

VIEWPOINT: Srebrenica - The Endurance of Depravity

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The Srebrenica massacre and Tito's slaughter of anti-communists 50 years before show how human depravity has remained constant through the years.

Six years have passed since Serb execution squads shot, knifed, axed, and clubbed to death about 7,000 Muslims from the United Nations "safe area" of Srebrenica. The media routinely bill these killings as Europe's largest mass murder since the Second World War. They were actually its largest since Tito's execution squads shot, knifed, axed, and clubbed to death about 35,000 Croats, Muslims, Slovenes, Serbs, White Russians, and Cossacks in the weeks after the war had ended.

These crimes, separated by 50 years, a few hundred miles, and a universe of social, economic, and political changes, show how human depravity has remained constant through the years. They also show how far the governments of the Western alliance have come in terms of their willingness to bring the perpetrators of such crimes to justice, at least when the victims are located in Europe's poor eastern corner.

The similarities in these mass murders are striking. Almost all of the victims were prisoners - defeated soldiers, civilians. Some had taken part in atrocities. Some were wounded and dragged from hospitals. None had a trial. Many died with their hands bound with wire. The killers buried the bodies in mass graves.

It was British troops in Austria who handed over 5,000 to 10,000 of the victims to the murderers in 1945.

It was United Nations civilian officials and military officers who effectively handed over thousands of the victims to the murderers in 1995, after the Security Council reneged on its promise to protect Srebrenica. In both instances, the victims were reviled by the foreigners involved.

The Allies looked upon the prisoners they delivered to Tito's forces as Nazi collaborators and murderers; and there were more than a few butchers among them. Many UN personnel in Bosnia, even in the highest echelons, identified with the Serbs and looked on the Muslims trapped in Srebrenica as troublemakers, whiners, and thugs; alas, there were a few killers and thieves among them. But what normal person, living in penury in what was a concentration camp surrounded by enemies who had sworn to take vengeance and protected by a the flimsiest of promises, would have trusted the Serbs and the UN over the law of the jungle?

There is little doubt that Tito used mass murder in 1945 to both extirpate the Communists' bitterest rivals and made scapegoats and examples of them. His men herded thousands of the victims on a death march during which anybody who had an axe handle, a rock, or a fist, could vent the bloodlust he, or she, had developed during the orgy of nationalist butchery that took place during the Second World War. There is little doubt that the commander of the Srebrenica mass murder, Ratko Mladic, used the executions to extirpate the last Muslims in lower Drina valley and, in the process, exploited the bloodlust left over from the Second World War, and exacerbated during the 10-month period in 1992-93, when Srebrenica's Muslims fought to steal whatever food they could from the Serbs trying to starve them out.

This is just about where the similarities end. No one was ever brought to justice for the 1945 murders. So far as I know, no journalists ever went snooping in the woods or caves, looking for the victims' skeletons before May 1990, a few weeks after voters in Croatia and Slovenia toppled Tito's communist descendants. I recall stories that after he became Croatia's president, Franjo Tudjman, one of Tito's political commissars in 1945, blocked investigation of the killings because some of his closest advisers were implicated.

There was more soul-searching in Britain after it became clear that Tito's forces had summarily executed the prisoners whom the British had handed over. "They had every reason to believe Tito's people were going to treat the prisoners harshly," said Mark Wheeler, a historian of wartime Yugoslavia. "But they had no reason to expect executions." The British surrendered the prisoners assuming they would weigh down some of Tito's troops and keep them out of the Italian city of Trieste, which Yugoslavia's communists had occupied and were refusing to give up.

The response to the Srebrenica murders was quite different. The United Nations and its war crimes tribunal for Yugoslavia were up and running; and, in his conversations with UN officials during June 1995, Mladic was already expressing concern that he would be dragged before it. Spy planes and journalists located the bodies of the dead within weeks of the killings. Panicked Serbs exhumed some of the corpses and dumped them into the Drina to hide the evidence, but tribunal forensics experts have since exhumed almost 1,900 bodies and know the locations of thousands more.

The tribunal indicted Mladic and his political master, Radovan Karadzic, to mark the first anniversary of Srebrenica's fall. Drazen Erdemovic confessed to being one of the trigger men and implicated more Serb officers. General Radislav Krstic, who allegedly organized the murders, is about to hear the verdict in his trial. Now Slobodan Milosevic has joined him in The Hague, and some of the blood of Srebrenica may be on his hands. While the murders were underway, Laura Silber, the lead reporter on the award-winning BBC documentary, "Death of Yugoslavia," asked Milosevic what was going on at Srebrenica. He said, "Things got a little out of hand ". This was the same excuse Tito's lieutenants gave for the 1945 murders.

