

Yugoslav Crisis - Srebrenica 20 years after: From commemorations to interpretations

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All the diplomatic posturing surrounding the commemoration of the Srebrenica massacre (whether they are for or against the resolution proposed by London characterizing the massacre as genocide), fail to question the essence: what were the causes and authors of these crimes, in the area and on the ground where the conflicts took place and on the international level where they were “settled”? Homage to the victims of Srebrenica and the full respect of their memory means not mitigating the condemnation of what were certainly war crimes and crimes against humanity, but also giving them a political meaning.

On July 11-13, 1995, 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were separated from women and small children, and then murdered and thrown into mass graves. This reality is not challenged in Moscow or Belgrade whose leaders will be present at the commemorations. These crimes were condemned by the Serbian parliament and, according to a recent poll by 54% of persons interviewed in Serbia - although 70% reject, like their leaders, the characterization as genocide. Such a refusal is without doubt still more radical within the Republika Srpska - the Bosnian Serb entity where the massacre itself occurred: here, it is still likely that the political leader Radovan Karadzic as well as the commander of the Bosnian Serb armed forces General Ratko Mladic, who are waiting in the Hague for the verdict of their trial for genocide, are still perceived as “heroes”.

We are therefore on this 11 July 2015, very far from a common “truth” and a clear denunciation of responsibilities. But what responsibilities? Contrary to what the dominant commentaries say, it is not the term of genocide which is the real test of “the facts”, without omission and on a scale allowing their full interpretation. The tree of the “word” (genocide) risks hiding a dark forest with two components - that of the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia on “ethnic” bases, and that of international realpolitik as the background to the signing of the Dayton agreement, a few weeks after the massacre in Srebrenica. It is to establish the obvious links between this massacre and the set of “conditions” that allowed US diplomacy to have signed, a few weeks later, the Dayton accords proclaiming “one” Bosnia-Herzegovina, deeply traumatized and divided, “sovereign” and under a de facto international protectorate. [1] Strangely, the Guardian does not include Franjo Tudjman among the major actors of Dayton and forgets to mention the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Serbs from the Krajina, as one of the pre-conditions of Dayton]].

What “truth”?

The United Kingdom, by presenting to the United Nations a resolution strongly supported by the United States (masterminds of the Dayton agreements) claims, by adopting the term used by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to characterize the massacre of Srebrenica, to implement the truth. But it is far from being demonstrated that the ICTY - dependent on the funding and political pressures of the major powers, which have put it in place in an ad hoc manner - has been able itself to exercise any authority of “truth” on the international responsibilities

of such a tragedy; it has also not allowed any analysis of how it fits into the wars of “ethnic cleansing” which ravaged Bosnia for three years, with about 100,000 deaths (70% Muslims, who are only 43% of the total population) and several hundred thousand refugees and internally displaced persons.

US diplomacy exploited the failures of the “peace plans” as originally conceived by the European governments and the United Nations - the plans failing successively in the face of the advanced practice, on the ground, of ethnic cleansing: two states in the Bosnian state tended thus to forge themselves by actions of terrorizing the “undesirable” population, on the one hand “Republika Srpska” (Serb dominated) and parallel to this (which is generally not said) Herceg-Bosna (around Mostar, Croat dominated). The ultra-nationalist militias of these two sides met from 1991 and encircled Sarajevo, advancing their parallel projects on the backs of the populations most attached to a multi-communitarian Bosnia Herzegovina, the Muslims in particular (known as Bosniaks since the 1990s).

One of the constants of the failures of UN and European policies was that they were designing pseudo “peace plans” in the context of wars: the negotiations only confirmed the progress of the territories controlled by the Serb and Croat nationalist militias; but none of the European powers engaged in these plans, any more than the United States which remained on the margin until 1994-5, were ready to interpose themselves against ethnic cleansing, or lose a single man. The UN forces were supposed to guarantee a “peace” which did not exist in the plans. But in the security zones they should theoretically protect the people. If they did not do so at Srebrenica it was because they did not have (any more) the mandate to do so.

