

Serbs Subvert Srebrenica Commemoration

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While the world recalls the tenth anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, the Serbs are busy erecting a cross to Serb victims.

Kravica, a village nestled in a valley 15 kilometers away from Srebrenica, is a site of bustling activity.

Handymen and builders are hurriedly finishing off their work as curious villagers come by to check their progress and bring refreshments.

The work in progress is eye catching - a seven metre concrete cross stands rigidly in the middle of a circular arena fenced off by three gates each with its own cross at the top.

"We are doing this for the memory of our loved ones, who were killed in the war," one builder, a local Bosnian Serb, told Balkans Crisis Report, BCR.

Indeed, to those in the know, a mere mention of Kravica, will send shivers down the spine - but for different reasons.

The village was a site of some of the worst atrocities against fleeing Bosniaks after the fall of what was known as the safe haven of Srebrenica in July 1995.

A day after the enclave was overwhelmed, on July 12, more than 1,000 Bosniak men and boys were systematically executed by Bosnian Serb forces in Kravica.

In all, about 8,000 Bosniaks from Srebrenica were killed by Serb militia during five days of summary executions which have been labeled the worst atrocity to have taken place on European soil since World War Two.

On July 11 this year, the survivors, their families, politicians and diplomats from around the world will gather at the memorial complex in Potocari to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the massacre.

Two weeks ahead of this event, Srebrenica, a town which still looks as derelict as it was at the end of the war, is overrun by hordes of journalists that have arrived from four corners of the world to cover the commemoration.

They ask the local population in this small eastern Bosnian settlement about return, reconciliation, the past and the future. The locals oblige them with answers and refresh them with freshly brewed coffee.

Just fifteen minutes away from Srebrenica is Bratunac, a Bosnian Serb town which became infamous as the place from which the final attack on the enclave was launched.

Ten years after the massacre, both the town of the victims and that which sheltered some of the

perpetrators seem equally caught in a time warp. The infrastructure has decayed and other scars of war remain visible in these divided communities.

A few minutes down the winding road from Bratunac is Kravica.

There visitors will be confronted by the most hair-raising reminder of the mindless bloodletting that took place over those five days in 1995. For it is here that the abandoned building known as the "warehouse" is to be found, its walls covered in bullet holes.

This was the place into which Serb soldiers ten years ago herded more than 1,000 Bosniak men and boys, machine-gunning them to death and finishing them off with hand grenades.

Before the 1992-5 war, Kravica's warehouse was used to store agricultural produce from the area.

Visiting it, several months after the enclave fell in July 1995, UN personnel said they spotted hair, blood and human tissue still caked to the inside walls.

A decade later, only the bullet marks remain to testify to the butchery that took place within. There's no plaque or sign of any kind that records what happened in this building one hot July afternoon a decade ago.

Across the road, a few metres away from the warehouse, lie the dozen of houses that make up the village of Kravica.

Villagers are reluctant to talk about the atrocity. "We were not here. We went with our families to Serbia," most of them tell BCR.

They do not want to discuss what it is like. Instead, they point visitors down the road to the concrete cross, which is being finished off by workmen who say it is the first stage of a memorial monument to "Serb victims of the civil war".

When complete, benches placed around the base of the cross will enable people to pray in comfort for the fallen Serbs. They also plan to build an apartment block near the complex, to house the families of Serb soldiers who died in the conflict.

The monument at Kravica is only one example of the battles for historical truth that are being waged all over the divided land of Bosnia and Hercegovina. A similar, smaller, Serb monument already stands next to the infamous detention camp of Trnopolje in the north-west of the country.

In Kravica, they started creating their own version of history three months ago, with help from the regional branch of the Organisation of Serb War Veterans.

"We want to have a place where we can pray for the souls of our victims that will not have political connotations, like the memorial in Potocari," Milos Milovanovic, president of the local veterans association told BCR.

He made it clear that he felt the monument at Potocari, which commemorates the deaths of Srebrenica's Bosniaks, was based on a historical falsehood.

Jovan Nikolic, who is on the board of the Kravica memorial complex, told BCR, "We want to commemorate our victims of war from Birac region, where we estimate some 3,500 defenders and civilians died."

The Birac region covers several towns in the Drina valley of eastern Bosnia, including Srebrenica, Bratunac, Vlasenica, Milici, Zvornik and Sekovici.

According to the war crimes tribunal in the Hague, it was also the scene of some of the most horrific acts of ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks in the entire war.

But in Kravica, the local Serbs deny all knowledge of this. Instead, they dwell on their own sufferings and especially on the events of Orthodox Christmas day, January 7 1993, when local Bosnian army forces captured the village.

Their commander was Naser Oric, who was subsequently indicted and put on trial by the Hague tribunal. Kravica is mentioned in his indictment as a place where Oric failed to prevent looting and the demolition of homes. But he is not charged with the responsibility for the death of any civilians.

Witnesses in The Hague have testified that Bosnian army troops were accompanied by hordes of desperate scavengers known as "torbari" or "bag people". But they maintain that both the soldiers and the scavengers were mainly after food.

"In Srebrenica we were cut off from the world for more than a year," Ahmet Begovic, a Srebrenica survivor, told BCR. "Aid convoys could not get through to Srebrenica as Serbs from Bratunac would steal the packages. Virtually no food was available to us, so people had to search for food."

Nura Begovic, the leader of a survivors' organisation called Mothers of Srebrenica, whose husband and son were killed in 1995, was among the torbari on the night that Kravica fell.

"It was their Christmas. We knew they would have a lot of food while we were starving," he said. "I took my daughter and followed the soldiers to Kravica in hope of securing a bite. There were a lot of us civilians, mainly mothers with hungry children. We would go into their houses and take food."

