



DISCUSSION PAPER

25 Years After
Srebrenica
The Bosnian War and the
Role of the International
Community

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research
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PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

JULY 2020

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DESIGN BY

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Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, in Srebrenica, a small town located in Eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina, a genocide took place before the eyes of the international community. Speaking about the massacre, Former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan said that “not since the horrors of World War II had Europe witnessed massacres on this scale” (Cigar & Williams, 2002). In Srebrenica, 8,372 Bosniak men and boys were killed by Bosnian Serb forces under the command of Ratko Mladic after Dutch soldiers belonging to the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) surrendered the UN-designated safe area to the Bosnian-Serb forces without firing a single shot. Srebrenica, although the gravest, was one of many acts of ethnic cleansing and war crimes perpetrated by the Bosnian Serbs in their aim to form an ethnically pure Republika Srpska within the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Bosnian War, which lasted from April 1992 to December 1995, caused the death of more than 100,000 people and the displacement of a further 2.2 million. Furthermore, as many as 50,000 Bosniak women, including girls as young as six years of age, faced systemic rape and sexual violence. Until taking decisive action in August 1995 with the NATO-led Operation Deliberate Force, the international community took a hesitant attitude

towards intervention, effectively giving a pass for Bosnian Serb forces to continue their atrocities. Although UNPROFOR was deployed to the country to protect the distribution of humanitarian aid and provide security for the UN-designated safe zones, they were unable to fend off harassment from Serb forces and were even taken hostage in some instances. It is a fact that the war was brought to an end with the international community's intervention, however, this does not negate the fact that it failed to prevent war crimes such as torture, systemic rape and ethnic cleansing for nearly four years.

This paper will examine the humanitarian aspects of the Bosnian War and the role of the international community both during and after the end of the war. Firstly, it provides a background on the history of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian War (1992-1995). Secondly, it gives an account of the humanitarian aspect of the war, with emphasis on the Srebrenica Genocide. Furthermore, the paper analyses the role of the international community, UNPROFOR and The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The paper concludes with an account of the current state of affairs in the highly polarised country and place of the Dayton Peace Accords in the current situation.

Historical Background

The Western Balkans have historically acted as a border between the West and the East throughout history. Before the Ottoman conquest in the 14th century, the region, which was mostly comprised of Southern Slavic nations, had a fragmented political and religious order. While the Croats and Slovenes of the region were mostly under the influence of Central European powers and followed Catholicism, those living in the Eastern part of the region such as Serbs and Montenegrins were mostly under the influence of Eastern Rome (Byzantium) and followed Orthodox Christianity. Bosniaks, on the other hand, who were located at the middle of the Western Balkans, occupied a middle ground between these two distinct religious and political orders. Unlike their neighbours, Bosniaks followed a Balkan originated sect of Christianity named Bogomilism. Thus, they were regularly under the pressure of Catholics and Orthodox aiming to extend their influence in the region (Waardenburg, 1997).

After the arrival of the Ottomans to the region in the 14th century, Bosniaks largely converted to Islam, becoming the only Slavic Muslim nation. Until the 18th century, Ottoman rule in the region did not face a serious interior or external challenge and the region was largely stable. However, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Russian and Austria-Hun-

garian Empires, the region became one of the most important fronts of the long wars between the great powers throughout the 18th and 19th century. With the rise of nationalism, which caused internal uprisings against the Porte, the Ottoman Empire lost much of Western Balkans following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 under the terms of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. With the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, Ottoman Rule in the greater Balkans came to an end and the region became home to newly established nation-states (Hanioğlu, 2008).

Following World War I, Serbia extended its rule throughout Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia and changed its name to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. In 1929, the state's name was changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. After the end of World War II, the monarchy in Yugoslavia was abolished and a socialist regime under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito was established. Although socialist rule was established, Yugoslavia succeeded in forming an independent foreign policy from the Soviet Union and became one of the most important members of the Non-Aligned Movement throughout the Cold War, establishing relations with both the West and the East (Benson, 2001).

