

Owning Up to Srebrenica

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Now that the Dutch have owned up to their role in the Srebrenica massacre, surely it's time for the former Bosnian warring factions to take a good hard look at the atrocity and the events that preceded it.

The official Dutch report on the Srebrenica massacre, published this week, weighs 10 kilos and is 7,600 pages long - that's about one page for every Muslim killed in the July 1995 massacre. The report follows a French one and another by the UN. So is it now the turn of the former Bosnian warring parties, the Serbs and Muslims, to produce their own?

As far as the Dutch are concerned, their report is probably the last word on the biggest massacre in Europe since the Second World War. It shares the blame for the massacre but Srebrenica survivors and Dutch activists who have also worked on the case are disappointed.

This is because the report does not pin ultimate responsibility for preventing the massacre on the 200 or so Dutch soldiers who were charged with guarding this UN designated "safe area". But it does not whitewash the Dutch contribution.

Still, for many it makes uncomfortable reading because it has no truck with any "politically correct" views of who was responsible for the catastrophe.

Indeed, it claims that at the very beginning it was political correctness, which led the Dutch to disaster. It notes that in 1993 "a combination of humanitarian motivation and political ambitions" led their government to offer troops for the Muslim enclave.

At this point, it covers familiar ground: the mandate was unclear and there was no peace to keep. But the Dutch failed to get information on the situation on the ground from their Canadian predecessors and arrogantly refused intelligence equipment from the US, which would have enabled them to listen to Bosnian Muslim, ABiH, and Serb military, VRS, communications. As a result they had no "ears".

Of course, the report lays the main blame for the massacre on the shoulders of the men who actually did it - General Ratko Mladic and his men. But it also makes clear that relations between the Dutch and the ABiH were poor because the latter attacked the Serbs from the enclave and then sheltered behind Dutch positions.

Significantly, the report finds no link between the authorities in Belgrade and the massacre, which will come as a fillip to Slobodan Milosevic, who is indicted for his role in Srebrenica. It also notes that the involvement of Mladic's supposed political boss Radovan Karadzic is "unclear".

These findings are crucial because, if after so many years of research the Dutch cannot link Milosevic and Karadzic to the massacre, it is hard to see how the war crimes tribunal will be able to make their Srebrenica indictments against these two men stick.

Most controversial is what happened at Potocari, the Dutch base, which was overwhelmed with tens of thousands of Muslims. The Dutch feared a humanitarian disaster and, given the situation and their numbers, risked a "bloodbath" by resisting the Serbs.

At the heart of the matter was the fact that the Dutch believed that while there might be some killing of men they did not expect mass murder.

Still, while they soon became aware of some killings, communications broke down. "One reason for this is the great stress to which members of Dutchbat were exposed," the report said. "In some cases, concern about their own survival in this hell will have meant more to them than the fate of the Muslim men who had made things so difficult for Dutchbat."

Late in the report, the Dutch military comes under fire for attempting to cover up its own shortcomings and for withholding information from its own government.

This year will be the seventh anniversary of the massacre and survivors are disappointed by the report. But it is easy to play the favourite ex-Yugoslav game of blaming everyone else for awful things and taking no responsibility for anything whatsoever. The fact is, however, that in the Srebrenica case foreigners have now taken the blame where blame is due.

Srebrenica is a stain on the Dutch conscience and will continue to be for years to come. But the Dutch didn't commit the massacre! By contrast it is telling that in Serbian journalist Slavoljub Djukic's new

biography of Slobodan Milosevic in English, which is also of course, an account of the war, Srebrenica is not even deemed worthy of a single mention!

So, let's not lose sight of the facts. The massacre was not committed by Dutch soldiers, it was not committed by the UN. It was committed by Bosnian Serb soldiers under the orders of General Ratko Mladic. Throughout the war his army was supported by Milosevic's authorities and cannons fired on Srebrenica from the Serbian bank of the Drina. Also, during the siege, hundreds of Serb civilians were killed by the enclave's commander, Nasir Oric, and his troops. The most infamous atrocity being the attack on the village of Kravica, on Orthodox Christmas Day in 1993.

This year will be the seventh anniversary of the massacre. The Dutch, the French and the UN have all now made their reports, so I suggest it is time the authorities of the Republika Srpska, the Bosnian Federation and Yugoslavia made their own. Of course, this may be brushed off as a flippant suggestion, but, let's get serious....

It is a commonplace that one of the many factors that destroyed Yugoslavia was that the awful deeds that happened during the Second World War were simply brushed under the carpet, where they festered for almost half a century. Bosnians and other ex-Yugoslavs should not make that mistake again.

Foreigners can write ten thousand reports and they can also sign a million aid cheques...but in the end Bosnians and everyone else in the former Yugoslavia need to stand on their own two feet and stop carping at the foreigners, or à la Djukic simply ignore the nasty bits of history.

There's no question that Ratko Mladic and his men bear responsibility for the massacre, but that doesn't mean Bosnia's Muslims need not take a long hard look at some of actions committed by their forces during the siege. So, guys, it is up to you now. Call us when your reports are in!

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