Commemorating Srebrenica

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With only a few thousand inhabitants, the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica has acquired an almost global reputation. Its name has become synonymous with what is considered the worst single atrocity in Europe after 1945: the massacre of at least seven thousand Bosniak men in the aftermath of the Serbian takeover of the "Safe Area" of Srebrenica on 11th July 1995. The United Nations (with Dutch troops in a dubious key role) failed to prevent this bloodbath, which has led to a series of investigations and reports, the first of which was published by the UN, followed by official reports in France, the Netherlands, and recently in Republika Srpska. I was involved in the largest Dutch inquiry, carried out by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD). My primary task was to provide an anthropological and historical background account to the events in Srebrenica in July 1995. As part of that, I conducted numerous interviews with Bosniaks and Serbs, as well as Dutch battalion (*Dutchbat*) soldiers, in order to find out how the massacre could happen within the context of local events and conditions. I took a wide historical angle, covering two centuries and looking at the legacies of previous wars and episodes of violence, in particular the historical memories that existed about them. My aim was not to write a comprehensive history, but to critically look at the ways important historical episodes were remembered and represented, used and instrumentalised, before and during the war.

It is clear that historical memories and myths helped to fuel the Bosnian war. One cannot fully understand particular events such as the Srebrenica massacre, if one ignores the various *perceptions* of history that existed among local players. It is sufficient in this context to point at Ratko Mladić's references to the Kosovo battle (1389) a few days before he launched the attack on Srebrenica, or his references to the First Serbian Uprising (1804–1813) when he had conquered the town. When the Serbs marched into Srebrenica's town centre, Mladić presented the takeover as a revenge for the historical defeat suffered at the hand of the Turks almost two centuries before. I believe that this combined imagery of the Kosovo battle and the First Serbian Uprising is relevant for an understanding of the ideological context behind the massacre of Bosniak men in 1995, and the mental map of at least some of those people who orchestrated and

committed these crimes. It is indeed plausible that Mladić's world-view was permeated by national epics and "great" Serbian traditions, romanticising the fight against the Ottoman Turks. Epic elements were part and parcel of the discursive patterns, which he and other Serbian nationalists employed to "explain" recent and more distant events and justify their decisions and actions.

Yet, in my final analysis, I was cautious not to draw a straight line of causation from myths to violence, as some other authors have done. To cut a long argument short, I argued that on the Serbian side the collective remembrances of distant events, and the powerful myths that had grown out of them, fed into the living memories of more recent local events, such as those of World War II, when the ustashe carried out massacres against the Serbian population in and around Srebrenica, and those at the start of the Bosnian war, when around one thousand Serbs in this particular part of Bosnia were killed in Bosniak attacks. This blend of historical myths, collective memories and living local and personal remembrances formed the breeding ground for the Serbian desire at vengeance that showed itself with such destructive power in July 1995.

In this presentation I would like to extend my analysis to the postwar period: I want to look at the 'afterlife' of the massacre, the ways in which it has been commemorated, and see what potential effects this may have. Given the sheer brutality and scale of the massacre, and the bitterness that exists among its survivors, it is clear that reconciliation will be more difficult to achieve than elsewhere in Bosnia. In addition, the chance that the Srebrenica massacre will be used as a new emblem in future conflicts is very real. However, Srebrenica is much more than just a local problem. For Bosnia as a whole, the massacre remains a controversial and divisive issue. Its legacy rests heavily on the country where the two most important war criminals sought by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Mladić and Karadžić, both indicted in relation to Srebrenica, are still at large[1]. In the eyes of some people, the memories of the massacre, and the Serbs' failure to face it and apprehend its perpetrators, affects Bosnia's prospects of becoming a "viable" state.

