

The Wall of Denial

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Despite mountains of evidence, many Serbs refuse to accept that a massacre took place.

Milos Milovanovic, a resident of Srebrenica and former commander of a Serb paramilitary unit called the Serbian Guard, speaks in deadly earnest tones from the coffee bar of one of the town's few hotels.

"The massacre is a lie," said the former soldier, who now represents the Serbian Democratic Party on the town council. "It is propaganda to paint a bad picture of the Serbian people. The Muslims are lying; they are manipulating the numbers; they are exaggerating what happened."

Referring to a brief period in 1993, when the then enclave commander Naser Oric led Bosnian army forces on a number of raids into enemy-held territory - allegedly killing many Serb soldiers and civilians - Milanovic insists "far more Serbs died at Srebrenica than Muslims".

The other men in the coffee bar - "his warriors" - agree.

"The world outside refuses to see the truth about 1995," said Cvetin Petrovic. "Out in the world, everyone says that we, the Serbs, were killing people here. And we are powerless against this propaganda."

Although ten years have passed since Bosnian Serb forces overran Srebrenica and killed more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys in the worst massacre on European soil since World War Two, and despite a mountain of evidence of the atrocity - that includes mass graves, confessions from officers who carried out the executions and video tape of the killings - no real reckoning seems to be underway.

Milovanovic's perception, that Srebrenica is a lie, that Serbs were in fact the true victims of the war and that they have been demonised by a vast international conspiracy is a common one in Republika Srpska, RS.

The early denials were simple.

"None of these accusations have a firm basis," said Jovan Zametica, spokesman for then Bosnian Serb president Radovan Karadzic, immediately following the massacre.

After survivors of mass executions began to tell their stories, and later when reporters found body parts poking from the earth at one of the massacre sites, the Bosnian Serb leadership began peddling the conspiracy line.

In November 1995, Karadzic brushed off allegations of a massacre at Srebrenica as "a propaganda trick in the run-up to the negotiations at Dayton" - the peace talks that ended the war and established the two entities that make up Bosnia.

When teams of forensic scientists from the UN war crimes tribunal in The Hague began unearthing multiple mass graves across RS, undermining the conspiracy theory, new ones were propounded.

The Muslims were mostly killed in combat was one common claim. Another was that they split into rival factions and killed each other. Some even suggested that they were killed by a group of French, Bosnian and other mercenaries in order to discredit the Serbs.

In March 1996, a former Bosnian Serb soldier, who served as part of the 10th Sabatoge Unit, Drazen Erdemovic, came forward and confessed to participating in an execution of up to 1,200 men in the field of a farm in Pilice, on the road between Bjeljina and Zvornik.

Although Erdemovic's confession was intricately detailed, describing the 7.62 millimetre bullets the men used in the executions, and although his account was corroborated with forensic evidence, it did little to break down the wall of denial erected around both RS and Serbia itself.

Erdemovic, it was often said, was unreliable. He was an ethnic Croat and there were questions about his state of mind. But moreover, Serbs often argued, The Hague was part of an international conspiracy to make Serbs look bad in the eyes of the world.

As a 32-year-old former Bosnian Serb soldier drinking in Srebrenica's Bar Venera one recent Saturday night put it, "The Hague goes on about Srebrenica just to make itself popular. Maybe something bad happened, but they are making a mountain out of a molehill."

This same argument would be used after judges at the Hague tribunal ruled in August 2001 that Bosnian Serb general Radislav Krstic, General Ratko Mladic's right-hand man, was guilty of genocide in Srebrenica.

The trial, charged with emotional testimony from survivors and bereaved, and backed with forensic evidence from mass grave sites, was a judicial landmark, and although the genocide ruling was controversial and later amended on appeal to "aiding and abetting genocide", it left no doubt about the scale and magnitude of the massacre.

Nonetheless, a year later, in September 2002, the Bureau of the Government of Republika Srpska for relations with the Hague war crimes tribunal concluded, in a chapter headed "The Alleged Massacre" that less than 100 Muslims had been killed by Bosnian Serb forces, and that the soldiers who did the killing did so for personal revenge or in simple ignorance of international law.

Hoping to tackle the denials and justifications, in 2003, the international community's High Representative to Bosnia, Lord Paddy Ashdown, ordered RS to form a commission into the massacre at Srebrenica. It did so, but the result again repeated the worst of the denials.

Lord Ashdown was furious. He called the report "a scandalous indictment" of RS, "a whitewash", and ordered the commission to sit again.