The Bosnian War (1992-1995)

Although the Tito administration was highly authoritarian in its nature, it succeeded in keeping the multi-ethnic Yugoslav society under one flag. Until Tito's death in 1980, the people of Yugoslavia largely co-existed in peace with minimal ethnic tensions. However, following Tito's death, the Belgrade-based administration's weak rule and the worsening economic situation served to exacerbate the ethnic fault lines in the country. The end of the Cold War saw the breakup of the Yugoslav Federation. Following Slovenia, Croatia

and Macedonia's declaration of independence in 1991, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992 after a referendum (Chenoy, 1996). Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence was subsequently recognised by the international community and the country became a member of the United Nations in May 1992. (Kempster, 1992)

Bosnia and Herzegovina had multi-ethnic demography and the Serbs, who consisted of nearly 31 per cent of the population, opposed independence from the

now Serb dominated Yugoslavia. With support from Belgrade, Bosnian Serbs declared their autonomy from the newly formed Bosnia and Herzegovina to form Republika Srpska, leading the country into the most violent conflict Europe has witnessed since World War II (Bosnia: Serb Ethnic Cleansing, 1994).

By April 1992, the conflict between Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats evolved into a full-scale civil war. Although the Yugoslav Army (JNA), which was composed mainly of ethnic Serbs, officially withdrew from Bosnia and Herzegovina in June following international pressure, they left most of their weapons to Bosnian Serb forces. Moreover, many of the JNA personnel also stayed in the country by simply changing their uniforms and fought in the war under the command of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic (Chenoy, 1996). All Bosnian born JNA personnel were also transferred to Bosnia and Herzegovina to fight in the Bosnian Serb Army (Burg & Shoup, 1999). The Belgrade administration under the leadership of Slobodan Milosevic continued its support to Bosnian Serbs throughout the war.

At the beginning of the war, Bosnian Serb forces, supported by the JNA, were in an advantageous position. Although Serbs comprised only 31 per cent of the population, Karadzic argued that they were entitled to 70 per cent of Bosnia and Herzegovina's land (Nizich, 1992, p. 32).

With tensions rising between Bosniak and Croats at the end of 1992, the conflict devolved into three-sided civil war. The conflict between Bosniaks and Croats caused the unintended consequence of handing Bosnian Serb forces an advantageous position. During these two years, they were able to gain control of nearly 70 per cent of the land. However, in February 1994 under American mediation efforts, Bosniaks and Croats signed a peace agreement and united their forces against Serb aggressions (Greenhouse, 1994).

In June 1992, the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was deployed to Bosnia and Herzegovina to protect the Sarajevo International Airport. UNPROFOR's authority was later extended to assist humani-

tarian aid deliveries and protect UN-designated safe zones for civilians (Weller, 1996). However, UNPROFOR's role was largely symbolic as the international community lacked the will to show a strong determination to end the conflict. In April 1994, US jets under NATO command bombarded Serb forces attacking a safe zone in Gorazde. However, this resulted in Serbs taking 150 UNPROFOR personnel hostage (Wrage & Cooper, 2019). Following this event, for more than a year the international community continued to hesitate to meaningfully intervene in the conflict.

Following increased Bosnian Serb attacks against Bosniak civilians in Srebrenica in July 1995 and Sarajevo Markale Bazaar in August 1995, NATO, in accordance with UNPROFOR, started to take a more comprehensive role in the conflict and commenced Operation Deliberate Force against Serb targets. During the NATO air campaign, which lasted about 20 days from August 30 to September 20, Bosniak and Croat forces made rapid gains against Bosnian Serb forces. The main targets of the NATO operation were Bosnian Serb communication lines, command posts and air defences. Moreover, a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF) was formed by French, British and Dutch artillery forces to break the siege of Sarajevo. The resulting heavy losses and international pressure forced Bosnian Serb forces to fold (Hendrickson, 2005; Schinella, 2019).

The war finally ended with the much-debated Dayton Peace Accords signed by Bosniak leader Aliya Izetbegovic, the President of Croatia Franco Tudjman and the President of Yugoslavia Slobodan Milosevic in December 1995. According to the agreement, all the parties agreed on a single state of Bosnia and Herzegovina composed of two autonomous regions: the Bosniak and Croat dominated Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serb dominated Republika Srpska. Moreover, a rotating Presidential Council was formed. The council would be composed of a Bosniak member, a Croat member and a Serb member and the chair seat would be rotated every eight months during a four-year cycle (UNSC, 1995).

The Humanitarian Scale of the War

During the Bosnian War, more than 100,000 people were killed and 2.2 million forced to leave the country. Moreover, many war crimes, including the indiscriminate bombing of cities torture, systemic rape and ethnic cleansing were committed by the warring parties. About 90% of these war crimes were perpetrated by Bosnian Serbs in their quest to form a homogeneous Republika Srpska (Cohen, 1995).

