

## **VIEWPOINT: The Violence Continues**

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An Omarska camp survivor believes holding Bosnian Serb institutions accountable for genocide is as important as prosecuting those who perpetrated the crime.

Until April 1992, life in Bosnia was peaceful. People of different nationalities lived side by side and often inter-married. Then suddenly, neighbour turned on neighbour and the butchery began. Amongst those involved were Mladjo Radic, Miroslav Kvočka, Dragoljub Prcac, Zoran Zigic and Milojica ("Krlje") Kos - now convicted as the Omarska Five, but then just regular men about town.

Before the war, I regularly encountered three of these men during my trips to Omarska. As a pupil at the local primary school, as a customer at a local barber below Omarska police station, and as a passer by in the streets of Omarska, they were familiar faces. That fateful spring of 1992 these same individuals became part of the most sinister policy one group can visit upon another - that of annihilation.

During my stay in the Omarska camp, I witnessed these three individuals behaving like gods, showing neither mercy nor restraint towards their captives. I saw Prcac arriving on duty early in the morning, nonchalantly carrying his briefcase as if he were arriving on ordinary police duty at Prijedor police station. While we feared to look into their eyes, they laughed arrogantly, sneering at the "scum" running sheepishly to the canteen for a daily ration of beatings and lukewarm cabbage-water garnished with peas.

They had their own system of justice, which they believed they would never have to answer for. But they made one big mistake. They didn't kill us all. The policy of annihilation was incomplete. And so, today, they face their former victims in disbelief: who would have thought those parchment-skinned captives would survive to tell this incriminating tale?

I doubt they ever anticipated that their turn at incarceration would come. But their stay in The Hague has been humane. They receive food that satisfies their hunger, clothes appropriate to the weather, medical attention, uninterrupted sleep, and the respect of being addressed by their names. These were luxuries they denied me and my 5,000-plus inmates throughout our two-and-a-half month sojourn in Omarska.

While they are treated as human beings with rights and entitlements, under their "management" in Omarska, I was made to feel that I was not entitled to live. I wonder if they ever ask themselves, "God, how did our victims feel under our torment?" Do they even recall the details of what they put us through? Do they ever silently regret their involvement in the war crimes that took place in Omarska, or the war-crime planned on a larger scale: Bosnia minus Muslims equals Greater Serbia?

I expect their main response is one of resentment. Their detention in The Hague has probably become an opportunity for them to hate us even more, blaming us for being there. It is ironic that perpetrators of crimes often blame their victims for their acts of aggression and cruelty. Such a system of logic enables the authors of heinous acts of violence to believe they are the victims while we are the deceitful victimisers.

I would like to ask the Omarska Five personally, What do they think of us now? This is important to me because it was clear during our incarceration at Omarska that they were not really reflecting on what they were doing. Now that they have the time, I wonder if there is any more clarity or whether they are still blinded by self-serving bigotry.

The testimonies about how these men in Omarska treated people sound horrific, but the cruelty did not stop there. The type of justice being meted out at The Hague is delivering yet another blow to a still septic

wound. When their trials started, the Omarska Five pleaded not guilty to all charges, which included murder, torture and beating, sexual assault and rape, harassment, humiliation, psychological abuse and confinement in inhumane conditions. One of the accused - unusually - pleaded not guilty with "faith in justice and in God", while the others pleaded "not guilty" or "absolutely not guilty".

One might foolishly hope that if an individual had certain convictions he would maintain them till the end. But no, it seems the Omarska Five have lost their previously fervently held convictions, or suffer from a rare virus that causes selective amnesia. They claim they had nothing to do with the several thousand deaths at Omarska. There is, of course, one other explanation, namely that these individuals are cowards and brutes whose "bravery" was limited to the torture of helpless people when no one but their victims could witness their crimes. Whatever explanation you prefer, one truth stands out: they believed they would get away with it.

When Radoslav Krstic, the general involved in the Srebrenica massacre, was convicted for genocide I felt no joy, even though I believed his conviction represented an acknowledgement of the crimes of Bosnia's Serbian aggressors. Following the conviction of the Omarska Five for their involvement in war crimes in the Omarska concentration camp from May to August 1992 - and sentenced late last year to prison terms ranging from 5 to 25 years - I realised that it did not matter to me whether they received life sentences or just five years. It was important simply that they were tried and convicted based on evidence presented in the court. But I still feel dissatisfied.

During the aggression against Bosnia many individuals like the Omarska Five became involved in crimes against humanity. To expect all of them to be prosecuted is unrealistic. We would need another thousand years of trials to reach all those who stained their hands with the blood of the innocent. But the fact that The Hague was established to prosecute and try individuals from former Yugoslavia does not convince me that it was established for the purpose of justice.

This is because the world seems to be trying to convince the victims that a bunch of wayward individuals brought about all the carnage, as if no institution stood behind those crimes. I believe that attempts to prosecute individuals before establishing collective responsibility is futile, and was doomed to failure from the start. The identification of institutions guilty of war crimes is the prerequisite for a systematic and thorough prosecution of the individuals who inspired, led and staffed them. Trying individuals as war criminals while still recognising their creation in the form of the Republika Srpska is an insult not just to their victims but to our capacity for logic.

Imagine that individual Nazis led by Hitler are charged and tried at Nuremberg, while their legacy of occupied Europe, "New Germany", is legally recognised. It would be the worst kind of insult to the millions of Holocaust survivors and their relatives. It would force survivors of genocide, if they wished to return, to go back to a territory created by the genocide that forced them to flee. If we prosecute individuals while leaving the loots of their genocide undisturbed, we legitimate genocide as a means to an end.

By so doing in Republika Srpska, we sentence future generations, living there and in the Bosnian Federation, to the decades of conflict that inevitably follow an incomplete process of justice. The world seems to want the survivors of genocide, rather than the perpetrators, to compromise their security. Again? Wasn't the arms embargo they imposed on Bosnia enough?

It is of paramount importance to arrest and try the main perpetrators of the war crimes that took place in Bosnia, including Zeljko Meakic, former commander of Omarska, and Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who should be charged for their individual involvement in the deaths of so many innocent people. But this should take place after the institutions they represented have been pronounced accountable for genocide. Without these two separate processes, true reconciliation will never take place on Bosnian soil that is still so deeply sullied with the blood of those who formerly lived and worked there. Those who have been convicted for the crimes at Omarska were not simply five criminals who scourged the country with their violence; they were zealous agents of a programme that aimed to rid Bosnia of Bosnians - that is, of those who believed it possible to live together. By failing to nullify the legitimacy of Republika Srpska, we continue to oppress these men's victims. Call it institutionalised violence by omission.

Kemal Pervanic spent seven months as a prisoner at Omarska and Manjaca camps. He is the author of *The Killing Days: My Journey Through the Bosnian War* and runs Bosnia-Herzegovina Community UK, a refugee association.

**Location:** Balkans  
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