

The Yugoslav Crisis - Remembering Srebrenica: 20 years after the massacre

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Last Saturday (11th July) all sorts of 'worthies' gathered in Srebrenica on the 20th anniversary of the massacre of over 8,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) by Bosnian Serb forces under the control of Ratko Mladic. Mladic is now on trial for war crimes in the Hague alongside Radovan Karadzic, former political leader of the Bosnian Serb 'state'. The massacre was given greater prominence by the failure of the Dutch battalion stationed in the 'safe haven' of Srebrenica to protect the population -though the UN rules of engagement meant that its troops could not, in fact, defend anyone other than themselves.

Former US President Bill Clinton apologised for not using sufficient force to prevent the massacre but failed to mention that NATO had already carried out a number of bombing operations before the fall of Srebrenica and the subsequent genocide. He also failed to point out that Srebrenica is now in the Republika Srpska, the Serb controlled part of Bosnia-Herzegovina that was agreed with former (rump) Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic at Dayton in 1995.

But Clinton was not alone in displaying a poor memory and a weak grasp of reality. Virtually every newspaper commentary, as well as the recent BBC TV programme A Deadly Warning: Srebrenica Remembered, failed to explain the nature of the war that tore apart former Yugoslavia. Everything was reduced to ethnic hatreds, while the real culpability of western leaders (their political complicity not their failure to use sufficient force) has largely been written out of history.

By focussing on Srebrenica commentators have lost sight of what led up to the massacre – and what came after.

The main cause of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and prior to that the war in Croatia, was the rise of Serb nationalism in Serbia – a rise promoted by Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade. Milosevic espoused the goal of a greater Serbia, which led to conflicts with the Albanian majority in Kosova (then an autonomous province within Serbia) and the Hungarian population, who formed the largest national grouping in Serbia's other autonomous province Vojvodina. The repression in Kosova and Vojvodina created alarm in the other republics within Yugoslavia which led to the secession of Slovenia and Croatia and, at the same time, led to the attempts to secede from Croatia by Serbs living in Krajina. Encouraged by Milosevic Serb militias drove out Croats and established their own government.

However, contrary to what is believed by much of the British left, the conflict was neither caused by imperialism wanting to break up the Yugoslav federation nor by Croatian President Franjo Tudjman. There is no evidence whatsoever that imperialism wanted to break up Yugoslavia: in fact all the evidence shows that the main European imperialist powers wanted to preserve Yugoslavia as a single state, and therefore a single market. All the republican communist parties in Yugoslavia were in favour of allowing much greater capitalist penetration: again, contrary to myth, Milosevic was not defending a 'socialised' economy against pro-capitalist secessionists in Croatia. Privatisation was actually more advanced in Serbia than other party of Yugoslavia.

Nor was the main conflict between Serbia and Croatia. All the running in opposing Milosevic's attempt to extend Serbian control over Yugoslavia was made by the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia. Slovene defence forces fought a short war against the Yugoslav National Army (JNA). Because Slovenia was overwhelmingly populated by Slovenes, with a very small percentage of Serbs, Milosevic decided that war with Slovenia was not useful and instructed the JNA to end its military operations. Tudjman was an observer of this decisive step in the break-up of Yugoslavia, not a major protagonist. The Croatian President was forced into declaring independence because the Slovene leadership was intent on leaving the Yugoslav federation. Croatian independence was neither planned by Tudjman (though he would later claim credit for it) nor was it planned in Berlin – as much of the British left, with its strongly anti-German prejudice, seemed to believe. It was a reaction to the independence of Slovenia, independence which left Croatia threatened by Milosevic's Greater Serbia project.

However, for Milosevic, Croatia was a very different case to Slovenia. There was a large Serb population in Croatia and Milosevic set about whipping up Serb fears. Memories of the Independent State of Croatia (during the 2nd world war) were revived. Tudjman and the Croatian leadership were denounced as Ustase (the extremely brutal pro-Nazi Croatian forces during the 2nd world war): by implication all Croats were Ustase.

This, of course, was a very different narrative to that of Tito and the partisan army that established the Federative Peoples' Republic of Yugoslavia, which became the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – SFRY – in 1963. For Tito the Ustase were the enemy but so were the Serbian Cetniks (who were now suddenly back in favour among Serb nationalist politicians), as well as pro-Nazi organisations in Slovenia, Kosova etc. Again much of the left failed to understand this.

For many on the left all Croats were responsible for the Ustase while apparently 'the Serbs' were on 'our' side during the second world war. Tony Benn in particular, voiced such sentiments. Leaving aside the lumping together of different classes into a single nation, as if there are not class differences, this view of 'the Serbs' as 'our' allies ignores issues that for Tito and the Partisans were central to their political and military campaigns. We have already mentioned their hostility to the Cetniks: they also fought against the pro-Nazi Serbian government in Belgrade, a government which boasted that it was the first in Europe to create a '*judenrein*' (free of Jews) state. By contrast Croats also fought alongside Serbs, Bosniaks and all the nations and nationalities that would make up the SFRY, in the Partisan army. Tito was himself half Croat, half Slovene. (Not half Croat, half Serb as sections of the left claimed at the time of the wars in Croatia and Bosnia).

