

Srebrenica and the Arrest of Ratko Mladic: The Propaganda Machine is Hard at Work Again

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The circumstances surrounding arrest of the wartime commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, General Ratko Mladić, seem puzzling. On May 26 he was captured in the house of a close relative with the same surname in a village north of Belgrade. Prima facie this means either that Mladić was entirely left to his own devices and had to seek shelter with people certain to be under police surveillance, or else that the Serbian authorities had been conniving in his hiding. The former is unlikely in view of the effectiveness of Mladić's concealment after he finally went underground in 2002. The latter is even less likely in view of President Boris Tadić's constant desire to please his mentors in Brussels and Washington and get Serbia a step closer to the ever-elusive EU membership.

According to our reliable sources in Belgrade, Mladić would not have been discovered had he not decided to give himself up in return for a substantial financial reward for his family. He is a very sick man and unlikely to live much longer. In addition to a chronic kidney ailment and high blood pressure, he has suffered several minor strokes over the past decade. Two years ago he was treated—under an assumed name—for non-Hodgkin's lymphoma at a clinic in Belgrade. Aware that his wife Bosiljka and son Darko had been living in penury since the authorities stopped paying his pension in 2005, Mladić decided to offer the government a deal. The final settlement is well below the \$10m previously offered for Mladić's capture, but sufficient to enable his wife and son to live in comfort for many years to come.

The price Mladić will have to pay is to endure, in the closing months of his life, a show trial at The Hague, where his guilt for genocide, crimes against humanity etc. is treated as a long-established fact. That he will not be granted even pro forma assumption of innocence was evident in the statement by the viceroy of Bosnia ("International High Representative"), Valentin Inzko of Austria, who described Mladić as a "war criminal" even though the trial is unlikely to start until some time next year.

Ratko Mladić is neither a monster nor a saint. He is a soldier, groomed in the Titoist tradition of the JNA (YPA) trans-national Yugoslavism, who rediscovered his Serb roots in late middle age. He was a skilled tactician but he was not a master strategist: he knew how to win battles, but ending the war was beyond him. His masterly conquest of the fortified Muslim positions on Mts. Igman and Bjelašnica in the summer of 1993 was a neat case of deep penetration by platoon-sized shock units in the center, immediately followed by panic-inducing flanking pincers.

Mladić's freedom of action was partly curtailed by the latent tensions between the military and the political leadership of the Bosnian Serb republic. He and his staff were former YPA

officers mistrusted by the ruling Serbian Democratic Party. On the other hand, Mladić's view was that the Serbian Democratic Party establishment was both corrupt and inept. Dr. Karadžić retaliated by referring to the Army top brass as "commie bastards," *komunjare*. The underlying animosity was based on the politicians' claim that the officers had divided loyalties, since many of them (including Mladić) were still on the payroll of the Yugoslav Army, which at that time was controlled by Slobodan Milošević.

Needless to say, Ratko Mladić is not guilty as charged. The heart of the indictment against him, "Srebrenica," is a myth—a genocide-that-never was, a postmodernist exercise in pseudoreality. It is a matter of record that thousands of Muslim men were killed in the vicinity of that small town during the Bosnian war, and that most of them lost their lives during an attempted breakthrough after the pocket fell to the Bosnian Serb forces in July 1995. At least a fifth reached safety of the Muslim-held town of Tuzla; a few hundred crossed to Serbia, across the Drina River to the east. An unknown were killed while fighting their way through; and many others—numbers remain disputed—were taken prisoner and executed by the Bosnian Serb soldiers. The numbers remain unknown and misrepresented. The War Crimes Tribunal at The Hague (ICTY) never came up with a conclusive breakdown of casualties. That a war crime did take place is undeniable, but the number of its victims remains forensically and demographically unproven. According to the former BBC reporter Jonathan Rooper, "from the outset the numbers were used and abused" for political purposes." The most startling aspect of the 7-8,000 figure, he says, is that it has always been represented as synonymous with the number of people executed. This was never a possibility. (Check out my Srebrenica and the Power of Reason, April 15.)

Far from bringing the Srebrenica myth to some long-overdue critical scrutiny, Mladić's transfer to The Hague will be used to reconfirm old prejudices and old myths. In reality, the crimes and violations of human rights between 1992 and 1995 were not the direct result of anyone's nationalist project. These crimes, as Susan Woodward of Brookings notes, "were the results of the wars and their particular characteristics, not the causes." Yet the effect of the legal intervention of the "international community" with its act of recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina was that a Yugoslav loyalty was made to look like a conspiratorial disloyalty to "Bosnia." In 1943-4 Tito was able to force the Anglo-Americans to pretend that his struggle was not communist revolution. In 1992-5 Alija Izetbegović forced the West to pretend that his jihad was the defense of "multi-ethnicity." Both pretenses were absurd.

Ratko Mladić will be duly convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity. He will not come out of jail alive. The verdict is already written, but it reflects a fundamental imbalance. It ignores the essence of the Bosnian war—the Serbs' striving not to be forced into secession—while remaining mute about the culpability of the other two sides for a series of unconstitutional, illegitimate and illegal political decisions that caused the war. The judgment against Mladić at the U.S.-sponsored and largely U.S.-funded tribunal at The Hague will be built on this flawed foundation. It will be neither fair nor just. It will also give further credence to the myth of Muslim blameless victimhood, Serb viciousness, and Western indifference, and therefore weaken our resolve in the global struggle that used to be known as "war on terrorism," and now no longer has a name, or a purpose, or a strategy.

The long-term agenda of the Tribunal's architects is obvious when we read Geoffrey Robertson's "Mistakes the Mladic trial needs to avoid" (The Independent, May 28, 2011): "The Mladic indictment ... should be replaced by just one charge, the crime against humanity constituted by his command responsibility for ordering the worst war crime since

the Japanese death marches of POWs at the end of the Second World War, namely the slaughter of more than 7,000 prisoners of war—the Muslim men and boys killed at Srebrenica.” It remains the Serbian government’s duty, Robertson says,

to clean out the Serb orthodox church, whose priests blessed the death squads at Srebrenica. Without their blessing, I believe that some soldiers would have disobeyed their orders to shoot defenceless, hog-tied, men and boys. It is widely known that the church has harboured Hague fugitives in its monasteries and has been deeply implicit with the murderous aspects of Serb nationalism... They should remember ... the fact that the wheels of international justice grind slowly but they grind exceedingly small.

This is a statement worthy of a senior jurist in Moscow, cca 1937. It is unimaginable that Mr. Robinson would suggest a similar clean-up of the Prophet’s Religion of Peace and Tolerance, of course. His call is based on the construct of primary Serb culpability that is supposedly unique among the warring factions. In Robertson’s scenario The Hague is not a vehicle of judicial reconciliation but an instrument of quasi-legal retaliation.

The forthcoming verdict against Ratko Mladić, signed and sealed as it is, will be based on a lie and on an arbitrary apportioning of guilt by the self-appointed guardians of the “international community.” It paves the way for a new, even worse conflict a decade or two from now. It guarantees that the absurdity known as “Bosnia-Herzegovina” will become even less tenable than it is already.

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