As part of their ethnic cleansing strategy, Bosnian Serbs employed systemic rape as a weapon of war. The fear of rape led Bosniaks to flee from the targeted lands and girls as small as six years old were raped in front of their families. Collective rapes were also common.

In one instance, a woman was raped by twenty-eight Serb soldiers. The scale of systemic rape went as far as forming 'rape villages' where Bosniak women were enslaved for the pleasure of the Serb forces (Kovalovska, 1997, pp. 932–935). Unlike many other rape cases in war, one strategy of the Serb forces was to impregnate women and hold them hostage until the chance of abortion was eliminated, part of a widespread 'Serbianisation' effort. The European Union (EU) estimates that 20,000 women, most of whom were Bosniak Muslims, were raped. Bosnian authorities believe the number to be as high as 50,000 (Ward, 2017).

Genocide in Srebrenica

During the war, there were numerous accounts of mass killings and other crimes against humanity. The siege of Bosnia and Herzegovina's capital city Sarajevo by the Serb forces led to a humanitarian disaster and the deaths of nearly 10,000 Sarajevans. The shooting of civilians by snipers and shelling of civilian areas carried out by Serb forces were routine in the course of the four-year siege. The gravest of these attacks against civilians was the shelling of the Markale Bazaar in February 1994 and August 1995. In the first attack, 68 civilians were killed. This was followed by a second attack in which 43 civilians were killed. The second attack pushed the international community to act and authorise the NATO-led Operation Deliberate Force against the Serb forces. (Schinella, 2019).

Sieges and massacres were not limited to the capital city. Systemic ethnic cleansing by Bosnian Serb forces was a common practice throughout the war, culminating in acts of genocide in the eastern regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The murder of 8,372 Bosnian men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces in Srebrenica is only the most notorious of these war crimes (Green, 2020).

Before the war, Srebrenica was a small town of around 5,000 inhabited mostly by Bosniaks. As the war progressed, the town became a safe haven for more than 30,000 Bosniak civilians who had fled from their villages due to Serb atrocities. It is reported that at least 296 Bosniak villages in the Srebrenica region were destroyed by Bosnian Serb forces (Toljaga, 2010). The resources of Bosniak forces, whose supply lines were cut off by the Serbs, were limited. Many of the Bosniak forces did not even have proper military equipment and were armed with hunting rifles. In 1993, Srebrenica was declared as a UN safe area under UN protection. However, UN protection did little help during the siege as the supply routes were cut off by Serb forces and UNPROFOR was unable to force an end to the siege. During the siege, civilians and even UN forces in the safe area were not able to access food, medicine and fuel (UNSC, 1999).

In July 1995, under the orders of Radovan Karadzic, Bosnian Serb forces began an offensive against Srebrenica. NATO airstrikes in defence of the enclave proved futile as visibility was limited. Further airstrikes

were called off after Serb forces threatened to bomb UN sites and kill UN hostages. Thus, Dutch forces comprising of 400 soldiers serving in the UNPROFOR to protect the safe area surrendered Srebrenica to Bosnian Serb forces without firing a single shot on July 11 (HRW, 1995).

Commander of Bosnian Serb forces, Ratko Mladic, entered Srebrenica and gave a statement about their aims in the UN-designated safe zone; "We give this town to the Serb nation[...] The time has come to take revenge on the Muslims" (Neuffer, 2002). Throughout the next few days, men and boys were separated from women and the elderly. Many women faced rape at the hands of Bosnian Serb forces and were subsequently

forced to leave the area. 8,372 men and boys were killed by Bosnian Serb forces and buried in mass graves. To this day, the remains of more than 1,000 men and boys have yet to be found or identified (Öztürk, 2019).

The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), established in 1993, ruled what happened in Srebrenica constituted genocide. The commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, Ratko Mladic, was convicted of genocide and persecution, extermination, murder, and the act of forcible transfer in the area of Srebrenica in 1995 by the ICTY (ICTY, 2017).

The Role of the International Community

The International community's role in the Bosnian War continues to be debated. While the UN was involved in the conflict from the outset, it was not able to provide security to civilians, stop ethnic cleansing and other war crimes or put an end to the conflict in a reasonable time frame. In many cases, UNPROFOR forces, poorly equipped to intervene, faced harassment by Serb forces and were even taken hostage.

