

The Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Period of 1992/95: Mind set of Cleansers

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Abstract: The 1992-1995 civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, multi-ethnic and multi-confessional former Yugoslav state, saw some of the most distorted atrocities, as well as human and moral failures, of the twentieth century. This paper concentrates on one particular case of genocidal ethnic cleansing in the Bosnian conflict: that conducted by the Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces against the Bosniac Muslim and (to a lesser extent) Bosnian Croat civilian population. The paper examines various war crimes from a specific viewpoint: it attempts to explain why the cleansers cleansed, what the definition of their motivation might be; the mind set and propaganda of the Serbian regime and warmongering section of the cultural and NGO sector is, therefore, thoroughly investigated. We identified two major components of numerous official rationalizations of the genocide: call for a preventive self-defense of the Serbian nation and state, and dehumanization of the victimized community by invoking scornful attitudes towards Bosniac Muslims on the part of Serbian fighters.

Key Words: Ethnic, Religious Cleavages, B-h, Preventive Self-defence, Resurrection, Serbian Nation, Dehumanization, Islam, Jewish-Christian Heresy, Killing Without Weapons, Strength of Words.

Introduction

The 1992/95 civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina marked the end of the bloodiest of all centuries, and horrified the international public with its extreme brutality and practices that resembled strongly the insensitivity and massacres of WWII. The concentration camps in which the lowest sadistic drives were being satisfied, targeting women, children, old people in comprehensive actions of ethnic cleansing, constant murders of male civilians capable of bearing arms (including twelve-year old boys), showed the depth and bitterness of ethnic and religious cleavages in B-H. A significant part of the responsibility for the recent Bosnian atrocities must be connected to the Serb political and military leadership in both Serbia and Bosnia (i.e. Republic of Srpska). This paper will attempt to investigate the most conspicuous elements of the promoted ideology and motivation that supported and justified the war crimes committed by Serbian fighters. The victims belonged to the Bosnian Muslim and (to a lesser extent) Croat population. In psychological preparations for the military realization of the project of the Greater Serbia, two notions were dominant: "preventive" self-defense, and dehumanization of entire groups of people by invoking profound contempt in the victimizers' conscience.

Self-defense: The most striking feature of Serbian propaganda during the Bosnian massacres in the 1990s was embarking on the shameless campaign of spreading paranoia among the Serb population in this multiethnic country. Realizing that the natural instinct for self-preservation could serve as the most efficient political tool, political and military leaders of Serbs used to mark their speeches with constant references to the difficult periods from the past in which Serbs were victimized to an enormous extent. The warmongering media campaign heavily relied on the legacy of the WWII fascist Croatian state (NDH) (that also comprised a number of Bosnian

Muslims in the notorious Ustasha ranks) in which Serbs, Jews and Gypsies were the principal targets of the extremely inhumane mass destruction, and the traditional centuries old animosity towards Turks as the "backward conquerors" and "cruel oppressors" of the Serbian national identity. The outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war saw drawing frequent parallels between the WWII situation and the 1990s political tendencies and changes in Bosnia or Croatia. The message was clear: Serbs are in danger once again, and something radical has to be done immediately so that the repetition of the genocide could be prevented. In an interview with Dutch journalist Rob Siebelink in 1997, Bosnian Serb war leader Radovan Karadzic explained his reasons for entering the world of politics:

We did not invent ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. The Croatian people did that during the second World War. And everybody knows that Muslim leader Izetbegovic has worn a German uniform. Before the war in Bosnia he has written a book in which he has told us what to expect when Bosnia would be a Muslim-state with an Islamic regime... Tudjman of Croatia had conducted a very fierce campaign during the 1990 elections in Bosnia. And when he and Izetbegovic formed an alliance the message was clear. ... This was aimed at the Serb population. All Serbs were frightened to death that the same would happen as in World War II when hundreds of thousands innocent Serbs were slaughtered. That was the time when we decided to form our own political party. ...we decided we could not leave our own people here in Bosnia without political protection (Karadzic).

However, long before the majority of Serbs even heard of Karadzic, the paranoia concerning the "continuation of the species" and dangerous rise of the anti-Serb attitudes in much of the rest of SFRY was reinforced by the 1986 SANU's (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) famous Memorandum, which became a genuine

political platform for the recent project of creating a Greater Serbia. The most impressive parts of the document, written in highly exaggerated terms, are those lamenting the expulsion of Kosovo's Serb population ("genocide"), and warning of the constant pressure on and attempts at assimilation of the Serbian minority in Croatia. Explaining the roots and reasons of "the physical, political, legal and cultural genocide perpetrated against the Serbian population of Kosovo and Metohija," the Memorandum states.