Since the government of Serbia sent Milosevic off to The Hague, it seems that Karadzic and Mladic and the rest of the tribunal's fugitives are counting their final days as free men. The survivors of Srebrenica's dead, unlike the survivors of those murdered in 1945, will probably enjoy some justice on the war-crimes front. Rumours are flying that operations to arrest Karadzic and Mladic are being prepared. Karadzic is said to be in the French sector of Bosnia, where he has apparently been almost every day since the Srebrenica indictment was handed down five years ago.

One story places Mladic in Belgrade, surrounded by bodyguards, on the same day Milosevic was handed over; another says he is in Montenegro; another still has him cowering in his old underground hideout in Han Pijesak, which is squarely in the American sector of Bosnia. In each of these places, he is well within snatch range.

Another difference between 1945 and 1995 has been in the realm of soul-searching. Practically everyone touched by the Srebrenica murders - except Serbs like Milosevic and Muslims like Alija Izetbegovic - has been engaged in a process of self-examination that has been far more exhaustive than anything the British did after the murders of 1945.

The Netherlands has suffered guilt, largely because many Dutch people draw parallels between the mass murder at Srebrenica and the mass murder of Holland's Jews during the Second World War. The Dutch troops in Srebrenica when it fell, however, had been left high and dry by their United Nations political and military masters. They never had the wherewithal to protect the town, and man for man they seem to have fought harder than most of the Muslims to keep the Serbs at bay.

Nevertheless, there were errors: toasts with Mladic caught on film, destruction of photographic and video evidence, a failure to pass on calls for air strikes, blamed on broken fax machines. Dutch troops were caught on film doing crowd-control during the separation of the men and women. There was a signature on a statement saying the evacuation from Srebrenica was carried out properly. A comprehensive report by the Dutch government was supposed to have been released by this September; it is being delayed until November because Belgrade (read: Serbia's prime minister Zoran Djindjic) has now offered to provide more information.

The French parliament has just wrapped up fact-finding hearings, apparently aimed at finding someone responsible for what went wrong in Srebrenica. General Bernard Janvier, the UN's top commander in the

former Yugoslavia when the town fell, testified behind closed doors. He reportedly said he did not order the air strikes that could have saved the place because there were no target-spotters on the ground. (This, so far as I know, would be a lie.)

The "safe areas" in the Drina valley had hamstrung the entire UN military mission in Bosnia by the summer of 1995; and the much-touted rapid-reaction force sent in that June to beef up the UN military contingent in the country was meaningless so long as Mladic could treat the "safe areas" - and the UN personnel in them - as hostages whenever the UN decided to show some pluck.

So it is easy to see why Janvier and the other UN commanders would have wanted to see Srebrenica fall. Janvier could have called for air support and saved the town. He did not. And he has to take his knowledge of the consequences of this decision to bed with him every night. So does Yasushi Akashi, the UN's top-ranking civilian in Yugoslavia at the time.

In his report on Srebrenica, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan cited the irresponsibility of the Security Council, which engaged in fraud (my word, not his) when it designated Srebrenica a "safe area" but failed to deliver the means to make it safe. "The tragedy of Srebrenica will haunt our history forever," Annan's report says. "The cardinal lesson of Srebrenica is that a deliberate and systematic attempt to terrorise, expel or murder an entire people must be met decisively with all necessary means, and with the political will to carry the policy through to its logical conclusion.

"Through error, misjudgment, and an inability to recognise the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to help save the people of Srebrenica from a Serb campaign of mass murder."

It took decades before anyone wrote anything like that about the handing over of prisoners to the mass murderers of 1945. (The man who did, Count Nikolai Tolstoy, was sued and lost his shirt) So despair is not in order; but neither is confidence.

Today, despite the indictments and arrests, the news stories, and the soul-searching, our community of nations is pretending that something is being done to help the thousands of widows and orphans left by the murders. In the past six years, only a handful of the town's Muslims have returned to claim their homes and land. Muslims on the local council cannot live in their own homes without putting themselves in mortal danger.

Milosevic made Srebrenica a dumping ground for Serbs who fled their homes in Sarajevo, western Bosnia, and Croatia. Few want to stay in the town. There are few jobs. The place is controlled by many of the same nationalist thugs who participated in the effort to drive the Muslims out; their pathetic mantra is that the Serbs were the biggest victims of the war.

If a stone-throwing mob spoils the plans of 7,000 Muslims to mark the anniversary of the murders by traveling to Srebrenica and laying the foundation stone for a memorial to the victims, these thugs will be responsible. Nato and the other international authorities in Bosnia know this. They know who these thugs are. They know what these thugs have done and what they control today. They know that indictments, arrests, and other risky steps are needed to stop them, before time shows us the constancy of human depravity once again.

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