

Comment: Giving Victims a Voice

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Witness B-1701's testimony may not lead to Milosevic's conviction, but accounts such as his give crucial voice to the nameless victims of the Yugoslav wars.

The sufferings of the war crimes victim identified in court this week as B-1701 is important to the Milosevic case - but not for the reasons you might think.

His story - of being rounded up, twice readied for execution, and surviving both times - is extraordinary and shocking (see courtside).

He survived the first killing because his Serb female executioner paused to take a swig of plum brandy. His second escape came when a hail of bullets missed him - and he lay faking death in a river.

But beyond the headlines, the tale scarcely advances the case against Milosevic. This is because his suffering is only the first link in a very long chain. For a conviction, prosecutors must show a connection stretching from his would-be executioners all the way to Belgrade.

Thus much of this trial is taken up with attempts, confusing to many outsiders, to explain the full extent of Milosevic's influence in Croatia and Bosnia.

One expert spent two years pouring over the financial records of Yugoslavia. Others have gone through thousands of pages of official reports, charting the machinations of the governing machine through which Milosevic exercised control.

Although B-1701 knows all too well what the security forces did, he is not able to make the crucial link prosecutors are looking for. Yet crime-based witnesses such as B-1701, an illiterate forest worker from the tiny village of Glogova near Bratunac, are the key to the war crimes process.

By giving their accounts of the horrors that unfolded during the Bosnian war, such witnesses help prove that the crimes set out in the indictment actually happened and give the victims a voice.

It is not easy for the latter to tell their stories. The chairs on which many of the witnesses have sat to testify against Milosevic are stained with sweat. Many have broken down in tears. Some have not been able to look at the defendant.

The first witness to testify in the Kosovo stage of the trial, an Albanian who lost 34 members of his family, turned his back on the accused, only glancing at him once when he was escorted by UN guards from the courtroom.

In court last week, we couldn't see B-1701. He was hidden behind a screen and bulletproof glass for protection. But we could hear his voice. His testimony was not eloquent. He often forgot dates and suffered memory lapses. But he succeeded in articulating what he suffered.

One of the court's declared goals is to set the process of reconciliation in motion. And so, just by telling their stories - and having them legitimised in a court of law - these witnesses contribute a great deal to achieving a sense of justice.

It is testimony like this that gives voice to the nameless victims who make up the grim statistics of the Yugoslav wars. By telling their stories they are able to regain what was stripped from them during the conflict - their past, their family histories, their wives and sisters and children, their dignity.

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Location: Kosovo
Croatia
Bosnia and
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