UNPROFOR's original mission was to monitor the ceasefire between Croatia and Yugoslavia. With the outbreak of war in Bosnia, UNPROFOR'S mission was extended to Bosnia and Herzegovina in June 1992 to protect Sarajevo International Airport and ensure the flow of humanitarian aid through the airport. Later on, in September 1992 the Force's mission was further extended to the escort of humanitarian aid. In April 1993, UNPROFOR also became responsible for the protection of UN-designated safe areas in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zepa, Gorazde, Bihac and Srebrenica (Biermann & Vadset, 2019).

The authority of UNPROFOR was limited to the protection of humanitarian aid and designated safe areas, rather than putting an end to Serb aggressions or protecting civilians. However, as in the case of Srebrenica, UNPROFOR proved unable to fulfil its limited mandate properly, contributing to the maltreatment, displacement and deaths of thousands of civilians, mainly Bosniak Muslims. Although the war ended in 1995 with NATO's intervention and a peace deal was achieved with international mediation, it is a fact that the international community failed to protect the civilians during the course of the war. Noting that the Serb forces were brought to the negotiation table only a little after Operation Deliberate Force began, it can be argued that had the international community acted earlier to put an end to the Bosnian War, Europe's worst humanitarian disaster since the World War II would not have occurred.

One of the most controversial UN decisions taken during the war was the UN Security Council's arms embargo placed on the former Yugoslavia, including Bos-

nia and Herzegovina (SIPRI, 2012). Bosnian Serb forces were not significantly affected by the embargo since Yugoslav Forces left their weapons to them and they continued to receive support from the Milosevic regime in Belgrade. Croat forces also continued receiving a flow of weaponry from neighbouring Croatia. Bosniak Muslims were the only fighting party that was heavily affected by the embargo. Throughout the war, they had to fight with inadequate weaponry and limited ammunition against the Bosnian Serb onslaught.

While the United States supported the end of the arms embargo to the Bosnian government in 1993, the United Kingdom, France and Russia opposed taking such action, arguing that it would worsen the situation in the country. As the legitimate government in Sarajevo faced constant barrages from Bosnian Serb forces and their supporters in Belgrade, the arms embargo effectively meant that the UN Security Council had taken away the Bosnian Government's right to self-defence (Meisler, 1993).

Perhaps one of the most important UN initiatives during the Bosnian War was the establishment of the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in May 1993. The establishment of the Tribunal was in response to ongoing war crimes that had been taking place since the start of the war. Based in The Hague, the ICTY's authority included the prosecution of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide (Ronen, 2011, pp. 22–23) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries of the former Yugoslavia such as Kosovo.

In its twenty-four years

of existence, the ICTY has indicted 161 people and sentenced 90 for genocide, crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war and/or grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions. Among those sentenced were high profile political leaders and generals: Presidents of Republika Srpska Radovan Karadzic and Biljana Plavsic, Commander of Bosnian Serb Army Ratko Mladic and General Stanislav Galic. Moreover, the President of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, was also indicted by the court, however, he died (2006) in custody before his trial was concluded. Following his demise, the Chamber issued a statement "that a reasonable judge could convict Slobodan Milosevic on all counts" (ICTY, 2006).

Whether the ICTY was a success or failure is a highly debated topic. While the convictions have been welcomed by Bosniak society, the slow pace at which judgements have been reached has been criticised. On the other hand, the Serb community both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have generally expressed displeasure about the Tribunal's rulings. Serb discourse on the ICTY has framed the tribunal as having an anti-Serb bias and being under Western, especially

American pressure with regards to its rulings against Serb leaders. For many Serbs, the ICTY's independence and impartiality continue to be a fractious issue. As there has been a tendency towards the denial of crimes perpetrated in the course of the Bosnian War, it is not surprising that negative attitudes towards the Tribunal have prevailed. A 2002 study shows that trust in the ICTY

