

The Srebrenica Genocide: Lest We Forget

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The Srebrenica genocide (*genocid u Srebrenici*), or massacre (*masakr*), was a massacre of more than 8,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), especially men and boys, in the city of Srebrenica in the easternmost part of Bosnia and Herzegovina near the border with Serbia. The tragedy took place in July 1995.

The genocide was the culmination of Serb aggression against the independent and sovereign state of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The aggression started in April 1992 and ended in December 1995.

The genocide was committed by the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska (then a quasi and utterly illegal entity inside Bosnia and Herzegovina), with the help of various military and paramilitary units from the neighboring Serbia. The Army was under the command of Ratko Mladić. Republika Srpska was under the political, as well as ideological, leadership of Radovan Karadžić, who was under the complete tutelage of Serbia and its leader, Slobodan Milošević.

Apart from the killings, more than 20,000 civilians were also expelled from the Srebrenica enclave as part of the process of ethnic cleansing. The people were deported and forcibly displaced - not only from Srebrenica, but also from many other Bosnian cities and villages - in order to create vast homogenous Serb geographical areas. The areas were meant to subsequently become part of a Greater Serbia.

The doctrine of a Greater or Great Serbia (*Velika Srbija*) was integral to a Serb nationalist ideology. According to it, all territories and regions of perceived traditional importance to Serbs, including such as lay outside Serbia, were to be integrated into one huge and powerful state. Since Bosnia and Herzegovina has a 357km border with Serbia to the east, and since many Serbs resided in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the country was an immediate target of the Serb unholy plans.

At any rate, the war in Bosnia was by no means a civil war in the conventional sense of the word. Rather, it was a war of aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina. The war was characterized by the meticulously planned and systematically executed, and assisted as well as abetted, genocide and ethnic cleansing predominantly against the Bosniaks.

The Srebrenica genocide started on July 11, 1995, and was completed on July 22, 1995. The bodies of the victims were found at 150 different locations, 70 of which were categorized as mass graves. Over 1,000 persons are still considered missing. Every year, new bodies are found, exhumed, identified and properly buried. For example, this year (2019), 33 new bodies were found and the Islamic funeral prayer was performed over them at the Srebrenica Genocide Memorial Center, which includes a cemetery for all the victims. Of the 33 victims, the youngest was a 16-year-old boy, and the oldest an 82-year-old woman.

The irony is that as early as in April 1993, Srebrenica was designated by the UN Resolutions 819 and 836 as a "demilitarized and safe area", which was supposed to be free from any armed attack or any other hostile act. That "safe" and "internationally protected" area - sanctuary or haven - was to be safeguarded by the UN peacekeeping units employing "all necessary means, including the use of force."

However, "while the Bosniak defenders of Srebrenica largely demilitarized, as confirmed by UN conclusions, the Serb forces surrounding the enclave were well armed and refused to honor their part of the demilitarization agreement." And when the fated day(s) arrived, the UN peacekeeping troops did virtually nothing to stop the assaulting Serb forces. For that, Dutch soldiers who acted as UN peacekeepers in Srebrenica were held partly liable for the ensuing carnage.

The results were catastrophic. The events represented the worst organized and state-sponsored atrocity, crime and barbarism Europe has ever seen since World War II. However, the only "crime" of the Srebrenica Bosniaks was that they were Muslims, and that they stood in the way of the Serb ethnic nationalists' well-established and renowned monstrosity, savagery and primitiveness.

On July 11, 2000, then the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, summed up the painful catastrophe when he said that "the tragedy of Srebrenica will forever haunt the history of the United Nations."

In November 1995, International Criminal Tribunal judge, Fouad Riad, described the Srebrenica horror as follows: "Thousands of men executed and buried in mass graves, hundreds of men buried alive, men and women mutilated and slaughtered, children killed before their mothers' eyes, a grandfather forced to eat the liver of his own grandson. These are truly scenes from hell, written on the darkest pages of human history."

While ensnaring the unarmed and harmless citizens of Srebrenica, Ratko Mladić announced: "All who wish to go will be transported, large and small, young and old. Don't be afraid, just take it easy. Let the women and children go first ... No one will harm you."

In 2001, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) judged that the 1995 Srebrenica massacre was genocide.

July 11 has been chosen as Srebrenica Memorial Day. During the Day each year, tribute to the victims is paid and a strong message to posterity sent to never forget, nor allow such tragedies to take place anywhere and to anybody in the world.

