

Death came from Serbia

Bosnian Institute News

Author: Emir Suljagic

Uploaded: Thursday, 23 March, 2006

The death of the author's father is movingly related to the real significance of the case brought by Bosnia-Herzegovina against Serbia before the ICJ

On a dry and cold December morning in 1992, two days before the Catholic Christmas, a man left his shelter about a kilometre behind the frontline and made his way through the village. Burned-out and shell-torn houses lay around him: for the past few days the Serbs had been shelling the village from both banks of the Drina in preparation for a counter-attack. He had been born there and knew every stone; though he bent low against the cold, his head covered by a cap, he could not but feel a joy that after a year of absence he was nearing his home. It was still on the far side of the front, but he had continued to believe that sooner or later he would come home. Wishing to release the silent anxiety that had taken hold of him, he started to sing under his breath: 'Snooow is faaalling on the flowers, on the fruuiuuts...' The song was cut short by a projectile fired from a multiple missile launcher of the Orkan type on the other, Serbian side of the river. His co-fighters buried him that night in the courtyard of his father's house; they took a door off the nearby hayshed to use in place of a tahta, and quickly dug a shallow grave. Twenty-four hours later, the time it took for the news to travel, a scared seventeen-year-old learnt that he had lost his father.

Milosevic and his collaborators

Fourteen years later my country - not necessarily the country for which my father fought, but that is of no importance right now - is demanding restitution from Serbia-Montenegro before an international court. Fourteen years later, I find myself a member of one of the saddest generations that ever grew to maturity in this country; branded and destroyed by the war: a generation for which the war has not ended and, I know for sure, will not do so for a long time to come. Most of us will receive not a grain of justice. It is for this reason that Serbia must pay. Not with money: for me, as for most people directly concerned with the accusation, money is the less important part of the problem. The damage is too huge, the lost lives too numerous, for any financial compensation to make sense.

The post-war experience of this country tells - as is true for many other such cases - that war, and genocide in particular, are irreversible processes. Irreversible like death. This is why I do not believe that another court verdict will make much difference to this country. Borders carved with the knife cannot be changed: the physical ones perhaps, but not those cut into the human body. I have neither the illusions, nor a sufficient reserve of optimism, to expect anything much from a highly formalised procedure taking place before an institution devoid of effective influence. Yet this trial is important, because regardless of its outcome Serbia will pay. I do not feel sorry for Serbia for getting itself into a no-win situation. Indeed I rejoice deep down inside every time the Chetniks organise a popular celebration in 'the national capital'. That is what happens when genocide comes back to haunt the perpetrators.

Serbia has been whining these past few weeks about how you cannot put a whole nation or society on trial. It was all done by one man, Slobodan Milosevic, and his regime. There was also 'another Serbia', one that did not always openly confront Milosevic, but neither did it approve what his regime was doing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Milosevic's regime had kidnapped the whole country, and used the uneducated - stupid and primitive, if you wish - masses to commit terrible crimes, and had acquired not inconsiderable wealth on the side. Maybe.

For no dictatorship is so black-and-white. Moreover, research on the Holocaust shows that the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo, was far from being a sufficiently large and frightening organisation, but that its implementation of the 'racial policy' relied in good part on the cooperation of the citizenry. It is impossible to kidnap a society: no political ideology over the past century attempted to do that. Ideologies do not

grow from, or realise themselves in, a vacuum. They adapt themselves, make compromises, and form alliances with practically all parts of society. There was no 'other Serbia'. There was only one, that of Milosevic. Just one, personified by Jovica Stanisic, with his aggressive face of a legionary on the run or a pathological killer released from prison. If another existed I could not see it, being blinded by the columns of fire that rose from my home. I did not hear it through the clatter of the machine-gun that killed practically all my family. If it did exist - and there were indeed Sonja Biserko, Natasa Kandic, Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco, Petar Lukovic, Latinka Perovic - it was too small and impotent. I do not wish to argue in favour of collective guilt, but neither does there exist any right to a collective release from sin, because there is no such thing as collective innocence.

The enterprise that Milosevic undertook in Bosnia-Herzegovina was simply too great for any governmental apparatus; this is why every such regime in history has sought open help or silent support from society. It is sad but true that all genocidal ideologies have managed to win over considerable sections of the army, religious communities, police; to find allies among doctors, teachers and university professors. Genocide is a social undertaking that is based on complicity, on drawing into the crime as many people as possible, even if only indirectly. Complicity shortens the links between the killer and the onlooker, the flat or house and the theatre of war; it is an essential condition for creating a conspiracy of silence or a state of denial after the crime.

TVs without remote controls

Genocide does not take place in a vacuum. Such mass killing requires infrastructure and expertise - military, transport, logistical - it requires the services of bureaucrats in the state apparatus. It is also necessary that they all continue in their jobs. Some will win promotion, since their boss who was an Armenian, a Jew, a Tutsi or a Bosniak will have ended up in a concentration camp. Others will continue to drive the school bus, but instead of children they will be driving prisoners to the place of execution. This is an enterprise which demands help from all professions in society. Every mass murder is preceded by the drawing of an imaginary line through society, leaving out those who have been marked. Something like this is not possible to achieve without media support, without the readiness of teachers to tell their pupils; without the priest who will talk about it in his sermons. Finally, one needs the ordinary people too, who will follow instructions to their logical and bloody end.