[1] On 22nd July 2008 Radovan Karadžić was arrested in Belgrade after thirteen years in the large *[Translator's note]*

The difficult establishment of a shared narrative

More generally, some people argue that if Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats cannot reach consensus on how to remember the recent past, and fail to develop mechanisms to establish a shared narrative about the war, it is difficult to see how the country can continue to exist. The question of how to remember and commemorate Srebrenica, one of the most dramatic episode of the war, but also many other events, seems to be crucial for Bosnia's future. It is normally understood that establishing the facts, and opening up the discussion across the established lines of division is the only road to peace and reconciliation. I thought along very similar lines when I wrote my local history of Srebrenica, investing much time and effort not only to describe how these historical experiences are represented in nationalist discourse but also to critically examine them, to distinguish fact from fiction, and weave a more inclusive and accurate narrative that would do justice to both sides. I tried to dovetail Bosniak and Serbian sources, correct and defuse the nationalist simplifications and distortions on both sides, and describe the nuances and complexities of local historical events. Although I do not claim that there is only one historical truth, my conviction was that out of these divergent and often mutually exclusive histories, it is possible to shape a more inclusive and truthful version of events.

Here, I would like to point at the limitations of such a historical inquiry, especially in what it can possibly achieve in the short term. One characteristic of the postwar situation is a deep mental gap between the two communities, Bosniaks and Serbs, in how they look at what has happened during the 1990s. This is visible in the books that Serbs and Bosniaks published during and after the war, describing the events and commemorating the victims on their own side, ignoring the victims at the other side. Their perspectives seem to be wholly incompatible: though similar in style and rhetoric, using the language of victimisation at the hands of "the Other", the official Bosniak and Serbian accounts of the war tell completely different stories, which are very hard to match. Even though I tried to merge these narratives into an overarching one, in the hope that perhaps this would produce a version that would be acceptable to both sides, the actual divisions persist in how Serbs and Bosniaks perceive the war. Commemorative practices, beginning with the commemorations and subsequent burials of victims of the massacre at the Potočari Memorial Centre, and the counter-commemorations organised by local Serbs in places such as Bratunac and Kravica, seem to indicate the lack of common ground undermines any attempt to reach consensus and bring the two communities together.

The situation is further characterised by a high degree of involvement of the international community. Srebrenica stands for the failure of the international community to prevent the largest massacre in Europe since World War II. The two most crucial international actors are the ICTY in The Hague and the Office of the High Representative (OHR). The ICTY plays an important role in establishing the facts and reconstructing what has happened in Srebrenica during the war. The events have been investigated in a series of trials, including the trial of Naser Orić, the former commander of the Bosniak resistance in the enclave. One of the ICTY's most crucial results has been labelling the Srebrenica massacre as genocide: the one and only verdict for genocide, or complicity in committing genocide, was pronounced in relation to Srebrenica (in the Krstić case). Secondly, the Office of the High Representative has played a crucial role in shaping the memories of this event, and determining how the massacre is commemorated. Obviously, the issue of remembering Srebrenica cannot be properly understood without considering the actions and interventions in the local arena by the OHR and ICTY.

Divided memories

Clearly, these war's memories are managed very differently by Serbs and Bosniaks, and other actors, depending on their different war experiences, interests and political objectives. All actors remember and commemorate some episodes, while other events are concealed or forgotten. First of all, for the Serbs, remembering and commemorating important events from Serbian history (such as the Kosovo Battle, the First Serbian Uprising, and World War I and II) was intrinsic to the pursuit of war and camouflaging the economic and political interests at the basis of the attempts to ethnically cleanse and control (eastern) Bosnia. During the war, many events important to Serbian national history were constantly rehearsed and remembered in the local media. As soon as the war entered its second year, regular ceremonies were organised to bury and commemorate the victims of the war. Between May 1992 and January 1993, Bosniak units attacked Serbian villages, killing about one thousand Serbs, civilians as well as soldiers. The Bosniak attacks became a source of major indignation, confirming, in the eyes of local Serbs, that the Serbian nation had always been a "suffering" nation, threatened with genocide and extinction.

