts to broaden its remit into Croatia proper, reflecting simmering antagonisms between the US and the European powers over who controls the strategically vital Balkan region.

In April 1999, the *World Socialist Web Site* drew attention to The Hague's documentation of atrocities by Croatian forces in 1995. The ICTY's report accused the Croatian Army of carrying out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and ethnic cleansing. It concluded: “In a widespread and systematic manner, Croatian troops committed murder and other inhumane acts upon and against Croatian Serbs.” (The indictment against Milosevic regarding Croatia conveniently only covers 1991-92—thus preventing

discussion on Croatia's ethnic cleansing of the Krajina and US involvement.

The Hague's investigators had concluded that the Croatian Army carried out summary executions, indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations and “ethnic cleansing” in the Krajina and was recommending the indictment of three Croatian generals. The *Times* of London was amongst those who stated that the Krajina offensive “was carried out with the tacit blessing of the United States by a Croatian army that had been schooled in part by a group of retired American military officers.” It added, “In the course of a three-year investigation into the assault, the United States has failed to provide critical evidence requested by the tribunal, according to tribunal documents and officials, adding to suspicion among some there that Washington is uneasy about the investigation.”

Mesic's response to charges of his own involvement levelled by Milosevic was to say, “All countries have Mafia, but the Croatian Mafia is the only one that has an entire country.” He denied any knowledge of Croatian atrocities whilst he occupied leadership positions and insisted that only Bosnian born volunteers fought in Bosnia. But Croatia was actively seeking war in order to break away and expand its borders.

Mesic himself told the court, “The victories in the homeland war were glorious because they made it possible for Croatia to reach each and every part of the Croatian state.” Even the UN Security Council warned him in February 1994 to withdraw regular troops or face serious consequences. His role in events and that of the imperialist powers that backed Croatia are summed up in the title of the first edition of his book, *How We Toppled Yugoslavia*, which was amended for the second edition to the less proactive, “How Yugoslavia Was Toppled.”



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