



BOSNIA 1995

BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a mountainous country about a third the size of England. It lies next to the Adriatic Sea, to the south of Croatia and west of Serbia. Its population is less than half that of London. Bosnia was part of the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire until 1878 and then of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until the First World War. After the war it was united with other Slav territories to form Yugoslavia, essentially ruled and run by Serbs from the Serbian capital, Belgrade. By 1980 the population of Bosnia consisted of 1.3m Bosnian Serbs (Orthodox Catholic Christians), over 1m Bosniaks (Sunni Muslim), and 0.7m Bosnian Croats (Roman Catholic Christians), all with strong historical and local claims to a homeland there.

In 1980 Yugoslavia's communist president Tito died. His rule had held the federation together. Now Croats and Bosniaks began to look for independence, and Serbian nationalism, never dead, took on a new lease of life from 1987 when Slobodan Milosevic became Serbia's leader (and thus effectively Yugoslavia's as well). He encouraged Serb nationalism not only at home but also in the other republics where there were large Serb communities.

Elections in 1990 brought nationalists to power in Croatia and Slovenia, which, together with Macedonia, declared independence in 1991 and were all recognised internationally. Alija Izetbegovic, the leader of Bosnia's multi-ethnic government, called for independence for Bosnia, too; it was recognised as independent by the USA and the EU in 1992.

Bosnia's Serbs, however, weren't happy: they saw themselves and the land they lived on as part of Milosevic's 'Greater Serbia'. The Yugoslav Army (mainly Serb) had just ended a year's fierce conflict with Croatia in an attempt to hang on to Serb communities there. Now it turned its attention to Bosnia, whose forces were restricted by an arms embargo because of recent violence in Bosnian Croatian territory. By the end of 1993 the Serbs (led by Radovan Karadzic) had set up their own Republika Srpska in the east and a Bosnian Serb army (under Ratko Mladic) was in control of nearly three quarters of the country; the Bosnian Croats had been mostly driven out, though a small force continued fighting for its Bosnian territory until 1994; the Bosniaks were hanging on only in the towns.

The European Union (EU) tried mediation, without success. The UN refused to intervene, apart from providing some troop convoys for humanitarian aid. Later its peace-keeping force, UNProFor, undertook to protect 6 'safe areas', mainly Muslim and including Sarajevo (the Bosniak capital) and Srebrenica; it failed. Each so-called safe area, except Sarajevo, fell to the Serbs and was 'ethnically cleansed'. This was the Serbian term accepted by the USA and other members of the UN Security Council to avoid any reference to 'genocide', which would by international law demand their intervention. It had become clear that what was happening in Bosnia was no longer a civil war fuelled by 'ancient feuds', if it ever had

been. Bosnia was the victim of one group's determined wish for political domination, which it was prepared to achieve by isolating ethnic groups and if necessary exterminating them.

THE GENOCIDE

Srebrenica is situated in what had become, and still is, Republika Srpska. The town, declared a UN safe area in 1992, was now a Bosniak enclave in the care of the French and Dutch governments. In July 1995 Serb troops and paramilitaries led by Ratko Mladic descended on Srebrenica and began shelling it. They had already dealt with Muslim soldiers in the countryside villages. Now they were besieging Srebrenica's thousands of Muslim civilians. Food supplies and water began to dwindle, buildings were damaged, people were injured. Soon Serb troops were able to take up positions close the town's outskirts. In Bosnia's capital, Sarajevo, a radio message from an amateur operator in Srebrenica was heard: 'Please do something. Whatever you can. In the name of God, do something.'

The contingent of Dutch soldiers who made up the UN military presence safeguarding the town (from their HQ in a suburban factory complex) could do little. They were poorly equipped and had no back-up. In any case, over two dozen of them had been taken prisoner by the Serbs and no-one wanted to take action that might endanger the hostages' lives.

However, the Dutch commander did repeatedly ask the French (their military colleagues in this operation) to provide immediate deterrent air strikes; but his requests were repeatedly stalled. (The story goes that one request was rejected because it was on the wrong fax form.) Still hoping for French assistance, the Dutch commander warned Serb officials that there would be air strikes at 6.00 a.m. on the morning of July 11 unless Serbian troops moved away from the town's borders.

But there were no air strikes that dawn (though two jets flew over later). Instead, the Serbs' bombardment intensified. Thousands of Muslims made for the Dutch compound - some killed by shells as they fled. Throughout the day a stream of refugees was slowly admitted inside: up to 6,000 by nightfall. 20,000 more were left waiting outside. There was no food, little water, and a lot of fear.

The following morning representatives of the Dutch battalion and of the Muslims heard that Mladic had made a promise: everyone would be allowed to cross out of Serb territory, but the men would have to be screened first, so that war criminals could be detected, before rejoining their families. Meanwhile, Serb troops quietly surrounded the Dutch HQ.

Soon afterwards Mladic himself appeared, caught on film in genial mode and reassuring a group of women that all would be well. ('Thank you,' they cried.) After him came large numbers of trucks and buses. Serb troops at once began separating off the men from women and children among the civilians outside the UN compound. Women and children were forced on to the trucks and buses. As they were deported, they could hear gunfire echoing round the hills; and they saw corpses lying by the road.

The following day the transports returned to fetch more women and children. There were

now no men to be seen among the people in the street, and soon no women and children either. By noon the Serbs were ready to deal with the remaining thousands inside the camp. The Dutch gave the order: 'Leave the camp in groups of 5'. The Serbs stood at the entrance, once again isolating the men and boys.

