

France: Former intelligence officer Bunel jailed

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On December 15, Pierre Henri Bunel, a former French military intelligence officer accused of passing on NATO war plans to Serbian intelligence in 1998, was found guilty of treason and sentenced by a military/civilian tribunal “Tribunal aux armées” (TPA). In court, Bunel was fervently denounced for his treachery and having disgraced France. However, the five-year sentence passed against him, with three years suspended, falls far short of the rhetoric. Having served ten months awaiting trial, Bunel will apply for an early release scheme called “conditional freedom”. According to his lawyer, Eric Najsztat, Bunel could be released within weeks. Up until 1981 the charges he faced still carried the death penalty.

The verdict itself and the trial’s proceedings can only deepen suspicions of a high-level cover-up, for fear of exposing the fact that Bunel was not acting alone but on behalf of a section of France’s state apparatus.

The case against Bunel, prepared over two years, ended in a guilty verdict after just two days. The trial had been transferred from a public to a military court to hide the proceedings from the French public.

When he was first arrested on the prompting of US intelligence, Bunel claimed he handed NATO war plans to Serbian intelligence to prevent a “humanitarian disaster”. As the trial approached, however, his lawyer declared that Bunel had been following the orders of an arm of the French military. During the trial, Bunel named the service involved as the DPSD (Direction de la Protection et de la Securite de la Defense).

The state prosecutor declared that the documents Bunel handed over to Colonel Jovan Milanovic in the agent’s apartment (not in a café as initially reported) in Brussels gave Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbian regime “a clear picture” of NATO’s fundamental objectives and each stage of its war plans, thus threatening France’s

interests. Bunel responded, “I am not a traitor.... I was asked to tell a Serb intelligence officer that the only way for Milosevic to avoid massive bombardments was to pull out of Kosovo.”

But under prompting by the state prosecutor, who declared Bunel’s claims an “unbelievable story”, Bunel again changed his story and accepted the charge that he was acting as an isolated individual with no connections to the military.

This change to his testimony formed the basis of the state prosecutor’s case that Bunel not only acted alone, but was also mentally unstable. Bunel’s nerves were frayed and he was disappointed with the direction of his military career. Evidence was provided that all his fellow officers at Saint Cyr military academy of 1975 had been promoted to colonel or higher. Not to have experienced “the glory of a real military career” had allegedly added to Bunel’s mental derangement.

The French press did not challenge this version of events, or produce any serious investigative work to uncover the obvious connections between Bunel’s activities and the policies of French imperialism. Instead they treated him as a figure of fun.

However, Bunel was a significant figure in the French military. Prior to his arrest and trial, he had even been recommended as the next head of the French military security. He has the highest decoration in France and was a senior figure in French and NATO operations in Somalia, Iraq, Rwanda, Bosnia and Yugoslavia. He was one of four French officers decorated by US General Norman Schwarzkopf after the Gulf War 1990-91 and he was assigned a senior position with the European Rapid Reaction Force when it was formed.

Such a record does not fit the picture painted in court of a disgruntled maverick that acted alone.

Though he eventually changed his testimony,

possibly in return for a lighter sentence, Bunel continued to deny that he was a traitor. Instead he called his actions a professional mistake. During the trial Bunel's lawyer called on three retired French generals, who Bunel had worked closely with, as character witnesses. General Michel Roquejoffre, the ex-head of French forces in Saudi Arabia and of French forces during the Gulf War declared, "I don't think Bunel is capable of the facts he has been accused of." Retired General Guy le Pichon, whom Bunel served under in Bosnia, said he was an "officer of tradition" attached "to the service of France... I think he wanted to show the Serbs that matters were serious." General Rideau, whom Bunel also served under in Bosnia, mentioned Bunel's "great culture", and said he "was an intelligence officer of outstanding quality." As to Bunel's alleged pro-Serb sentiments, Rideau said, "This reproach is levelled systematically at the French forces that have served in Yugoslavia."

Rideau is telling the truth here. Bunel was not motivated by pro-Serb sentiments, or by humanitarian convictions. He has taken part in some of the worst slaughters in recent memory—the destruction of Iraq, genocide in Rwanda and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Bunel clearly acted on behalf of French imperialism. It is highly probable that he was instructed to meet with Serbian intelligence by the French secret service and it was only because his activities were discovered by US intelligence that he was arrested.

French military intelligence has a track record in the Balkans of seeking to undermine US influence. After Bunel's arrest in October 1998 the NATO bombing campaign was suspended until the following March. During its initial phases, US bombers destroyed the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. It was an unnamed source within French military intelligence that said they had evidence that the US deliberately targeted the Embassy.

Interviewed in December 1999, Jacques Rupnik of France's Centre for International Affairs explains, "France does feel this paranoia that America is a hegemonic power in the Balkans... France feels that the US has established itself as the dominant power in the Balkans, and that the French position in the Balkans has been weakened." According to Dominique Moisi another leading French Foreign policy expert, "The incidents of French complicity with the Serbs are so

numerous that it must be defined as something of a trend... Clearly the French as a nation feel we have helped build the Serbian nation, and that a privileged relationship existed between Serbia and France."

Bunel is the first French military official to be tried for his activities in the Balkans. But it was also alleged that in the summer of 1997 a NATO operation to arrest the Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic for war crimes was foiled when French Major Hervé Gourmillon warned Karadzic that he was in danger.

It is entirely possible, therefore, that Bunel did indeed hand over documents to the Serbian authorities under instruction by the DST or some other section of the state in order to frustrate what they saw as the consolidation of US hegemony and a danger to French imperialism's interests.



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