The Balli (anti-communist nationalist) (Albanian) uprising in Kosovo and Metohija that broke out just before the end of the war with the participation of fascist units was broken militarily in 1944-45, but it appears not to have been broken politically. Its present form, disguised with a new content, is proceeding more successfully and is moving towards a victorious outcome (SANU). (Although the subject in question here is Kosovo Albanians, not Bosniacs or Croats, the way the arguments are built is nevertheless very useful and insightful, because the strategy for creating the atmosphere of panic and destructive obsessions remains the same in all conflicts in the former Yugoslavia.)

And as far as Croats are concerned, "with the exception of the Independent State of Croatia from 1941- 45, Serbs in Croatia have never been as persecuted in the past as they are now. ...In any case, the Serbs in Croatia are ...exposed to a sophisticated and quite effective policy of assimilation" (SANU).

Another source - the web site of the Serb nationalist diaspora organization Serbian Unity Congress - proves that fear, hatred stemming from distant past conflicts and a tradition of blood revenge were among the most powerful elements of Serbian war psychosis. Under the title Forbidden pictures, the authors of the site state that "twice before in this century there have been well documented attempts by the Croats and Muslims to destroy the Serbian people, and to obliterate their culture, religion and memory. The pictures you will see is their third try." What follows on the web page is a number of the photographs presenting the Serbian suffering in both the WWII and the recent Yugoslav civil war. The inevitable conclusion is that the genocidal history with Serbs as eternal victims is repeating (Serbian Unity Congress).

Therefore, the authoritative ideology behind the acts of indescribable massacres committed by the Serb soldiers and paramilitaries was that of preventing another infernal persecution and possible extinction of the entire nation; Serb fighters were repeatedly encouraged to embark on the complete destruction of the very substance of the "enemy" population and potentials, so that the serious threat to Serbs and the land "historically" belonging to them could be eliminated with no compromise. The language of hatred, including labels such as Mujahedin and Islamic fundamentalists (often directed to all Bosnian Muslims) or Ustashas (describing every single Croat), also invoked the traditional Balkan vengefulness.

However, Serbian fear, which helped justify most horrible atrocities against civilian population by referring to the legitimate right to self-defense, was not at all simple and monolith. The centuries-old myth of Serbs as

victims, who keep on "winning wars and losing peace", was reinforced in the above mentioned SANU Memorandum. Describing alleged Tito's "weak Serbia, strong Yugoslavia" policy, the academics point out the injustice Serbia faces at the end of the 20th century:

A nation that has regained statehood after a long and bloody struggle, that has achieved civil democracy, and that lost two and half million kinsmen in two world wars underwent the experience of having a bureaucratically constructed party commission determine that after four decades in the new Yugoslavia it alone was condemned to be without its own state. A more bitter historic defeat in peacetime cannot be imagined (SANU).

Tim Judah writes about the phenomenon of the Serbian "heavenly choice"; the legend according to which tsar Lazar "opted for the empire of heaven, that is to say truth and justice" immediately before the crucial Kosovo battle against the advancing Ottoman Empire, connects the collective body of Serbs to the sacrifice and fate of Christ. This inevitably includes the notion of "resurrection," i.e. the message that one should only be patient (but not passive), because Serb victory is more than certain. (Judah 36, 37) The SANU Memorandum seems to recognize the right moment for the national rebirth of the righteous, and suggests the solution: "Complete national and cultural integrity of the Serbian people is their historic and democratic right, no matter in which republic or province they might find themselves living" (SANU). Karadzic confirms, talking about the borders of the Serb lands: "The fact that Muslims are the majority makes no difference. They won't decide our fate. That is our right" (Danner). The academics are better at explaining on which basis Serbs have the supreme right to the lands of Bosnia-Herzegovina notwithstanding the fact that they are not even the majority: "The brave and honorable efforts at liberation exerted by the Serbs of Bosnia-Herzegovina and by all Yugoslav youth, which included Young Bosnia...were pushed into the historical background..." (SANU).