This is why Serbia is not innocent. Let the court judge, for history's sake, whether it is guilty. I do not need its decision, because whatever its nature it will be written with the blood of thousands of my compatriots. It will, once again, be more necessary to the Serbs. Paradoxical and hilarious is the extent to which the world is taking trouble over this country. How everyone, ourselves included, wish to help its society to be better than it is. That society will be brought to trial, and it will be the first time in fourteen years that every citizen of Serbia examines his or her conscience. And the last opportunity.

For years after the war I used to stare at the images shot at Srebrenica by Zoran Petrovic Pirocanac. One long frame shows dozens of men squeezed onto the balcony of the 'white house' in Potocari. The 'white house' was in fact the building belonging to a local electrical distribution firm in which Ratko Mladic's soldiers locked men up after having separated them from their families. They kept them there briefly before taking them for execution. Pirocanac commented that they were criminals who had tried to escape unpunished. The men on the film looked wretched, hungry and thirsty, depressed: one could see death in their eyes. At the top of the screen a runner said: 'Bambi, sponsor of Yugoslavia's waterpolo team', and a doe that my generation remembered from the packaging of Plazma biscuits kept moving across the screen. I believe that a society in which this does not cause general consternation must subject its values to a thorough re-examination.

That society spent years mutely watching its riff-raff cross the Drina into Bosnia to plunder and kill the best this country had ever had. It was a society in which mass murderers enjoyed - as some still do - the same treatment as pop stars. Milorad Ulemek Lukovic 'Legija' would attend parties given by the Belgrade actor Sergej Trifunovic after indulging himself with torturing camp inmates in the Bosnian Krajina. All those from the rich gallery of personalities who after the war caused such trouble to Serbia - for example, by killing its prime minister - began their careers in Bosnia. They committed their first murders

somewhere between Nevesinje and Bijeljina, and perfected their craft by killing unarmed Muslims before starting to shoot at other Serbs.

The state gave these men only the guns; it was society that supplied them with motivation. The same society that hailed them as heroes, or at least accepted their coronation with approval. They became the jet-set, the cream of society, though there was never any doubt as to the nature of their 'primary occupation' - which was certainly not just heroin dealing. Every TV set without a remote control sold on the flea market - a joke about this once used to circulate round Belgrade - came from someone else's home in Bosnia-Herzegovina. But death is not the only thing that Serbia kept sending us for all those years across the Drina. The post-war despair, the at best averagely burdensome existence and at worst total collapse and deep decline, which are visible at every level of society are all consequences of its actions - worse, I would presume to argue, than the death of tens of thousands.

Eleven years later

Eleven years after the war Serbia wishes to build 'good-neighbourly relations' and talks about a natural affinity between our two countries. But before that comes to pass, someone must account for the hundreds of thousands of shells produced in Valjevo's 'Krusik' factory and sent to Radovan Karadzic's Serbs. And what if one of these shells killed an unknown painting talent, disabled a budding basketball player, killed a future physicist or computer programmer - who will compensate for that? This is why it is not merely a matter of money, as is feared with a good deal of hypocrisy by Serbia pressed tight against the wall. It is not a question of revenge either. Serbia has killed this country's better future and it should pay for that. Such a price cannot be met and is never met by individuals. It is a bill issued to societies, countries, nations. There are precedents for this, dear readers, in which Serbia too played a more or less important role. Serbian society, to take one example, never took pity on the ordinary Germans who spent decades paying reparations to, among others, Serb victims of Nazism. This is the price of re-entry into the community of civilised nations and societies. This is something for which Serbia too must pay.

The war which Serbia waged could not be hidden, nor did the Milosevic regime try to hide it. Indeed the war served as an excuse for all the effort, suffering and impoverishment. It was a reason to demand further sacrifice. Serbia wants us today to trust its word. I do not believe it, because it refused to believe us. I do not believe that Serbia did not know, see or hear. It heard the thunder of artillery, it saw the columns of smoke, it knew about and took part in all that, indeed it bore a significant part of the burden, waging as it did three wars in the space of eight years in near-total international isolation. That required determination and will, and a significant part of society needed to agree to carry such a heavy burden. The Bosnian genocide, moreover, is the fundamental reason why Serbian society - important parts of every segment of it - continues on a course leading to further, suicidal isolation.

The man at the beginning of this text is my father Suljo Suljagic. He died in Voljevica, a village three kilometres from Bratunac, which until the ninth decade of the last century was one of the many grey Bosnian socialist provincial townships. He was saved from the boredom of everyday life by the formless power of great plans devised far from the ugly boxlike buildings of the town centre and the mahale on its periphery. That is perhaps the reason why I shall never learn who killed him. Perhaps because a country offered his killers the protection of anonymity, the refuge of indifference, or more likely even patted him on the shoulder and rewarded him with leave. Probably his commanding officer himself no longer knows who he was. I am certain too that the FRY army has by now destroyed the documents regarding its operations in eastern Bosnia in December 1992. Serbia, in other words, would like to pretend it never happened.

But I know that it did, because twelve years later I found my father's bones where they buried him that December night. He was buried under a wild apple tree, on a gentle elevation in the basin of a small natural hollow that looks like a bowl sculpted from clay. From that spot you could see nothing anywhere around, other than to the east. There, on that beautiful, sunny day, you could see the dark, naked stone hill whence a missile was fired that killed my father. There still lay Serbia.

/Translated from Dani (Sarajevo), 3 March 2006./