Fortunately, due to the tireless efforts of a great many enlightened and dedicated individuals and groups in Bosnia and Bosnian diaspora, from among Bosniaks as well as others inside Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond, annual commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide is becoming increasingly an international event. The central ceremony is conducted in Srebrenica itself, while numerous other events are organized in many parts of the world. Such events are generally religious, educational, social and cultural in nature. Certainly, the messages of Srebrenica and its victims are becoming louder, clearer and, above all, more impactful.

Why must we not forget Srebrenica?

We (the Bosniaks and others) must not forget Srebrenica. Lessons must be learned from the past so that we will be able to understand and cope with the present, and chart our own future. If not, others will do it for us. It is rightly said that without the past, there can be neither the present nor the future. The past is the foundation, the latter two the edifice. The present is a recurring past, and the future a synergy of the effects of both the present and the past. As Winston Churchill once said: "A nation that forgets its past has no future."

Since children are our legacy and future, they should thus be targeted most. They need to be educated and raised properly. They should be

enlightened and open-minded. Truth and justice should be their only obsession and goal. The truth about Srebrenica - and about the aggression against Bosnia at large - should feature prominently in our history books and history curricula.

We must not forget Srebrenica also because doing so will send a wrong signal to the actual and potential bigots, fanatics, criminals, villains and hate-mongers anywhere in the world. That will definitely embolden them to do what they feel bent on doing. They will know that people's indifference, insensitivity and ignorance will play right into their hands, giving them more leeway to try to manipulate authorities and public opinion and to run away with their crimes.

We ought to accept that life, in essence, is a perennial confrontation between good and evil at all levels of existence. People need to possess the right worldview and be pragmatic and rational. They likewise should know and accept fully that they are on the right side (path), and whenever necessary to stand up and be counted.

The antidote for evil is the actualization of good. Evil and good cannot coexist. Good is meant for the world. It is its quintessence and *raison d'être*. It is absolute and undeviating, whereas evil is relative and provisional. Evil exists only in the absence of good and its agents. The abundant presence of good and its forces completely neutralizes evil and its own forces. By the same token, only the presence of strong axes of good can lead to weakening and dispensing with open and clandestine axes of evil.

This becomes all the more important when we recall that despite everything, many Serbs still regard the Srebrenica tragedy as a form of "liberation", "self-defense" and an unavoidable - yet predictable and desired - outcome of a Serb "holy war" against their Muslim neighbor. They claimed to be avenging the Turkish conquest of Bosnia

and other neighboring regions in the 15th and 16th century. To many Serbs, Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić - both found by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) guilty of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, and both sentenced to life in prison - are still considered national heroes and unjustly treated by the international community.

For all that, the Serbs get substantial support from a number of prominent international political actors. So much so that it is often argued, for instance, that Bosnia has become a new "battleground" between Russia and the West; that Russia may be exacerbating tensions between ethnic Serbs and the Bosniaks for its own vested interests; and that to US officials, the Balkans is the area where they are most worried about the Russian influence.

At any rate, the war was not merely against Islam and Muslims in Bosnia, but as well against Islam as a global phenomenon and "threat". Following the war, the worldwide Islamophobia trend was intensified and was raised to another level of understanding and operation.

Given that the Bosnian war was primarily against Islam and Muslims, one wonders if the Serbs - and Croats - were the only ones who waged it, or if they were mere instruments in certain hidden hands, involving some of the biggest and most influential protagonists on the world stage. That is to say, the aggression on Bosnia was at once physical and ideological. It cannot be precluded that it aimed to thwart the formation of a predominantly Muslim (Islamic) country in Europe and close to the heart of the Western world, or the Occident. Such was deemed too perilous that it had to be averted at all costs, mass slaughters and ethnic cleansing being some of them. They were intended to be but a form of collateral damage.

As assumptive as it seems, the above proposition can be supported by a myriad of factors, such as the protracted general indifference of especially the Western world towards the aggression; the inability and unwillingness of the UN peacekeepers to perform any significant role on the ground; the imposition of an arms embargo on all parties involved, which was most detrimental to the poorly armed Bosniaks as they did not inherit anything from the Yugoslav People Army's rich arsenal - as the Serbs did - nor could they easily smuggle weapons due to their various geographical constraints, unlike the Croats who could do so through their long coast and their largely favorable geography; the sluggishness and ineptitude of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to perform its duties after the war (for example, Radovan Karadžić was arrested only in July 2008, and Ratko Mladić in May 2011, 13 and 16 years respectively after the war was ended). If the world powers were really serious about capturing and bringing the two biggest war criminals to justice, they would have done so much earlier. Last but not least, the war was ended and a deal struck (imposed) by the intervention of the international community only when the tables were turned on the Serbs, and when it became indicative that the Bosniaks - God forbid - may perhaps win the war.

