

The Bosnian Genocide as an Expression of Anti-Muslim Politics

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The Bosnian Genocide refers to the systematic campaign of extermination and expulsions of non-Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) conducted by the Army of the Republika Srpska (VRS), directed by the wartime leadership of the self-declared Republika Srpska (RS) entity, in particular its President Radovan Karadžić, and organized and financed by the then regime in Serbia. While Serb nationalist authorities targeted both BiH's Bosniak (formerly “Bosnian Muslim”) and Croat communities during this campaign, according to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the Bosniak community accounted for nearly 65% of the approximately 100,000 total victims of the Bosnian War, and nearly 70% of all civilian deaths during the conflict. As such, in most of the scholarly literature, the Bosnian Genocide refers to the specific genocidal campaign against the Bosniak community of BiH by the VRS.¹

To date, the ICTY and its residual mechanism have only formally recognized the killings in Srebrenica in July 1995 as genocidal in nature. Other European courts have expanded the genocide label, however, to other killing sites in BiH by the VRS, and these, taken together with the ICTY decision(s), gesture clearly also at a legal justification for the Bosnian Genocide label.² As such, in both the scholarly and policy communities there has been a growing normative shift toward adopting the term “Bosnian Genocide” (or “Genocide in Bosnia”) as a reflection of the logical improbability that a genocide – the highest crime in international law – could be localized to a single municipality.

The historical origins of the Bosnian Genocide are twofold. One stream concerns the immediate consequences of the hostile takeover of the Yugoslav political and security apparatus by the regime of Slobodan Milošević in Serbia between 1987 and 1991, and its use to carve out of the imploding Yugoslav federal state a so-called “Greater Serbia”; an ethnically homogenous polity, which was to be created through the wholesale expulsion and extermination of non-Serbs from occupied territories in Croatia, BiH, and Kosovo. The ideological roots of that putsch and the accompanying genocide, however, are in the emergence of a millennialist strand of Serb nationalism after the First Serbian Uprising (1804-1813), which became a significant feature of Serbian political thinking over the subsequent two centuries.

In the standard telling of this narrative, the 1389 Battle of Kosovo – a bloody but indecisive clash between the invading Ottomans and a coalition of Serbian, Bosnian, Croatian, and Albanian lords – marked the metaphorical death of the medieval Serbian state. Prince Lazar, who led the Serbian forces, and the knight Miloš Obilić, who in the oral tradition is said to have killed Sultan Murad I on the battlefield but may have been a mythic figure invented after the

¹ Portions of this testimony also appear in my definition and discussion of “[the Bosnian Genocide](#)” in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Peace and Conflict Studies* as well as my essay “[The Balkan Roots of the Far Right's ‘Great Replacement’ Theory](#)” published by *Newlines Magazine*.

² In 1999, the German Federal Court of Justice upheld a lower court ruling against Nikola Jorgić on 11 counts of genocide, committed during his tenure as a member of a Serb nationalist paramilitary in the Doboj region of central Bosnia. In the case of Novislav Đajić, the Bavarian Appeals Court upheld a lower court ruling on 14 counts of murder and 1 count of attempted murder, which the ICTY interpreted as having concluded that genocide had occurred within the territory of the municipality of Foča in the summer of 1992. A still third German court convicted Maksim Sokolović of “five counts of inflicting physical injuries to Muslim civilians and 56 counts of unlawfully detaining Muslim civilians. [The court] also held that this conduct qualified as aiding genocide”.

fact, subsequently assumed Christ-like characters. They became folk heroes who sacrificed themselves to preserve the Serbian people and their state in the Kingdom of Heaven, even as it was conquered on Earth.³

The prophecy of a second coming of the Serbian polity was then fulfilled in the 19th century as the Ottoman hold on the Balkans slipped, and a modern Serbian state emerged and quickly began vying for political and military supremacy in the region. Left unaddressed for both 19th and 20th century Serbian nationalists was the lingering problem of what were pejoratively referred to as “the Turks,” that is, the indigenous Muslim populations of the Balkans – primarily the Bosniaks of BiH and the Albanians of Kosovo. In the century and half between the First Serbian Uprising and the end of World War II, a de facto (if not always systemic) method took root to address this problem: local Muslim populations, whether Slavic, Albanian, or Turkish, were to be expelled and/or exterminated wherever Serb nationalist authorities⁴ managed to establish even a momentary political claim. In effect, Milošević and Karadžić’s activities in the 1990s sought then to “complete” this process of extermination and expulsion which had begun more than a century earlier.

Today, the Bosnian Genocide remains a central feature of the political discourses in Serbia and BiH’s RS entity but also increasingly the Western far-right. The governments of Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, respectively, take a revisionist and/or negationist posture concerning these events when dealing with the international community. Significant diplomatic efforts are undertaken to minimize the scale of the atrocities, and to distance the current leadership from the political structures involved in the events at the time. At home, however, genocide triumphalism and glorification are the norm. Perpetrators are valorized in virtually all mainstream media, by most government figures, and often provided with continued financial support by the government, including through the awarding of state honors. In sum, the genocide is celebrated as a righteous and necessary crusade to create the RS entity by the regimes in Belgrade and Banja Luka.

Concurrently, the ongoing secessionist efforts of the Dodik regime in BiH represent a major continuation of the logic and politics of the Bosnian Genocide. The failure by the Milošević regime to successfully annex the Bosnian territories which were eventually incorporated into the RS entity has remained a source of revanchist fervor in both Belgrade and Banja Luka. As in the 90s, contemporary efforts to break-up the BiH state by these two governments are, above all, an immediate threat to the physical security of the Bosniak community in the RS entity who even after the genocide constitute approximately 13% of the population in the region (down from 28%

³ This “Christian nationalist” parable has also been appropriated by elements of the Western far right. As I note in my Newlines Magazine essay: “By the 2010s, Bosnian Genocide denial and the valorization of Serb nationalist war criminals became a staple of Western far-right discourses – a pillar of their ideological and political lexicon...It soon started featuring in the manifestos of far-right terrorists. Anders Breivik, the terrorist who executed the attacks in Norway in 2011, made nearly 1,000 mentions of the Yugoslav Wars in his meandering manifesto...And Brenton Tarrant, sentenced to life imprisonment for the 2019 Christchurch mosque killings, covered his rifles and munitions in the names of Serb and Montenegrin historical figures and livestreamed himself playing a Serb nationalist ballad glorifying Karadzic’s genocide from the Bosnian War.”

⁴ The first Yugoslav regime created in 1918 and which collapsed in 1941, head by the Serbian monarchy, did not, for the most part, engage in systematic atrocities against Muslim communities in the new state. However, a process of large-scale economic expropriation and marginalization targeting the Muslim community of BiH did occur and was the catalyst for the creation of the first organized Bosnian Muslim political party in 1919, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (JMO). After the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in 1941, however, rump elements of the royalist regime formed the so-called Chetnik movement, a Nazi-collaborationist Serb ultranationalist movement which systematically engaged in atrocities against Muslim communities in BiH to create a new homogenous and expanded Serbian state. It should be noted, however, that the policies of Belgrade toward the Kosovo Albanian community during this time were considerably more hardline, and the scale of their political, social, and economical marginalization by the royalist authorities were significantly more severe than what befell the Bosnian Muslims community.

in 1991). Given the continuing glorification of the Bosnian Genocide as a chief ideological pillar of both the Dodik and Vučić regimes, respectively, it is almost certain that any move towards realizing the secession of the RS entity would entail another major round of atrocities against Bosniaks in the region, and a return to violence in BiH and the wider Western Balkans, which would in turn represent a major security crisis for the whole of the Atlantic community.