While it was re-investigating, events at The Hague were moving apace. In May 2003, two senior Bosnian Serb military officers, Momir Nikolic, former chief of intelligence in the Bratunac Brigade, and Dragan Obrenovic, ex- chief of staff of the Zvornik Brigade, pleaded guilty to their roles in the massacre and agreed to testify against former colleagues.

In his confession, Nikolic stated, "Able-bodied Muslim men within the crowd of Muslim civilians would be separated ... and killed shortly thereafter. I was told that it was my responsibility to help coordinate and organise this operation."

For the first time, high-ranking Bosnian Serb officers, men who were respected in their communities and whose nationalist credentials were unquestionable, not only acknowledged that the massacre took place, but provided chilling details about the cover-up operation that followed it.

A month later, the Bosnian Serb commission looking into Srebrenica issued its report and, this time, Ashdown got what he wanted.

At long last, the Bosnian Serb authorities took responsibility for Srebrenica. The commission established "that between 10th and 19th July 1995, several thousands of Bosniaks were liquidated in a manner that represents a serious violation of International Humanitarian law".

The president of RS, Dragan Cavic, called the massacre "a black stain on the history of the Serb people".

Nothing like this had come before - in this respect, among the countless atrocities committed across Bosnia, Srebrenica stands alone - but in spite of it, denial, or at least justification, is still rife. It is not uncommon for Serbs to both deny and justify what happened at Srebrenica in the same breath.

If the massacre did happen, many Serbs insist, the Muslims had it coming. It was payback for all of the Serbs they killed.

Although few are willing to admit the truth - that Bosnian Serb forces executed thousands of unarmed men and boys simply because they were Muslims - there is evidence that the wall of denial is crumbling.

At Srebrenica's High School - which is adorned with Serbian nationalist regalia, reproductions of Orthodox icons and pictures of Serbian national heroes - there are 600 students, 48 of them Muslim.

The school's director, Milan Jovanovic, sits at a desk, with the symbol of Serbian nationalism - the four crossed S's - prominently displayed.

A heavy-hearted man, wary, passionate about Dostoyevsky, Jovanovic lives under the weight of the heraldry around him, and no doubt of his education ministry.

"We do not teach the history of what happened here," he explained. "We need to wait a long time before we can do that. Because there is much different thinking about what happened - we are not sure what happened in 1995, and The Hague has not yet finished with its cases. We are waiting for history to establish what happened before we teach it."

In the meantime, Jovanovic insists he "will not talk politics".

But as he talks, it seems he was deeply affected by the Srebrenica killings.

"What happened here was so terrible that I have no words to describe it," he says. "I do not speak or think about these things, even if I am alone in the forest, where no one is listening. I was teaching in Bratunac at the time..[and] thank God I was not involved in what happened."

It was in this context – partial acknowledgements, denials mixed with justifications, inklings suppressed by fear – that the now infamous videotape appearing to show Serbian paramilitary soldiers from the Scorpions unit executing six Muslim men and boys from Srebrenica came to light.

On June 2, the Hague tribunal showed several minutes of the film, which had been provided by human rights activist Natasa Kandic of the Humanitarian Law Centre in Belgrade.

The film was subsequently broadcast on Serbian television, shocking many viewers.

In the days following the broadcast, the Serbian authorities arrested ten people alleged to have been involved in the killings.

“Serbia is deeply shocked,” said Serbian president Boris Tadic after the video aired. “All those who committed war crimes must be held accountable. Only in this way will we be able to have a future. We must not close our eyes to the cruelty that took place.”

Suddenly, it seemed impossible even for those who had refused to believe what happened in Srebrenica to continue to do so.

But the power of denial is strong. Before the video was shown, polls showed that some 50 per cent of the population did not believe that Serbs had committed war crimes during the war. A poll taken in the wake of the video showed a significant reduction in that percentage, however it found that one-third of the public believed the video to be a fake.

In the days after the video appeared on television, some in the Serbian parliament tried to pass a resolution on war crimes, but had to abandon the effort because several nationalist leaders refused to condemn the Srebrenica massacre without mentioning crimes that were committed against Serbs.

“It would have been irresponsible...to fail to mention all crimes, because they are equally grave and heinous,” said Milos Aligrudic of the ruling Serbian Democratic Party, adding that Serbs were the “greatest victims” of the conflict.

Still, it seems some have come to terms with the fact that Serbs committed war crimes don't see a problem with it. In the wake of the video screening, graffiti has appeared in both Serbia and RS, proclaiming, “Scorpions - Serb Heroes”.

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