"There were 55,000 people in Srebrenica - all hungry," recalled Nedžad Mulabdic, another Srebrenica survivor. "We could not sit back and wait for our children to die. We looked for any way to find food, and this was one way."

But Jovan Nikolic denies they were mainly after food. "If they say they only looked for food in our villages, they are lying," he said. "Their goal was to connect Kravica and Srebrenica in order to create more Muslim territory."

A respectable-looking middle-aged man and now director of a Bratunac high school, Nikolic told BCR that his role in the hostilities was brief. He commanded Serb troops in Kravica from the outbreak of the war until December 1992, when he was wounded and played no subsequent role in the fighting, he said.

But the Bosnian Serb interior ministry, acting on orders of the Bosnian state prosecutor, arrested Nikolic and ten other local Serbs on June 23 on suspicion of involvement in the Kravica massacre.

By 1995, he was director of the Agricultural Community of Bratunica, the municipality that owns the warehouse at Kravica.

An investigation into the warehouse bloodbath, initiated by the Bosnian Serb police, has found that Nikolic allowed the Bosnian Serb army to use the building to detain and then murder the Bosniaks from Srebrenica. More crucially, their investigation indicates Nikolic took part in the killings himself.

The Bosnian Serb police inquiry found that after the murders, Nikolic was also an accomplice in hiding the traces of the crime and in removing the bodies to an unknown location.

The Bosnian Serb interior ministry forwarded the file on Nikolic and the ten others to the special war crimes unit set up within the state prosecutor's office. They then ordered the arrest of the men and their transfer to Sarajevo.

But after four days in detention Nikolic was released. According to BCR's sources in the court, the judges said they lacked the evidence to keep him in detention.

Following his release, Nikolic told local media he had played no role in the massacre in Kravica and had only found out about the murders the day after they took place.

While in Kravica, BCR spoke to another prominent Serb, Milos Milanovic. Apart from heading the local war veterans association, Milovanovic also sits on the Srebrenica council for the Serbian Democratic Party, the party founded and led by the Bosnian Serb leader and a Hague indictee, Radovan Karadzic.

Milovanovic maintains that Oric's men were guilty of mass killings in the village in December 1993. "On Christmas day in 1993, 83 people, mainly civilians, were killed and their names will be on the memorial that we are building," he said.

The account does not tally with the recollections of other villagers who all said they had left the village at the start of the fighting in 1992 and crossed over the border into Serbia.

Milovanovic also refuses to admit that thousands of men and boys from Srebrenica were massacred in 1995, even though the government of the Republika Srpska, RS, has itself acknowledged the crime in a report published more than a year ago.

"The massacre is a lie," he told BCR in February this year. When interviewed four months later, he maintained the same stance. "It is propaganda, created to portray the Serbian people in a bad light. The Muslims are lying and are manipulating the numbers and exaggerating what happened. Far more Serbs died in Srebrenica than Muslims."

Milanovic denies that a massacre of Bosniaks took place, even though he commanded a paramilitary unit, the Serbian Guard, that is alleged to have taken part in it.

Sources at the Hague tribunal told BCR that they now possess evidence that Milovanovic was at the site of the Srebrenica atrocity. He claimed he was in Bratunac at the time.

When interviewed this month, Milovanovic volunteered different information. "I was there [in Srebrenica] in July 1995 but I was just a soldier, no one important," he said.

He added that his name was among hundreds of others on the list of those involved in the massacre, compiled by the RS Commission for Srebrenica.

Milovanovic does not want to talk about the Kravica warehouse and says he does not know how many Bosniaks were killed there. Like many other Serbs, he says the events in the village were provoked by the Muslims who "went around Serb villages, killing, looting and burning houses".

Back in Kravica, BCR tracked down Mijo Jovanovic, a villager who fought in the RS army. "I was defending Kravica when Oric entered with his troops on January 7 and many civilians were killed," he said. "They burnt the village and our soldiers had to retreat because Oric's men were much stronger."

He added the Bosniak victims at Kravica were not civilians but soldiers, killed in retaliation for Bosniak provocations from 1993 onwards.

"Muslim soldiers who wanted to walk to their territory in Tuzla gave themselves up to Serb soldiers who took them to the warehouse in Kravica and killed them," he said. "This was not done by the villagers but by mad soldiers who were led by [RS army chief General Ratko] Mladic."

Meanwhile, Bosniak returnees to Kravica area deeply resent the Serb decision to erect a memorial while their own victims in the village go unrecorded.

Some international officials are equally critical of the Serbs' move. "Building this memorial at this time is a cynical," Charlie Powell, regional representative of the Office of the High Representative, told BCR.

And now the date of the opening ceremony of the Serb memorial has been moved. Originally planned for August, it has been shifted to July 12 this year, almost coinciding with the tenth anniversary commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre.

July 12 is symbolic for other reasons, too. It is Saint Peter's Day, the day on which a decade ago, General Mladic formally presented "liberated Srebrenica to the Serb people".

By June 29, rows of wooden benches will have been set up around the site for the guests at the opening ceremony.

"We will have Bishop Vasiljevic, the RS presidency and other big names here," a workman assured BCR.

By contrast, the Serb entity's presidency has not said whether it will even attend the Srebrenica anniversary.

In Bibici, a Serb village just outside Srebrenica, many residents bitterly oppose either reconciliation or an admission of the crimes that were committed in their name.

"They got what they asked for in 1995," Radivoje Bibic told BCR. "Ninety-nine per cent of the Serbs will tell you the same."

Vukosava Bibic, whose son died while fighting for the RS army, agreed. "It would have been better if we had killed all of them, or they had killed all of us," she said, "because we cannot live together ever again."

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