

Who Says Milosevic is Dead?

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Burying the Butcher

On a dull grey day in Pozarevac in Serbia a few days ago, many thousands turned up to bid farewell to the Butcher of Bosnia. The man who carved up Bosnia and who launched a bloody genocidal war against Croatia and Bosnia, was being hailed as a hero by the thousands who carried his picture and the flowers around his youthful smiling cheaply printed pictures. Yet, thousands of supporters do not accurately reflect the spirit and legacy that Milosevic left behind. There are tens and dare I say, hundreds of thousands of supporters in Serbia who believe that the Butcher of Bosnia saved them and their culture and religion from an attack by their neighbours. They continue to live in the realm of fantasy, a realm that had been inculcated by 'their leader,' affectionately called 'Slobo.'

Here in Pozarevac was put to rest the master of the worst genocide in Europe since the gas camps at Auschwitz and the death camps of Treblinka and Buchenwald. Here was put to rest the organ grinder, without the associated dancing beasts of Radko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic. He made the policy and they conducted the dirty work of the dictator. The political puppet Karadzic and the military mass murderer Mladic may be on the run, but the noose is closing in on them.

Flashbacks

The lamentable story of Bosnia has many similarities with the other mass genocide that took place only a thousand or so miles from Yugoslavia in the 1940's. To understand the basis of state genocidal policies and practices, you must look no further to the conditions that created them. In the 1920's and 1930's the shame of the Versailles Treaty and a feeling within Germany that the country had been 'let down' by Bolsheviks and Jews, led to the dehumanisation and stereotyping of communities that led to what we know as the 'Final Solution'; where Jews, Poles, Gypsies, gays and lesbians and Romas were put to death. The Nazis had to blame someone to fill their vacuous lack of policies and to provide them with the legitimacy for their heinous crimes. That was 60 years ago and only 10 years ago the same worn tracks towards genocide were being used by the railroad cart of Milosevic and his coterie of henchmen. The real brains behind the man though was his manipulative and highly politicised wife, Mira Markovic, now living in exile in Russia.

Injustice Breeds Injustice

Serbian history is deeply bound by the impact that the Ottoman Empire had on it. Serbs felt a deep sense of injustice had been perpetrated by Ottoman Turks during the occupation of their nation some 700 years ago. One of the reasons of the attack on Kosovo in the late 90's by Serbian forces was their desire to keep that enclave under their control. That enclave stirred up deep historical and religious emotions and it was the Serbian Prince Lazar Hrebljanovic, who led Serbian forces into battle against the Turks at Kosovo Polje in 1389. Mysticism and legend has built up around this battle within Serbian folklore and it was believed that the day before the battle, the Prophet Elijah flew from Jerusalem and appeared to Prince Lazar in the form of a grey falcon. To the Prince, he offered a choice: he could either win the battle and conquer a terrestrial kingdom or he could lose and gain a place in heaven for himself and his people. He chose the latter and sacrificed his troops. That day was the 28th of June, St Vitus' Day and ever since that battle the Serbian people have regarded themselves as a 'celestial people', chosen by God and different since they chose the route of martyrdom.

This powerful myth is one of many that underlie the very tensions and acts of brutality that took place in Bosnia against mainly Bosnian Muslims. In 1992, after the declaration of independence by Bosnia from Yugoslavia, Milosevic was the sole organ grinder in raising such myths. In front of him was a battle, one that was to banish and bleed Bosnia into submission. After all, they were only Turks, grantedly not the same Turks of 1389, but balijas nonetheless. These Balijas (a derogatory name for Bosnian Muslims), were to be fought this time in Bosnia and not Kosovo Polje.

Divine Mission

On June 28th 1989, Milosevic purposely addressed a rally of Serbs in the town of Kosovo Polje. Addressing a million Serbs, he marked the 600th anniversary of the defeat of Serbian forces by Turkish Muslims and vowed that Kosovo would never leave Serbian control. It was a foretaste of what was to come in a few years when the patchwork quilt of Yugoslavia was to disintegrate and when Croatia and Bosnia claimed their independence. The Butcher of Bosnia launched an all out war and genocide against Croats and Bosnian Muslims, no doubt enraged and inflamed by nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments against his fellow neighbours.

The link with Kosovo Polje is a strong one when trying to understand the brutal and vicious manner in which Serbian forces conducted military actions against Bosnian Muslims. On taking Srebrenica, the Serbian General, Radko Mladic compared himself to Prince Lazar by stating in front of a TV camera that, 'I give this town to the Serbian people as a gift for St Vitus' Day. We finally took revenge on the Turks, (read Muslims).' Some 600 years after the

battle of Kosovo Polje, General Mladic spoke about taking revenge on the Turks even though there were no more Turks in Bosnia. In his mythological and warped mind, the archangel of Serbian revenge, had finally brought justice for the Serbs by the execution of thousands of 'Turks' (Bosnian Muslims).

