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The Archive Of The Yugoslavia Tribunal

“It’s your legacy too”

It is the largest war crimes archive in the world, yet the fate of the Yugoslavia Tribunal’s archive remains uncertain. “They don’t seem to realize that this archive is a monument.”

By Tjitske Lingsma – 12 November 2025, Issue no. 46

On a sunny afternoon, Predrag Dojčinović sits in a restaurant overlooking Amsterdam’s IJ River. He has a kind face, dark brown eyes, a bald head, and wears distinctive round, dark-framed glasses. “It’s the largest war crimes archive in the world,” says Dojčinović, dressed casually in a blue polo shirt. He can speak passionately for hours about the archive of the Yugoslavia Tribunal in The Hague, where he worked for nearly twenty years as a researcher and expert for the Office of the Prosecutor. He finds it incomprehensible that its fate is still unclear.

Officially known as the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), it was established by the UN Security Council in 1993. It prosecuted 161 accused—mostly (Bosnian) Serbs—charged with crimes against victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. The wars were brutal: more than a hundred thousand people were killed, countless others were tortured, raped, and starved, and millions were displaced or forced to flee.

Dojčinović worked on cases such as those against Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić and former General Ratko Mladić. The archive contains many documents with which he feels a deep connection—one of them, a particular motion, stands out. “My team reviewed 33,000 pieces of evidence to compile an overview of all statements made by Mladić that revealed his genocidal intent,” he explains. On 22 November 2017, the former general was sentenced to life imprisonment. A month later, the Yugoslavia Tribunal closed its doors. Since then, its cases have been handled by the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (MICT), which also manages the archive.

Pressure to close the MICT is mounting. Russia, which considers its continued existence overly prolonged, abstained when the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2740 on 27 June 2024, extending the mandate for two more years. The resolution instructs the UN Secretary-General to submit, by 31 December 2025, an update on the administrative and financial aspects of possible future locations for the archives of the Yugoslavia Tribunal, the MICT, and the Rwanda Tribunal.

The topic may sound dry, but this is no dusty storage room. The archive tells the story of a brutal European war that devastated countless lives—and of the international community’s response. It is a repository of immense significance for questions of justice and, above all, for survivors, who can find their stories here and create places of remembrance.

The Yugoslavia Tribunal’s archive is vast: more than ten million documents. The paper records alone stretch 2.6 kilometers in length. It contains files from all cases, military unit documents, official political papers, notes from defendants, witness statements, hearing transcripts, maps, internal tribunal communications, and even Yugoslav newspapers. “Sometimes these are the only surviving copies of certain papers,” notes Dojčinović, who now teaches human rights and international criminal law at the University of Connecticut (UConn). The archive also holds an enormous collection of photographs, videos, and audio—such as intercepted phone calls, wiretapped conversations, and television broadcasts.

For many years, Dojčinović and his colleagues have fought to preserve the archive—especially its public section, known as the digital database, available to anyone via the tribunal’s website. Yet he chuckles at the word “accessible.” “The search engine is a mess. I know only a few researchers who really understand how it works

and can find everything. Academic institutions even offer special courses to train people in how to use it. But" he adds, laying his hands on the table, "it is publicly available."

He fears that if the MICT shuts down without a proper solution, the website will vanish, and the archive will end up in UN storage in the United States. "But who is going to dig through boxes sitting in Queens, New York City?" he asks. "That would be a black hole of forgetting. It dishonors the archive's importance," agrees Victor-Jan Vos, Head of Collections and Services at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, which also preserves and provides access to archives and collections.

'Victims read the transcripts in the hope of finding information about their loved ones.'

Dojčinović emphasizes the archive's many dimensions—legal, political, military, historical, cultural, and human. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, trials are still ongoing that rely on the digital database. "The tribunal has also had a huge impact on how the region's history is told," he says. Against those who deny the wartime atrocities, the archive stands as a repository of truth. The judges established that genocide and other international crimes were committed in Srebrenica, where in 1995 more than eight thousand Muslim men and boys were murdered. Twenty perpetrators have been convicted for those crimes. The tribunal also heard not only victims and experts but Dutchbat soldiers, thereby confronting the Dutch role in the fall of the enclave.

Dojčinović knows that survivors still consult the online database in their search for missing relatives. "Victims read trial transcripts hoping to find information about loved ones. They search by village, by case. But if the archive goes offline, that opportunity will vanish."