Once Slovenia and Croatia had left the Yugoslav Federation then the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina felt it had no choice but to follow suit. Bosnia was the most ethnically mixed of all the republics and autonomous provinces of the Yugoslav Federation. It was the republic in which the largest number of people declared themselves as 'Yugoslav'. Marriage between people of different national and/or religious backgrounds were common. There were very few 'ethnically pure' areas. Hence the huge amount of 'ethnic cleansing' that took place.

Bosnia was not just subjected to war waged by the JNA and Bosnian Serb militias. Milosevic and Tudjman came to an agreement to divide up Bosnia between them. So Croat militias and Croatian regular troops also fought the democratically elected government of Bosnia-Herzegovina – even while large swathes of Croatia were held by Serb forces. The Bosnian government was denied arms by European leaders: the crudest expression of this was British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd's claim that supplying arms to the Bosnian government would simply create 'a level killing field'. For Hurd, and most European politicians, an 'unlevel' killing field was less of a problem than the Bosnian people being able to defend themselves.

But there was another problem for European governments: however much they tried to portray the war as one between different 'factions' in a land where 'ethnic hatreds ran deep' the reality in Bosnia-Herzegovina was different. Every single plan by the EU and UN was based on the ethnic division of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Of course many people sided with the ethnic cleansers, whether Serb or Croat, but not all Serbs and Croats supported the nationalist agenda. The Bosnian government included Serbs and Croats as well as Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims). The deputy commander of the army of BiH was a Serb. The editor of the Sarajevo daily *Oslobodjenje* was a Serb. In the cities people of all nationalities stayed and fought to defend their city. In Tuzla the miners' trade union set up defence forces consisting of Serb, Croat, Bosniak and other nationalities. Similar developments had also been seen previously in Croatia where Serbs stayed on in Dubrovnik and Vukovar to fight against the proponents of Greater Serbia.

Despite the best efforts of European governments to ensure its defeat, multi-ethnic Bosnia survived. Under pressure from the USA, the Croatian government agreed to end its war in Bosnia and fight alongside the Bosnian government. This allowed some arms, primarily from the Arab world or other Islamic countries, to reach the BiH army. Just as importantly Milosevic fell out with his allies in the Autonomous Krajina Republic in Croatia and in Republika Srpska in Bosnia.

At the time of the Srebrenica massacre Milosevic had withdrawn his support for Mladic and Karadzic. A Deadly Warning: Srebrenica Remembered is, therefore, strictly correct when it claims the massacre was carried out by Bosnian Serb forces. But the programme totally fails to mention the role of the government of Serbia in bringing about the war and also, despite visiting Tuzla, fails to mention the multi-ethnic nature of those forces in Bosnia opposed to the murderers of Srebrenica. The programme, which took a number of 19 year old Britons to Bosnia to educate people on a war that has largely been forgotten, therefore failed to give any context to the war. The young people who took part were clearly affected by their experiences but largely drew the lesson that we should be nice to one another.

However, Milosevic's withdrawal of support for those who he had brought to power in Croatia and Bosnia allowed him to pose as a peacemaker, a move that was rapidly approved in Washington and European capitals. Milosevic was invited to Dayton to participate in drawing up the plans which effectively dismembered a sovereign state. If the war in Bosnia had really been a 'civil war' as western governments and media continued, indeed continue, to claim then why was Milosevic (and Tudjman) invited to Dayton.

So what lessons can we draw from Srebrenica?

1) Contrary to Bill Clinton's assertions the doctrine of 'liberal interventionism' has nothing to do with protecting vulnerable people and everything to do with imperialist power. Primarily it involves using technological superiority to bomb those seen as hostile to western interests. Bombing did not deter Serb nationalists at Srebrenica (a number of bombing missions against the Bosnian Serb army had already taken place before the Srebrenica massacre), any more than it has deterred the Taliban, ISIS etc. Given the frequent deaths of non-combatants caused by bombing it may well increase support for those it is directed against. At best the notion of 'liberal interventionism' is utterly patronising, suggesting that people are incapable of fighting their own battles without the active intervention of the US and Britain; more realistically it meant that western powers want to ensure they dominate the situation and determine outcomes.

2) A further aspect of this point is that the western powers prefer to carry out bombing campaigns rather than arm people on the ground so they can wage their own struggle. (The sole exception to this is some military equipment for the Kurds of Iraq). Of course it would have been difficult to

supply arms to the Bosnian government given that Bosnia only has a tiny stretch of coastline near Dubrovnik and any arms would have had to go through Croatia or Serbia – at least until the Bosnian-Croatian alliance.

3) The UNPROFOR troops in both Croatia and Bosnia were there to protect the interests of the UN, not local people. The UN gave itself a fig leaf of stationing troops to cover the fact that it was, to all intent and purpose, carrying out the work of the Serb militias. However, this does not mean that at other times the UN will not intervene directly in conflicts though it is hard to envisage a situation where any UN intervention would not be a disguise for US intervention.

4) Britain and the US are more than willing to work with brutal dictators. Milosevic became a 'statesman' until his next war in Kosova. Milosevic (and Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi etc) only become liabilities when they start acting for themselves.

5) History is constantly being rewritten – especially when much of the 'history' of the wars in former Yugoslavia was specious to start with. We need to constantly expose the false historical accounts presented by TV and other media.

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P.S.

* <http://socialistresistance.org/7606/remembering-srebrenica-20-years-after-the-massacre>