This view absolutely ignored the immense suffering the Serbs themselves had inflicted on the local Bosniak population right at the start of the war, when

the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitaries carried out a ruthless ethnic cleansing campaign, assisted by many local Serbs. Yet, nine months after the start of the war, the Serbian feelings of being under threat had become understandable: Bosniaks had managed to carve out their own territory, attacking Serbian villages and pushing the Serbs back into a small pocket around Bratunac. Only ten villages in the area of Srebrenica remained in Serbian hands, while around thirty villages and seventy hamlets had been brought under Bosniak control. Feelings of revenge shined through in the pages of the local Serbian newspaper *Naša Riječ.* Especially after the attack on the Serbian stronghold of Kravica, in January 1993, the call for revenge was strong. As one local chronicler of the war wrote, Serbs were looking forward to the day of vengeance, to be able to avenge this humiliating defeat and finally settle accounts with the Bosniaks. This could have happened in early 1993, when Mladić pushed the Bosniak forces back into Srebrenica, but the creation of the UN "Safe Area" in April 1993 prevented major bloodshed.

When the Serbs finally attacked and took Srebrenica in July 1995, they celebrated this as the liberation of Srebrenica. The euphoria of having beaten "the Turks" mixed with grief over the dead that had fallen during the war, and revenge for what the Bosniaks had done in 1992 and 1993. In the immediate postwar years, when Srebrenica was a Serbian Democratic Party (*Srpska Demokratska Stranka*, SDS) stronghold, the Serbs' commemorations in July combined these two elements: celebrating the liberation of Srebrenica and mourning the Serbian dead. Monuments were erected and plaques were unveiled to commemorate those who had been killed. This was part of a wider effort to inscribe the new political order in the landscape: streets and schools were renamed, Orthodox churches were built, mosques were torn down, and a World War I monument (commemorating Serbian victims of that previous war), which a local peasant had been hiding for at least fifty years was put back in place. The massacre of July 1995 was completely denied, or rationalised away as killings that were a result of combat, at least in the discussions I had with local Serbs in 1998.

Bosniaks, despite suffering more victims, even before the July 1995 events, made no effort to create a commemorative culture, at least not in the enclave of Srebrenica. Sheer survival was the most crucial issue for Bosniaks living in Srebrenica during the war, and deaths (as a result of shelling, disease, or hunger) were a common and almost daily phenomenon. In addition, everyday life in the "Safe Area" was characterised by social and political cleavages, especially between the original inhabitants of

the municipality, the local *mafia*, and the refugees that had come from elsewhere. A strong sense of community could not develop in such a social environment. The Bosniaks of Srebrenica only started to commemorate their dead, in an organised way, after the end of the war, remembering the victims of the massacre but also those who had been killed before July 1995. Apart from the commemorative protests on the 11th of each month in Tuzla, women also returned to Srebrenica as soon as possible. The first large local commemoration, in Potočari, took place in July 2000, at the fifth anniversary of the massacre. Apart from a large number of representatives of the international community, Alija Izetbegović also attended the event and set foot on Republika Srpska territory for the first time after the war. No Republika Srpska representative was present.

At this point, UN Mission Head Jacques Klein suggested a cemetery to be constructed in or near Srebrenica, similar to military cemeteries in France or elsewhere in Europe. In addition, the idea was proposed to transform the battery factory in Potočari, where many women had seen their men for the last time, into a memorial complex, with an education centre and a museum. These plans have now indeed been realised due to intensive lobbying of the association of families of missing persons, the political and legal interventions of the High Representative, and financial sponsorship of the international community. Initially, politicians of the Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije*, SDA) opposed these plans: they were pressing the survivors to forget about Potočari and choose Kladanj, in Central Bosnia, where the SDA had already started to build a monument. Nevertheless, in line with the wish of the great majority of the families, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch set aside land for a cemetery and memorial complex in Potočari near Srebrenica. In March 2003, the first group of six hundred Bosniak victims of the massacre were buried in Potočari. Several hundreds followed later that year and in 2004. The local Serbs' answer to this has been to open their own "remembrance room" (*spomen soba*) in nearby Bratunac in April 2004, with hundreds of photos of relatives killed during the war, an initiative started and sponsored by the Serbian war veterans' association. This leaves us with a situation of sharply divided memories and separate commemorative practices, whereby each side is unwilling to recognise the suffering that has occurred on the other side. In addition, the situation is uneven: Bosniak suffering – which is much vaster to be sure – is recognised and validated by the international community, while Serbian victims are largely ignored.

