

Srebrenica's Executioners Believed They Had a Right to Kill

By Knut Vollebaek,

On 11 July thousands of people will gather in Srebrenica in Eastern Bosnia to mark the anniversary of the mass killings that took place there in July 1995. This crime, in its scale and systematic execution, challenged the rule of law not just in a small Bosnian town but far beyond. It is imperative that this anniversary does not pass simply with hand-wringing and expressions of sorrow.

One of the most shocking facts about the Srebrenica genocide is that the killers believed they would get away with it.

According to testimony given at trials before the International Criminal Court for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and before the Bosnian State Court, they committed mass murder in shifts, they paused for cigarette breaks; they chatted among themselves while waiting for their machine guns to cool before resuming the slaughter. They even allowed themselves to be filmed.

In the autumn of 1995 when the perpetrators returned with mechanical diggers to destroy evidence of their crimes by removing bodies from mass graves to new, secondary graves, they appear to have believed that this would be enough to eliminate incriminating evidence.

They acted as though the law had been neutered. They believed they could murder with impunity, that the rights – and the humanity – of others had been nullified.

The armed men at Srebrenica believed they were entitled to kill. In similar fashion, in the twenty years since Srebrenica, and across the world today, mass killings spuriously sanctioned by political or pseudo-religious ideologies have continued to challenge the underlying principles of societies based on law.

The process of asserting – or re-asserting – the rule of law in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been slow and incomplete, but it has continued steadily for almost two decades. In the State Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 50 individuals have been tried for crimes committed in and around Srebrenica in July 1995; at the ICTY 20 individuals, including Slobodan Milosevic, Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, have been tried for crimes related to Srebrenica. The Mladic and Karadzic cases continue.

Court proceedings have identified a recognizable pattern among perpetrators of genocide. They set out to dehumanize their victims and then to erase their identity completely. In the case of Srebrenica this involved the attempt to dispose of bodies on an industrial scale. The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), established in 1996 to spearhead an effort to help governments account for the 40,000 people missing as a result of the conflict in former Yugoslavia, has worked successfully to reverse this shocking attempt to rob victims of their identity.

As a result of ICMP's efforts, more than 70 percent of the missing in former Yugoslavia have been accounted for. In Bosnia and Herzegovina 23,000 of the 31,000 missing have been located and identified. Of the approximately 8,000 reported missing from Srebrenica, 6,930 have been accounted for.

Accounting for the missing and dead does not bring them back to life. However, it does undo the attempt by the killers to erase the identity of their victims. It offers the bereaved the comfort of being able to bury their loved ones with dignity, to show love and respect to those who were victims of cruelty and spite.

On 11 July I will be at Srebrenica to stand in solidarity with those who grieve. We will witness the burial of an additional 150 newly identified bodies. I will mourn with the families of the missing and the families of the dead, knowing that this is something that concerns not only the people of Srebrenica and the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but the people of Europe and beyond.

It is in the interest of civilized societies everywhere to understand what happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 1995 and why it happened. The law that was cast aside then is the same law from which we seek protection today. This law has been rejected and ignored by others since then. It is being rejected and ignored by armed groups around the world today. Affirming and applying the rule of law is, in the end, what distinguishes us from those armed groups and what protects us from them.

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