

= Voštin massacre =

The Voštin massacre was the killing of 43 civilians , mostly Croats , by the Serbian White Eagles paramilitary unit in Voštin , Croatia on 13 December 1991 , during the Croatian War of Independence . The massacre was carried out after the unit was ordered to abandon the village before the Croatian Army (Hrvatska vojska ? HV) recaptured the area in Operation Papuk @-@ 91 . The unit generally targeted Croats living in the village , but also killed a Serb civilian who tried to protect others . Most of the victims were killed by gunfire , but some of them were killed with axes or chainsaws , or were burned to death . The victims exhibited signs of torture and were left unburied . On the night of 13 / 14 December , the unit also demolished a 550 @-@ year @-@ old church in the village using explosives .

The HV secured Voštin on the night of 14 / 15 December , the Serb population having left the previous night . Afterwards , Croatian soldiers torched many homes belonging to the Serbs who had once inhabited the village . The area was toured by US Congressman Frank McCloskey shortly afterwards . McCloskey publicised the killings at a news conference held in Zagreb the next day , deeming them genocide . He then persuaded Jerry Blaskovich , an Associate Clinical Professor at the University of Southern California Los Angeles County Hospital Medical Center to take part in the investigation of the killings . The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) later charged Slobodan Milošević with the killings and Vojislav Šešelj with the deportation of non @-@ Serbs from Voštin . In 2015 , the International Court of Justice ruled that the massacre in Voštin was not an example of genocide , and stated that Croatia had failed to prove that the killings had even occurred .

= = Background = =

Within the 1991 Yugoslav campaign in Croatia , the 5th (Banja Luka) Corps of the Yugoslav People 's Army (Jugoslovenska Narodna Armija ? JNA) was tasked with advancing north through western Slavonia , from Okučani to Daruvar and Virovitica , and with a secondary drive from Okučani towards Kutina . This task was essentially consistent with the line expected to be reached by the main thrust of the JNA advancing from eastern Slavonia in about a week . The linkup was designed to facilitate a further advance west to Zagreb and Varaždin . The JNA was stopped by the Croatian National Guard (Zbor Narodne Garde ? ZNG) between Novska , Nova Gradiška and Pakrac , although SAO Western Slavonia Territorial Defense Forces (Teritorijalna odbrana ? TO) units took positions on the Bilogora and Papuk north of Pakrac , near Virovitica and Slatina with no JNA support . The TO was supported by Serbian paramilitaries deploying to the village of Voštin on the Papuk Mountain in October .

The paramilitaries were the White Eagles under the control of Vojislav Šešelj . He visited Voštin in the following month and incited the paramilitaries to persecute the Croat population . According to testimonies of surviving residents of Voštin , the White Eagles and several local Serbs terrorised the Croat population , reduced to 80 by late 1991 . Prior to the war , ethnic Serbs formed eighty percent of the village 's population .

On 29 October , the ZNG launched Operation Hurricane @-@ 91 against positions held by the JNA and the TO near Novska and Nova Gradiška , and Operation Swath @-@ 10 against the TO positions on the Bilogora Mountain south of Virovitica . Aiming to exploit the success of Operation Swath @-@ 10 and recapture Papuk area , Croatian forces , renamed the Croatian Army (Hrvatska vojska or HV) on 3 November , launched Operation Papuk @-@ 91 on 28 November .

= = Killings = =

The HV began advancing in the area of Čulovac , located approximately 5 kilometres (3 @.@ 1 miles) west of Voštin , on 12 December , and the TO were forced to retreat from the area . In turn , the White Eagles were to abandon Voštin , but were ordered to take no prisoners . They were also instructed to ensure the evacuation of the Serb population . Those who refused to leave were

threatened and one man was killed in front of his home .