When Richard Holbrooke took up the “dossier”, a spectacular turn was made by NATO, exploiting the impasses of the United Nations and the EU, the United States seizing on the Bosnian conflict to maintain NATO and then redeploy it - after 1991, despite the end of the cold war. In practice, a few NATO “targeted strikes” by NATO on a United Nations mandate, against the Serb-Bosnian forces, accompanied the delivery of US weapons to the Croatian army: this allowed Washington, without engaging American ground troops, to balance the relationship of forces on the ground. But this overall arrangement also camouflaged a pragmatic turn: Slobodan Milosevic, previously denounced by the US as a “Serbo-Communist” and the “Butcher of the Balkans”, was linked to the negotiations at Dayton, as he had been in 1993 with the European and UN peace plans in Croatia and then in Bosnia. Holbrooke was seeking a “stabilization” of the whole region by balancing power relationships and compromise without clear defeat - “principles” and human victims counted for little in these calculations.

Behind the Dayton agreements lay therefore a first pre-condition: the “map” of the state of Bosnia-Herzegovina according to the constitution drafted by the United States, should be perceived as beneficial by each of the signatories, therefore “acceptable” without continuation of the war, from the point of view of the protagonists. After three years of ethnic cleansing under the direction of the Bosnian Serb nationalist forces, the Serbian “entity” (the so-called “Republika Srpska”) was going to be endorsed in Dayton on 49% of Bosnia-Herzegovina - but so that the weapons would fall silent, the Bosnian Serb forces had to be left to suppress the “ungovernable” enclave of Srebrenica. The remaining 51% would be attributed to the “Muslim-Croat federation”, the second “entity” created by the Dayton accords. It went, under US pressure, to contain the separatism of Herceg-Bosna where the Croat nationalist militias had notably destroyed the Muslim areas of Mostar, through a fragile and forced “anti-Serb” alliance within this “federation”.

In other words, at Dayton, the most “separatist” Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat militias and nationalist leaders were excluded in order to maintain the fiction of a unified state; but it was necessary to make the people accept as “representative” of their interests respectively Slobodan

Milosevic (leader of Serbia), Franjo Tudjman (head of the Croatian state), and Aljia Izetbegovic in Sarajevo. The three signed the Dayton agreements for reasons which were of course opposed: Izetbegovic accepted because they maintained a supposed sovereign and indivisible Herzegovina of which he could officially be president; while the leaders in Belgrade and Zagreb understood, as they had from the beginning of the 1990s, that it amounted to an ethnic division of Bosnia, defended in a radical way on the ground by the Bosnian Serb and Croat nationalist forces.

Henceforth the accords included a constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, allowing Belgrade and Zagreb strong ties with the “entities” defined on an ethnic basis. Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat forces accordingly agreed to be represented by the leaders of the neighbouring states, because they had gone as far as possible through force of arms, and their “advances” were in large part recognized by the new constitution of Dayton. The hope of separatist forces was also that time would leave the door open to a subsequent break-up of Bosnia. As for Milosevic and Tudjman, their “moderation” - by comparison to the ultra-nationalists on the ground - earned them international recognition (with the key mitigation of sanctions against Belgrade) and especially, they became masters at home to manage the fate of their respective “minority”: the silence on the conflicts in Kosovo at Dayton went hand in hand with another silence, concerning the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia, without the shadow of Srebrenica and accompanied by the silence of diplomats and the international media.

In other words, we cannot understand Srebrenica or isolate it from the general meaning of the wars of ethnic cleansing which ravaged Bosnia, or by ignoring the impact of the real-politik of Dayton on the maps drawn by ethnic cleansing. At the same time, it is necessary to measure the particular violence that the Muslim populations experienced: the aggression inflicted from both sides at the same time and the particular fragility of the Bosnian “Muslim nation” had a basis, including the sense of international collusion which was able to galvanize the aggressors

However, this has not prevented (on the contrary, without doubt) this population from being the most heavily committed to a state which affirmed both a universal citizenship (independent of cultures, languages, religions) whether Yugoslav or Bosniak, and the diversity of histories forging developing and often intermingled “national” identities. It deserves homage for this also.

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P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] It is not true, contrary to what is said in the “Guardian” How Britain and the US decided to abandon Srebrenica that it was necessary to wait 20 years to know and analyze the prior conditions at Dayton: one can read the articles on this subject written for Le Monde Diplomatique but also in a French language text written on the occasion of the death of Slobodan Milosevic, concerning in particular the Milosevic-Tudjman alliance on the ethnic division of Bosnia and Herzegovina and developments in international politics, especially during the Dayton agreements. [[Read the full article “De la disparition dans le sang de la Yougoslavie”.