Moreover, the tribunal has been crucial to the development of international criminal law. "The trials deepened understanding of the mechanisms of war and the role of propaganda," Dojčinović explains—knowledge on which institutions like the International Criminal Court now build. All of this is preserved in the archive.

Dojčinović has not been idle. He persuaded two UConn institutions—the Gladstein Family Human Rights Institute and the Dodd Center for Human Rights—to host parts of the archive. Together, they maintain the ICTY Digital Archives Collections, where Dojčinović serves as Director of Research.

"Hundreds of thousands of pages have thus been saved for research, education, and for communities from the war-torn former Yugoslavia. I want the archive to be accessible not only to scholars but also to a grandmother in Bosnia who wants to know what happened in her village."

The Predrag Dojčinović Collection contains documents from the Mladić case. "All the evidence the prosecution used to show Mladić's intent to commit genocide is in this collection—18,500 pages and three and a half to four hours of video and audio," he explains. His colleague and friend, former tribunal prosecutor Dan Saxon, maintains a collection on Momčilo Perišić, former Chief of Staff of the Yugoslav Army. Historian Robert Donia, one of the leading Balkan experts and an expert witness in about fifteen ICTY cases, curates materials on the Karadžić trial. There is also a special Srebrenica collection.

"If they pull the plug on the public ICTY archive, only such private collections will remain—fragmented and incomplete, just like what happened with the Nuremberg archive," warns Dojčinović. The fate of the Nuremberg Tribunal's legacy, which prosecuted Nazi leaders from 1945 onward, serves as a grim warning: the archive was scattered across universities, the International Court of Justice in The Hague, and even private homes. American jurist Thomas J. Dodd, who served at Nuremberg, took boxes of documents to the U.S.—and the Dodd Center for Human Rights, named after him, now holds one of the world's largest collections of original tribunal materials.

As a lecturer, Dojčinović uses the archive in his classes. He sees how new generations engage with the tribunal's legacy in their own ways. His former student Erna Alić used the archive to lobby for a law in Connecticut—home to a large Bosnian community—establishing an annual commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide on July 11.

Evidence items from the Yugoslavia Tribunal, 2018. On the left is a recording of a 1995 conversation between General Radislav Krstić and Colonel Dragan Obrenović, in which Krstić, referring to a group of Muslims, orders: 'Kill them all!', and Obrenović replies: 'Everything is going according to plan.' On the right is an ammunition crate used during mass executions near Srebrenica. © Martino Lombezzi

Former student Aida Gradaščević says her master's in human rights at UConn became a personal journey into her own past, with the archives guiding her way. "These are memories I shouldn't have," she says over Zoom from the United States. A red-brown headscarf rests elegantly on her shoulder. Her green eyes shine, then darken as she recounts painful events. It was April 1, 1992—"no joke," she says. Roadblocks appeared in Bijeljina, near the Serbian border. Her hometown became the first Bosnian city attacked by Serbian paramilitaries, Arkan's Tigers, who looted, murdered, and raped. "It was Serbia's dress rehearsal as an aggressor state—to see how the world would react."

That summer, her family managed to flee, but at a checkpoint, paramilitaries held her father at gunpoint. "I remember the fear, how my father feared for his life." They let him go, and the family reached Germany by bus before emigrating to the U.S. seven years later. Her parents rarely spoke of the war. "They wanted to protect us; to give us as normal a life as possible so we wouldn't feel like refugees. Thanks to them, I'm mentally whole as a survivor. But eventually, you want to understand the root cause of why you are here as a migrant."

For her studies, she made a short film about her mother. "I was lucky she had the courage to talk. My father didn't want to. In every Bosnian family, there's a wall of silence that prevents sharing memories and knowledge." On the Tribunal's website, Gradaščević found key details—dates, places—that helped her situate her family's story within a historical context. "Without the archive, my film would have had a much narrower perspective."

She found that the archive also opened paths to dialogue. "I could ask my parents: did you know Arkan was in Bijeljina? The archive is a portal to the past. It shows that these crimes really happened—but also that justice was possible," says Gradaščević, who now works as a digital artist at the intersection of archives, visual storytelling, and human rights.