Dehumanization: The dehumanization of the victimized community, which consisted predominantly of the Bosnian Muslim population, contained the promotion of scornful, denigrating attitudes on the part of members of, it was suggested, morally and historically superior Serb nation. The denial of the separateness of the Bosnian Muslim ethnic identity is more than striking in Karadzic's interview: "The [Sarajevo] town was western-oriented and even the Muslims felt more Serb than Muslim. In fact, that is what they are. They are Serbs who became Muslim during the Turkish occupation.... That now has turned the full 180 degrees. The Muslims deny now there has ever been a bond between them and the Serbs" (Karadzic). Again, Karadzic is not at all being original in his approaches. In Serb history, literature, politics, there is a genuine tradition of deep and hateful contempt towards the domestic Muslim population, their culture and past. The myth of betrayal, referred to by Judah, played the crucial role in the development of this monstrous ideology; the traitors determined the loss of Serb freedom and glory in and after the Kosovo battle, and the Serb cultural and military potentials under the occupation were significantly undermined by the presence of these converts of weak morality and honor,

as described in Njegos's famous Mountain Wreath.

The web site from the Republic of Srpska Free Srpska - NATO go home publishes a "scientific" discussion on the origins and purposes of the Bosniac (Bosnian Muslim) nation, elaborating on some of the most sensational anti-Serb conspiracy theories: "It is real shame that our leaders did not recognize this from the very beginning and that, in the Dayton Agreement, they permitted the name 'Bosniacs' to Muslims. It is the starting point of the further enslavement of Serbs, plunder and forgery of the history, and the beginning of the full Muslim domination of Bosnia-Herzegovina..." (Free Srpska). Here we can see once again the insistence on the obsession with the approaching destruction of the Serbian nation. The authors of the site also state that, before Tito (illegitimately) recognized the Muslim nation in 1963, Bosnian Muslims were referred to as Serbs by all authors. The same source cites the 1978 speech of the famous Yugoslav writer, Jew Oskar Davico, on the occasion of receiving the Njegos award for literature. Stripped from the context, this is Davico's alleged opinion about the problem of converts under the Turkish occupation Njegos's Mountain Wreath is dealing with: "Those who accepted to exterminate their own people for ... a handful of rice and macaroni do not deserve any better. They took the sword to serve ... the fascists, they worked in their interest and under their command, so it is natural that they suffer from the sword, not because of the alleged religious ideological intolerance, but in the name of the fight against the conquerors and their servants. Therefore, the substance of the Mountain Wreath is in the truth that the freedom is priceless" (Free Srpska).

The late Serbian bishop Nikolaj Velimirovic (1880-1956), who was exiled from Yugoslavia after the WWII and spent the rest of his life in the USA, is among the most prominent representatives of this Serbian intellectual anti-Muslim pattern. The relics of the bishop Velimirovic were returned to Serbia on May the 12th 1991, and this ceremony marked the establishment (or reinforcement) of the cult of this controversial theologian and religious philosopher in Serbian public opinion. Nikolaj Velimirovic is highly revered in the circles of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as among the moderate and extreme right politicians in Serbia. He addressed the issue of conversion to Islam in rather contemptuous terms in his famous work *Above East and West*. The Balkan Muslims, whom he calls converts, are described as cheated and avaricious; they betrayed Lazar's brave choice and the only right religion - Orthodox Christianity. They sold themselves and lost their honor for meaningless earthly benefits. Islam is, in Velimirovic's opinion, "Jewish-Christian heresy." The Balkan Muslims are the unwelcome remnants of the Mohammedan East; that is why the superior Orthodox Balkan must stand above such East (Velimirovic).

This comprehensive selection of the extraordinary bias and disdain in the anti-Muslim sources available to the wide Serb public shows clearly that, for the average Serb soldier, it was not at all difficult to draw conclusions about Muslims as disgraceful rubbish of the Orthodox community. If Muslims were so damaging to the interests and fate of the Serb nation throughout the

history, then they deserve to be treated as subhuman, and places like the concentration camps of Omarska, Trnopolje, Keraterm, fit perfectly into this picture.

Conclusion

If the infernal Bosnian experience is to teach the human kind any useful lesson, the fact that condemning and punishing only planners and actual perpetrators of genocides is not enough to prevent the repetition of crimes against humanity must be widely recognized. "Killing without weapons" principle, enthroned in the recent Yugoslav wars, rendered highly effective: journalists loyal to the regime, irresponsible intellectuals, members of the Orthodox Church hierarchy with their extreme and offensive attitudes, contributed drastically to the extent and nature of the victimization process in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Democracy and liberal values with regard to freedom of speech and expression have to encompass efficient mechanisms for legitimate suppression of the insulting language of intolerance and hatred. Therefore, some voices in Serbia and elsewhere which suggest that the most prominent creators of the warmongering propaganda also need to face charges for the war crimes should receive serious consideration, in order for the punishment to be just and prevention of the future ethnic cleansings successful.

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