

Controversial Srebrenica Report Back on Table

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Dutch report on events surrounding the massacre is so broad that both prosecution and defence witnesses are using it.

When Paul Shoup, an American professor at the University of Virginia, took the stand at the Hague tribunal this week, he argued that it would be unfair to pass judgement on atrocities committed by Bosnian Serb nationalists without taking into consideration the propaganda the population had been exposed to.

Appearing as an expert witness for the defence of Radislav Brdjanin, a Bosnian Serb politician on trial for genocide, Shoup mostly referred to a book he co-authored entitled "The War in Bosnia Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention."

But he also drew from what has become known as the "NIOD report", a 6,000-page account of what happened in Srebrenica, compiled by the respected Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, NIOD.

In a separate tribunal courtroom, another expert witness, Norwegian statistics professor Helge Brunborg, was drawing on the NIOD report for her testimony in the trial of Vidoje Blagojevic and Dragan Jokic, two Bosnian Serb Army officers charged with helping organise the Srebrenica massacre.

But unlike Shoup, Brunborg was testifying for the prosecution.

How is it that both a defence witness and a prosecution witness to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia can draw on the same report to make their case?

Some say this shows how reliable and authoritative the NIOD report is.

The document, commissioned by the Dutch government following criticism of the way its peacekeeping force in the Srebrenica behaved at the time of the massacre, took six years to prepare and has been heralded by many as the most authoritative account of the events of July 1995.

However, critics allege that the massive tome is full of inaccuracies and amounts to a whitewash designed to clear the Dutch of any wrongdoing. They claim that the government-financed report now provides a "one-stop shop" of information for all sides of the conflict, because it was watered down too much for it to take a real position on anything.

According to Jan Willem Honig, senior lecturer in war studies at London's Kings College and co-author of the highly-praised "Srebrenica, Record of a War Crime", the truth lies somewhere in between.

Although he says the report "has an aura of independent academic research," Honig is critical of its length, saying the sheer abundance of information makes it possible for anyone to pluck from it whatever they need to make their point.

This, he says, is a liability because the report is not always consistent.

“It's possible to draw different conclusions from the different parts in the book. Therefore one can imagine it is useful to both defence and prosecution,” he said.

Honig said he found numerous errors in the report as well. For example, he said an explanatory map inserted as a graphic aid to explaining the Bosnian Serb battle plan does not correspond with the plan as described in the text. And neither the written description nor the map accurately describe the actual plan.

Worse than the inaccuracies, according to Honig, is the fact that the report has no clear objective.

“They [the researchers] should have considered better what they wanted to establish with the report. That might have saved thousands of pages. With its leisurely narrative approach they shot themselves in the foot. The project escaped their control; it became too big,” he said.

Honig is not alone in criticising the report. Many readers have complained that the index is poorly organised and full of errors, particularly regarding peoples' names.

Even those who worked on the NIOD report have been critical of it.

One of the nine NIOD-researchers, anthropologist Ger Duijzings recently told the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad, “Information from sources that I found unreliable, I found back in Part 1 [of the report] – used by [fellow-researcher] Bob de Graaf, if he thought it fitted in his argumentation.”

Now it seems that the controversy surrounding the NIOD report will enter the tribunal's courtrooms, as witnesses for the defence and prosecution pick and choose what they want from it.

Most recently, former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic indicated that he would likely be using parts of the report as part of his defence.

This can hardly be what its creators had in mind when they set out to create the most authoritative report on Srebrenica to date.

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An English-language version of the NIOD report is available at <http://194.134.65.21/srebrenica/>

Location: [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)

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