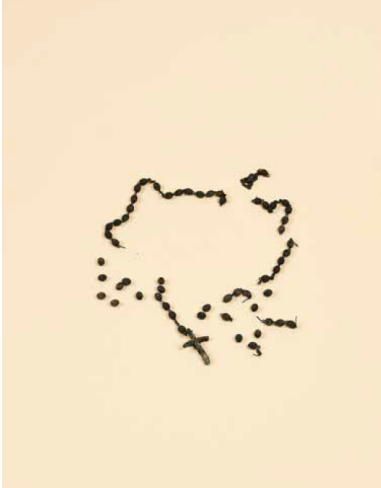
Her work didn't stop with her film. Gradaščević created a special Bijeljina City Archive Collection for the ICTY Digital Archives, dedicated to preserving the memory of her city, where traces of the war have been erased. Muslims are no longer a majority there, only a small and marginalized group. "I wanted to give a fuller picture of

what my city was. The archive gave me answers."

Opening the Bijeljina City Archive reveals old photos and postcards of buildings, streets, and the Atik Mosque, destroyed during the war. Another folder contains ICTY documentation on trials of perpetrators responsible for the violence in Bijeljina. In one video, Arkan and his armed men march through the city; later, Karadžić walks among the militias, kisses the Serbian flag, and embraces Arkan. "I would never have known this without the ICTY archive. It's not something my family would ever discuss—the political dimension and web of intent." Grainy footage shows politician Biljana Plavšić kissing Arkan in Bijeljina. These videos demonstrate the close ties between the paramilitaries and the Bosnian Serb leadership.

The collection also includes contemporary contributions from Bijeljina residents: journalist and author Jusuf Trbić, who was tortured, speaks about his pursuit of truth; filmmaker Avdo Huseinović investigates the Drina River, where bodies were dumped; and poet Selma Hujdurović contributed a short story. "I found it inspiring when she said that forgiveness is her path forward. We need a multitude of perspectives and voices to understand a place's full history," says Gradaščević.

The city still lacks a memorial, but the Bijeljina City Archive Collections serve as one. Without the tribunal's archive, they would not exist. "We're only beginning to understand what these records can mean. The archive shows why people's lives changed forever—why they grieve for life," she says.



Evidence from the Yugoslavia Tribunal, 2018. Rosary found in a mass grave in Dalj, Croatia. In a pit, 23 bodies were discovered—Croats who had been taken from their homes in 1991 and 1992.

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Dojčinović insists that the Netherlands has a responsibility to host and maintain the archive of the Yugoslavia Tribunal. "It belongs here, in The Hague—the international capital of justice. Moreover, the Netherlands is part of this history: in a positive sense as host of the tribunal, and in a tragic sense when it comes to Srebrenica. It's your legacy too." The NIOD agrees that the Netherlands should take responsibility and sees a role for itself. "We would gladly facilitate digital access. As an information center, we could host a copy of the public part of the archive. It would be wonderful if NIOD could also access the confidential section—but with the MICT, we concluded that making the non-public part accessible isn't realistic," says Victor-Jan Vos.

Hosting even the public part—the website—requires major effort. Having a copy isn't enough; a server must handle at least 1,500 terabytes. Vos also stresses the accessibility issue. "It's extremely difficult to search unless you've been trained in using the archive." NIOD conducted a pilot project indexing eight Croatian cases to demonstrate how a search system might work. Making the entire archive more accessible would require significant manpower. NIOD is currently in talks about saving the archive with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, the Srebrenica Memorial Center, and soon the MICT. "But there's no clear plan yet—and no funding," Vos says. "Time is running out. I'm getting nervous."

"The best outcome would be a new institution in The Hague dedicated to the legacy of the ICTY—and other tribunals," Vos suggests. It doesn't take much imagination to see the potential of the distinctive building at Churchillplein, which once housed the Yugoslavia Tribunal and now the MICT. Discussions are underway between the municipality of The Hague and government departments about its future—possibly as a museum. Urgency is needed: the three courtrooms have already been partly dismantled. Last month, an advisory group from the University of Amsterdam proposed turning it into a *Monument of Justice*. "With an information center for researchers, journalists, and relatives," says Vos. "The perfect place for the archive."

How much would maintenance cost? "Roughly €500,000 a year would allow three collection specialists and an IT expert to keep the archive accessible," Vos estimates. "But if you also give the building a museum function, you're talking millions." Is the Dutch government responding? "No, not really. But the door isn't closed."

Dojčinović is disappointed with the direction of discussions in the

Netherlands. “I have the impression that the parties involved see it as a financial burden rather than a cultural asset. They don’t seem to realize that this archive is a monument—built from hard legal facts and witness testimonies. This temple of knowledge must remain open to anyone who wants to learn more about human nature.”

“My children are still young,” says Aida Gradaščević. “But I want them to have access to these original sources one day, so they can discover the truth for themselves.”