Killing Field of Srebrenica

And what was the price of these animalistic urges based on nationalism and religious extremism. This can only be summed up by reference to the excellent book by Slavenka Drakulic entitled, 'They Would Never Hurt a Fly'. She goes on to describe in detail the following horrific and graphic images of the butchery and mass murder of Bosnia Muslims that took place within the blood stained killing fields of Srebrenica. Of those 8,000 men, women and children that were killed in 3 days by the forces of the paramilitary organisation, Republika Srpska led by Radko Mladic and his political superior Radovan Karadzic, the most disturbing thing is that only 1,600 out of the 8,000 Muslims that were killed have been found to date. The sad and inhumane fact of it all is that the bodies were dug up and moved after the executions in order that the killing fields could not unlock forensic facts around the unspeakable acts that had been conducted. The reason for the move? Well US satellite imagery was picking up what looked like large earth movements and mounds and there was a genuine fear by Serbian Republika Srpska forces that these could be found.

Slavenka Drakulic describes the barbarity of the attack against unarmed and helpless Bosnian Muslims on those 3 fateful days in 1995. People that should have been protected within the 'safe enclave' of the UN protected area, found themselves cordoned off behind razor and chicken wire by gloating Serb forces. The UN forces capitulated under Serb pressure and left the glaring and vacuous expressionless faces of doomed young men, women and children behind to die. Their emaciated bodies brought back shocking images of those dark haired and emaciated human beings clothed in grey striped clothes in Poland, some 60 years ago.

Slavenka describes the trial in the Hague of Drazen Erdemovic, 34, which shows the impact that the Butcher of Bosnia's policies had on the innocent. Below is an excerpt from her book, (They Would Never Hurt a Fly):

'Drazen Erdemovic, born in 1971 in Tuzla, Bosnia, of a Croatian mother and a Serbian father, was accused of crimes against humanity for taking part in a massacre of Muslim men from Srebrenica on 16th July 1995. During the investigation and the trial, he repeatedly expressed his remorse for the crimes he had committed. Erdemovic explained that he had been forced to shoot because, when he refused, his commander had threatened him with death. His initial sentence was ten years in prison, but on appeal it was reduced to 5 years, because the Tribunal acknowledged that Erdemovic had acted under extreme duress. He was a witness for the prosecution in the Krstic case as well as in the Karadzic-Mladic case. Today he is free and enjoys the status of a protected witness.'

The book describes the actual killings of Bosnian Muslims that took place in Srebrenica in 1995. It goes on to state that,

'When Drazen looked at his watch, he was shocked; it had taken them only fifteen minutes to execute some sixty people! A second bus had already arrived. The men in the bus could not see what was awaiting them as they were blindfolded, too. Drazen was glad about that; he thought that this was actually an act of mercy towards these poor (Muslim) men. But pretty soon after that, buses began to arrive carrying men who were not blindfolded. Their hands were not even tied. It was as though they had been hurriedly pushed into buses and sent to the Branjevo farm. But why such hurry? Drazen did not understand. And there was something else that he did not understand, that did not seem logical to him; these men who came later could surely see what was about to happen to them. They could see dead bodies on the ground and soldiers standing there with Kalashnikovs. And yet, they stepped down from the bus and marched to the execution site with two soldiers. Why didn't any of them try to escape into the nearby wood? Drazen wondered. In a couple of minutes you could dive into the safety of the trees; there was at least a slim chance of survival. But not a single prisoner tried to break away. Drazen had never seen such a spectacle before; prisoners walking in an orderly fashion towards their execution site, like animals in a slaughterhouse. Did they believe somebody would save them? If all of them had tried to run, surely some would have reached for safety. At the very least, they would die knowing that they had tried. They had nothing to lose. There were to be executed, and they must have known it the moment they had got out of the bus. Drazen wished they would try to run; at least it would have been fairer, because they would have had a chance to escape. But no. The prisoners were pouring in a steady, peaceful stream as if some kind of mental paralysis had seized them.