The killing of civilians living in Voštin and two nearby smaller villages began on 13 December at noon . The White Eagles infantry , supported by at least one tank , moved through Voštin bombing Croat @-@ owned houses and killing civilians . The killings and the destruction took twelve hours and claimed the lives of 43 civilians . The bodies of the victims were mutilated and left on display , presumably as a warning to others , outside Voštin itself , to flee or perish . All the victims were Croat civilians , except one 77 @-@ year @-@ old Serb who was reported to have tried to protect his neighbours from the paramilitaries . Most of the victims were elderly , including twelve women aged 56 ? 76 and eleven men aged 60 ? 84 .

Many of those killed were tortured , beaten using chains and burned . Most of the victims were killed by gunshots , but the cause of death proved hard to establish for eight victims whose bodies were severely burned . A couple was bound with chains and burned alive , two women were killed using axes or similar sharp objects , one of them by several axe blows to her head . Another couple was beheaded and their heads were placed in bags . One of the victims was cut by a chain saw while still alive , and another died trapped in her house which was torched by the paramilitaries . The Serb civilian who attempted to protect the others was also beaten , tortured using lighted cigarettes and heated chains , and then flayed .

At 3 : 00 a.m. , the paramilitaries demolished the Roman Catholic church of the Pilgrimage to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Voštin . They used the 550 @-@ year @-@ old structure as an ammunition depot . In the wake of the explosion , a single wall of the structure remained standing . It is estimated that several tons of explosives were used for the purpose . At the same time , approximately 20 other Croat inhabitants of villages of Bokane , Kraškovi? , Miokovi?evo and Zve?evo , further to the south , were reportedly killed .

= = Aftermath = =

The HV captured Voštin on the night of 14 / 15 December , the village 's Serb population having withdrawn the night before . Afterwards , Croatian soldiers torched many homes that belonged to the Serbs who had once inhabited the village . One of the first to arrive in the village following its re @-@ capture was US Congressman Frank McCloskey , who was in Croatia on a fact @-@ finding mission .

McCloskey asked his aide , Pat Mackley , to arrange a press conference in Zagreb the next day , while Mackley persuaded Dr. Jerry Blaskovich , an Associate Clinical Professor at the LAC + USC Medical Center , sent to Croatia to investigate alleged use of chemical weapons , to take part in the investigation of the killings . At the conference , McCloskey called the killings genocide . CNN reporter Mark Dalmish refused to attend the press conference as the network distrusted the reports of the killings , and , according to Dr. Blaskovich , only became interested in the event once Blaskovich 's involvement was announced .

The victims ' bodies were taken to the nearby town of Slatina for forensic examination on 17 December . Mackley contacted Croatian authorities and obtained permission to document the autopsies of the victims , but was denied access by authorities in Slatina . Mackley telephoned Croatian Defence Minister Gojko ?u?ak asking him to intervene on his behalf , but the local police allegedly disobeyed ?u?ak . The special police was deployed to Slatina to enforce ?u?ak 's order to cooperate , almost causing an armed clash over the issue . To settle matters , a team was sent to Slatina by Zagreb University 's Institute for Forensic Medicine to perform autopsies , retrieve bodies and perform the rest of the procedures in Zagreb .

Survivors who took shelter in basements or cornfields , as well as a captured member of the paramilitary forces , later testified about the killings and identified the White Eagles as the perpetrators . In addition , the withdrawing paramilitaries left critical evidence behind , including personnel records confirming the force was indeed the White Eagles associated with ?e?elj . US investigator for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) John Cencich corroborated the information in an interview with a witness linking Slobodan Milo?evi? , then president of Serbia to the killings . The ICTY charged Milo?evi? with the deaths of 32 civilians in

Voštin . Milošević was subsequently arrested and tried , but he died before his trial was completed . The ICTY also charged Šešelj with involvement in the forced deportation of non @-@ Serb civilians from Voštin , but as of August 2013 his trial is still in progress .

In March 2014 , Croatia alleged before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) that the massacre in Voštin was part of a larger campaign of genocide targeting the Croat population of Slavonia . In 2015 , the ICJ ruled that Serb forces had not committed genocide in Croatia , and stated that the Croatian legal team had failed to prove that any mass killing had taken place in Voštin .