The commemorative arena

I would like to call this a commemorative arena, where outcomes are not decided in advance. For all the actors and sides caught up in this arena, different issues are at stake. For the relatives of those who were killed in the massacre, the Potočari Memorial Centre and the "return" of the dead and their burial in Potočari makes an important step towards the return of the living. The way in which the reburials and commemorations are managed and secured locally largely determines the prospects of successful return for Bosniak returnees into an area now inhabited predominantly by Serbian internally displaced persons (IDPs). For the survivors, the Potočari Memorial Centre is also a form of non-violent redress for what was done to them: in their eyes, local Serbs should be forced to live with the signs of a crime committed by Serbs or in their name. Some Bosniak politicians have a slightly more calculating approach to the issue and instrumentalised the responsibility and accountability of the international community in order to press for reconstruction and compensation payments, from which the families usually profit least. They identify the UN and *Dutchbat* as the main culprits and use the massacre to make them pay for their mistakes.

This approach helps to conceal sensitive issues: the massacre is de-contextualised and made into a generic symbol of Bosniak victimisation, which diverts the attention away from the fact that Srebrenica was an important centre of Bosniak resistance. From here, attacks on Serbian villages were carried out. An even more delicate issue is that the Bosniak resistance in Srebrenica received very little support from the SDA-led government in Sarajevo, partially because Srebrenica's warlord Naser Orić was hostile to local SDA leaders. The Sarajevo government used the Srebrenica enclave to keep Serbian troops tied to the ground elsewhere. In June 1995, Bosniak forces were ordered to launch an attack on Serbian positions around Srebrenica, which was used as a pretext by Mladić to attack the enclave. It can be argued that this is one of the circumstances that brought the massacre closer. The fact that SDA politicians never use the term *šehidi* (martyrs who died in combat) for the Srebrenica victims is salient in this respect. Even though most of those massacred were unarmed civilians or prisoners of war when they were killed or executed, many had previously been active fighters, resisting the Serbian onslaught under very difficult conditions. The resistance element is blotted out from the story in order not to raise the painful and controversial issues about indirect Bosniak or SDA responsibility.

The local Serbs, on the other hand, through counter-monuments and commemorations, try to convince themselves and the outside world that the Bosniak attacks on Serbian villages are key to the whole Srebrenica story. Even though the Serbs ignore the fact that the Bosniak attacks on Serbian villages resulted from a ruthless Serbian campaign of ethnic cleansing, most do not continue to deny the massacre, which can be seen as the start of a process of facing the past. In addition, the Republika Srpska report on the Srebrenica massacre (2004) was a step in the right direction. Yet, the fact that Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić have not been arrested will continue to thwart attempts to bring closure, for Bosniaks as well as Serbs.

Instead of regarding these divided memories and commemorations as necessarily detrimental to creating a shared understanding of the war, they could be seen as an understandable legacy of the war. Instead of imposing an official narrative from above, a mistake made in Yugoslavia after World War II, it seems better to allow free expression to these contrasting memories. A shared understanding will probably never be possible, particularly with regards to such turbulent and violent episodes: as the 1990s have shown, reminiscences of and perspectives on World War II are very different among those who experienced that war, even after fifty years, because experiences of violent conflict are often very personal and subjective. We need to recognise that a plurality of voices and a multitude of perspectives is normal in such situations. Open expression of differences will hopefully lead, at some stage, to the creation of a shared public space (which is not the same as a homogenised public space) in which different perspectives and views will be debated. Monuments and commemorations may split communities and solidify divisions, and even fuel future conflict, but if designed and managed properly, they can also help to overcome the losses and traumas of war. Instead of inciting memories of ethnic or national victimisation, as political and religious leaders may feel attracted to do, monuments and commemorations can assist in bringing closure for the people most concerned, and that should be – as far as I can see – their main function.

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