Maybe these men no longer felt anything? But then he saw something and realised this couldn't be so. As he aimed at the nape of a man's neck, Drazen saw a telltale sign on the back of his trousers. There was a spot there, getting bigger and bigger. There was a wet spot there, getting bigger and bigger. He heard a command and shot once more. When the man fell down, Drazen saw that he was still alive, still urinating out of fear. Drazen was suddenly embarrassed as if it was happening to him. It could happen to me, too, he thought, but pushed away the unpleasant notion away. He was tired and angry with himself. It was just not right to execute all these men. If they were soldiers they were prisoners of war, and if they were civilians, what was happening to them was even more unjustified. He and his fellow soldiers were doing something wrong, that much he knew. If there were any justice, then these men would not be executed like that, without a trial, without any proof of their guilt. Their relatives would be looking for them and eventually Drazen's unit would be held accountable for their deaths.

But then, Drazen, heard another noise. Among the prisoners standing in the field was a man of perhaps sixty, grey haired and neatly dressed. 'Don't kill me, he shouted, I saved the lives of many Serbs in Srebrenica. I could give you their names, I am sure that they would vouch for me. He started to pull out a piece of paper out of his pocket. Drazen approached him and took it aside. He gave him a cigarette and a glass of orange juice. The man sat down and lit the cigarette. His hands were trembling as he handed the paper to Drazen. Here are names, telephone numbers, you can check them if you want, it's true what I am saying... But Drazen knew that the man would not be allowed to live, because he was already a witness to the execution. Why did he take him aside, then? Drazen was impressed by this man who had not silently accepted death like the others. He seemed honest and brave, and Drazen wanted to prolong his life for as long as he could. But the man did not look as if he had any hope left. We all used to live together, Muslims, Serbs, Croats, the man said to Drazen. What happened to us ordinary people? Why did we let it happen? Yes, indeed, what happened to us, Drazen said? If only somebody could explain that to me, if only I knew, but I don't know any more than you do, I am a half-Croat, but my wife is Serb.

Drazen understood that he and the man in front of him had something in common: they had nothing against people of other nationalities. But how could you do this? The man asked as he inhaled the smoke from the cigarette, sensing it would be his last. What could Drazen tell him but that he did not have a choice? It sounded like a stupid thing to say to a man who was to lose his life, it sounded damned stupid. But it was the truth. Drazen was aware that the man was guilty only of being the wrong nationality, and in this he didn't have a choice either.

There was no more time for a conversation. Pero and another soldier approached them and took the man away. Drazen said no, 'don't do it, knowing that it was all he could do. Shut up, 'don't be stupid, Ivan said. In a minute it was all over. The man was dead.

It must have been past noon, but the soldiers did not have much time for a break from the killing. At the beginning, every half-hour Drazen would go and sit under the tree and have a cigarette. It was a kind of escape, a break. But then he no longer craved a cigarette. His movements became more and more mechanical. He would aim at somebody's head and shoot, and before he had time to wipe his forehead the next one would be kneeling in front of him. He preferred it that way; if he paused for too long, he would become aware of the foul odour of the bodies. In the heat bodies started to decompose almost immediately. The stench reminded him of a butcher's shop. Sometimes his mother would send him to buy meat, though he tried to avoid it. In summer, the stench in the butcher's shop was unbearable, and fat, green flies would land on pieces of raw meat to eat and lay their eggs. The butcher would entertain himself by catching flies and dropping them in a glass of water. Drazen would run home, eager to get away from the smell. What a fine nose you have, his mother would tease him. Now the same kind of stench was coming from the field, the same kind of green flies descending on the fresh bodies.

Ivan, perhaps noticing that Drazen was becoming nauseated, offered him a brandy, a strong homemade slijivovica. Drazen took several sips and felt better. With the alcohol taking over, he could keep shooting for some time without giving himself the chance to think. As he took another sip of the slijivovica, Drazen saw out of the corner of his eye a young boy stepping out of the bus. The Muslim boy was not blindfolded and Drazen saw his face, though he had promised himself that he would not look at the prisoner's faces, as it had made shooting more difficult. The boy might have been fifteen, perhaps younger. His chest was bare and his pale skin exposed to the sun. The boy looked at the soldiers and then the rows of the dead bodies in front of him. His eyes grew bigger and bigger, as if he could not take in all of what he saw. But he is a boy, only a boy, Drazen murmured more or less to himself. When the prisoners knelt down just before the command came to shoot, Drazen heard the boy's voice. Mother he whispered, mother! That day Drazen heard men begging for their lives, grown men crying like children: he heard them promising money, cars, even houses to the soldiers. Many were cursing, some of them were sobbing. But this boy was just calling for his mother, as children sometimes do when they awake from a bad dream and all they long for is their mother's hand on their forehead. A minute later the boy was dead, but Drazen was sure he could still hear his voice.

By Fiyaz Mughal, 2006

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