Forgetting the Srebrenica genocide, it goes without saying, would mean an indirect participation in the begetting of more *srebrenicas* in the future. Indeed, when evil is allowed to establish itself and thrive, it never sleeps. We need not go any further to illustrate our point than the terror attack on two mosques in Christchurch in New Zealand in March 2019. The terrorist who killed 49 innocent worshippers is believed to have been an admirer of the chauvinistic and Islamophobic ideology of the Serb nationalists and their historical figures. He played a song honoring war criminal Radovan Karadžić before opening fire. The terrorist visited Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia in 2016, stopping at historic battle sites in the area. He also visited Turkey several times.

Furthermore, we must not forget Srebrenica because doing so will inadvertently contribute to the desperately solicited credence for the ungodly hypothesis of "the clash of civilizations", as proposed by the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. According to the theory, people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War world. Future wars will not be fought between countries, but between cultures, religions and value systems and their proponents wherever and wherever they may be.

Of late, as for instance, President Trump's continuous anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric, endorsing and fostering thereby international Islamophobia, is by no means helpful. It obviously subscribes to the "clash of civilizations" concept and facilitates it to gain some currency.

By remembering and learning from the Srebrenica episode, we join the global forces of universal good which champion that all acts of injustice, oppression and violation of human rights, not just in Srebrenica and elsewhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina (in Prijedor, Foča, Višegrad, Zvornik, etc.), but likewise in different places of the world (in Palestine, Kashmir, Rohingya, Xinjiang, Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, etc.), should be condemned in the most unequivocal terms and their perpetrators brought to justice. We thus also contribute our share to the prevention of future tragedies from taking place. We partake in the noblest Islamic activity of enjoining good and forbidding evil (*al-amr bi al-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*).

It is not only that we do not forget, but also within our limited capacities, we act and try to make an impact. If nothing, we make our conscience clear, harboring neither regrets nor guilt *vis-à-vis* the numerous implications of righteousness, justice, history and the spilled blood of the victims (martyrs).

The Holy Qur'an says: "And those who are bent on denying the truth (disbelievers and corruptors) are allies (protectors and guardians) of

one another; and unless you (believers) act likewise among yourselves, oppression will reign on earth, and great corruption" (al-Anfal, 73).

Commenting on this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali said: "Evil consorts with evil. The good have all the more reason for drawing together and not only living in mutual harmony, but being ready at all times to protect each other. Otherwise the world will be given over to aggressions by unscrupulous people, and the good will fail in their duty to establish Allah's peace and to strengthen all the forces of truth and righteousness."

Instead of "the clash of civilizations", the ideas of "dialogue among civilizations" and "interreligious dialogue and cooperation" should be upheld. One of the first advocates of these ideas was former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami. He did so as a response to Samuel P. Huntington's theory of "the clash of civilizations".

Yes, we are different, but we cannot use our differences as an obstacle to finding a common ground to build a common future. Our differences should be cherished and celebrated in the name of our humanity, shared destiny and universal values. Our motto should be "unity in diversity", believing that treasuring differences greatly enrich and enhance human interactions. As far as Islam is concerned, all it ever wanted both from Muslims and non-Muslims was freedom, justice, open-mindedness and integrity.

Finally, we must not forget Srebrenica because doing so is inhuman and a sin. In a way, it yet amounts to a partnership in crime. It may furthermore lead us to forgetting ourselves: who we are, and what our terrestrial purpose and mission are. And that will spell a truly spiritual and moral disaster and tragedy, i.e., a personal spiritual and moral *srebrenica*, as it were, wherefrom nobody will be able to emerge as a winner. The Qur'an warns about such a state: "And do not be like those who forgot Allah, so He made them forget themselves. It is they who are rebellious transgressors (evil-doers)" (al-Hashr, 19).

We must remember and act because we owe it to all the innocent victims. We owe it to our conscience. Above all, we owe it to Almighty Allah who tried the victims with agonizing suffering and death, and still tries us with the vicissitudes of life. Integral to our trials is how we respond and deal with the legacies of those who have gone before us - and for us.