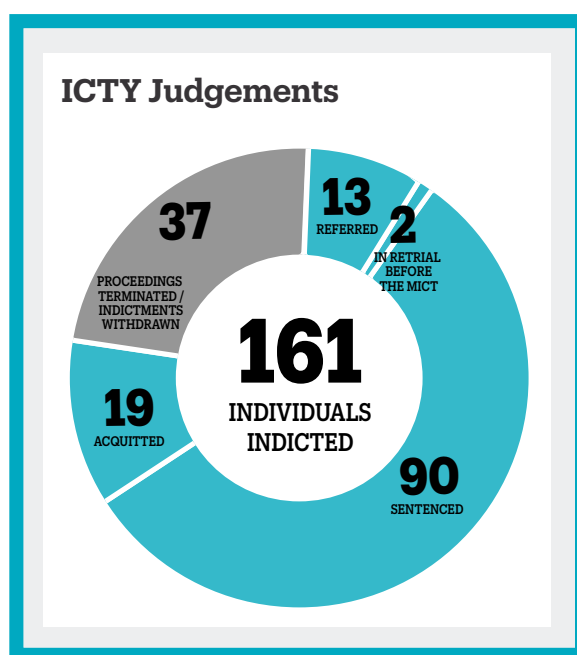


Figure 1 – Source: ICTY (www.icty.org)

was 51 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina (IDEA, 2002a) while it was only 8 per cent in Serbia (IDEA,

2002c) and less than 4 per cent in Republika Srpska (IDEA, 2002b).

Concluding Remarks

Although a quarter-century has passed since the Bosnian War came to an end, Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to be a politically and socially divided country. The current political and bureaucratic system, a result of the Dayton Peace Accords, has been ineffective in tackling the country's problems and has caused deadlocks in the country's governmental process. According to the World Bank, Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the poorest countries of Europe with a GDP

per capita of only \$6,000 (The World Bank, 2019). Due to the aftereffects of the war and a difficult economic situation, the country's population is shrinking as people continue to migrate abroad in search of better living standards. While the population was 4.5 million in 1990, by 2019, it had fallen to 3.3 million (O'Neill Aaron, 2020). Furthermore, youth unemployment in the country rose to high as 60 per cent in the course of the last decade (AA, 2013).

Demographic Change in Bosnia and Herzegovina

	1991 Population	%	2013 Population	%
Bosniak	1,902,956	43.5	1,769,592	50.1
Serb	1,366,104	31.2	1,086,733	30.8
Croat	760,852	17.4	544,780	15.4
Other	347,121	7.9	130,054	3.7
Total	4,377,033		3,531,159	

Figure 2 - Source: Statistika (www.statistika.ba)

Polarisation among Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats remains a major issue for Bosnia and Herzegovina's future. Today, these communities continue to live in divided cities where crossing to another's neighbourhood can still be a perilous journey. Rising nationalistic rhetoric from politicians, particularly from Bosnian Serb officials, is serving to effectively nullify any substantial reconciliation efforts. While Bosniaks and Croats have charted a largely pro-Western foreign policy

aiming at integration with Western institutions such as the EU and NATO, Republika Srpska opposes this path. Though it could be argued that membership in these organisations would be a stabilising factor and enhance the country's economic and democratic credentials, the underlying cause of Serb irredentism is based on a continued desire for an independent Republika Srpska.

In February 2020, the Serb member of the Presidential Council and former leader of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, threatened to secede from Bosnia and Herzegovina after the Constitutional Court decided that an unclaimed agricultural land located in the Serb region belonged to the central government rather than the regional government. Dodik declared that they would organise an independence referendum in Republika Srpska and said that if the court did not reverse its decision, it would be, "Goodbye Bosnia, welcome RS-exit" (Sasso, 2020).

This was only the latest move by Republika Srpska officials that has stirred political tensions and increased social and political polarisation in the country. Serb politicians have consistently followed a strategy of destabilisation by undermining the central government and glorifying wartime figures who have been convicted by the ICTY for war crimes. Criminals such as Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic are widely regarded as heroes in Republika Srpska and their names continue to be used to name streets and buildings. Their pictures, accompanied by glorifying statements, can be seen on walls and posters throughout the re-

gion (Dzaferovic, 2020). Dodik and his followers also deny the Srebrenica Genocide and other war crimes. According to Dodik, Srebrenica was an "arranged tragedy" and many of the "alleged victims are still alive". In 2018 Serb efforts to rewrite history culminated into revocation of a 2004 report adopted by the Republika Srpska's government on the role of Serb forces in Srebrenica massacre (DW, 2018).

Prospects for normalisation and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are currently very low. Bosnian Serbs have been largely successful in their aim to form an 'ethnically pure' Republika Srpska by claiming 49 per cent of the Bosnian land with only 31 per cent of the population. In many respects, they have emerged from the Dayton Accords as the victorious party. Furthermore, many atrocities committed by Serb forces in the course of the war have gone unpunished, contributing to Serb intransigence towards the efforts to form a united and strong Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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