The deportation of Srebrenica's population took 4 days, and the UN assisted in a way it didn't foresee and couldn't prevent: the Serbs removed the Dutch soldiers' blue peacekeeping helmets and later wore them themselves to trick escapees into handing themselves over.

Up to 7,500 men, and boys over 13 years old, were killed. They were trucked or marched to their places of death. Up to 3,000, many in the act of trying to escape, were shot or decapitated in the fields. (Mladic had sent out his written order to 'block, crush and destroy the straggling parts of the Muslim group'; it was carried out.) 1,500 were locked in a warehouse and sprayed with machine gun fire and grenades. Others died in their thousands on farms, football fields, school playgrounds. The whole action was carried out with military efficiency. (It is said that the transport drivers were each forced to kill one man, to deter them from testifying against the Serb troops later.)

Thousands of the bodies were buried in mass graves. US aerial reconnaissance film shows the signs of a mass grave being covered by earth-moving equipment. Later many bodies were dug up and moved to more secret burial places.

There was always work for the gravediggers as playing fields and spare areas of ground were turned into cemeteries.

AFTER THE GENOCIDE

The first person to provide a hint of the extent of the killings was an American reporter, who risked his life to look for evidence and indeed was eventually arrested. (He was awarded a Pulitzer prize for his Bosnian journalism.) He was at risk not only from the Serbs but also from NATO, who resumed their air attacks (begun earlier in 1995 when the Serbs ignored a ceasefire ultimatum) in response to the tragic events at Srebrenica.

Peace negotiations were held in Dayton, Ohio, and an agreement was signed in December 1995. Bosnia was now divided into a Croat-Muslim Federation (acknowledged reluctantly by Croat nationalists) and Republika Srpska. A NATO peace-keeping 'Implementation Force' of 60,000 was deployed. It was later replaced by a NATO 'Stabilisation Force', S-For, which is still there, still facing intractable social and administrative problems. In 1996, elections produced a three-man presidency representing the main Bosnian groups.

Meanwhile Srebrenica was re-inhabited: Serbs moved in to occupy the Muslims' homes. These Serbs were mostly refugees themselves, driven from other parts of Bosnia by Muslims and Croats. Many came from Sarajevo. None had much hope: there were no jobs, not much water, few supplies. 'But we have nowhere else to go.' The Serbian project in

Bosnia had brought about a huge internal displacement of the population from which the people have not yet recovered.

In 1999 the UN completed its own enquiry into the fall of Srebrenica, and faced its shame. 'Through error, misjudgement, and an inability to recognise the scope of the evil confronting us, we failed to do our part to save the people of Srebrenica from the Serb campaign of mass murder.' The severest criticism was directed at the then Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros Ghali, at his senior commander General Janvier (the general whom the Dutch had begged for air support), and the UN envoy in Bosnia (who had insisted there'd been no large-scale atrocity). In 2000, after a good deal of pressure (much of it from the charity Médecins Sans Frontières), the French set up a parliamentary inquiry into General Janvier's role, about which there has been much controversy; but the press and public were not allowed to hear what he had to say.

Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic have both been declared war criminals. Radoslav Krstic, a commander working for Mladic, was arrested by NATO troops in December 1998 and charged with genocide for his part in the atrocities at Srebrenica. 'This is a case about the triumph of evil, professional soldiers who organised, planned and willingly participated in the genocide, or stood silent in the face of it,' said the prosecution at the Hague (where the International War Crimes Tribunal for former Yugoslavia is held). In August 2001 Krstic was sentenced to 46 years imprisonment. 'His story is one of a respected professional soldier who could not balk his superiors' insane desire to forever rid the Srebrenica area of Muslim civilians and who fully participated in the unlawful realisation of this hideous design,' said the 255-page judgement on him.

As his trial ended, another began: a second Bosnian Serb military commander was charged with participating in 'a criminal plan and enterprise, the common purpose of which was to detain, capture, summarily execute by firing squad, and bury over 5,000 Muslim men and boys from the Srebrenica enclave, including the exhumation of the victims' bodies and reburial in hidden locations.'

On July 11, 2000, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan issued a statement: 'The tragedy of Srebrenica will forever haunt the history of the United Nations. This day commemorates a massacre on a scale unprecedented in Europe since the second world war - a massacre of people who had been led to believe that the UN would ensure their safety. We cannot undo this tragedy, but it is vitally important that the right lessons be learned and applied in the future. We must not forget that the architects of the killings in Srebrenica and elsewhere in Bosnia, although indicted by the international criminal tribunal, are still at large. This fact alone suggests that the most important lesson of Srebrenica - that we must recognise evil for what it is and confront it not with expediency and compromise but with implacable resistance - has yet to be fully learned and applied. As we mark the anniversary of the death of thousands of disarmed and defenceless men and boys, I wish to express once again to their families and friends my deepest regret and remorse. Their grief cannot be assuaged and must not be forgotten.'

On the same day, 3,000 Bosnian Muslims, mainly women, were taken in 60 buses to

Srebrenica for a short memorial ceremony. They were the grieving relatives, revisiting the scene of their loss, and they went heavily protected by S-For troops. Serbs watched, whistled and shouted abuse; some threw stones. The mourners found the Dutch HQ just as they had last seen it, with its 'UN' markings still visible. ('We thought they'd have the decency to hide that. We want the UN commanders tried for war crimes. They abandoned us.') In 2001 the women came once again, this time to see the unveiling of a monument to their dead.

Some of the bodies have been found and some of the mass graves opened. Identification has proved almost impossible - just a few hundred have been given names. There are still 20,000 people listed as missing in Bosnia. Hope now lies in the science of DNA, which can match profiles taken from remains with others taken from living relatives. A pathologist working on the exhumations says, 'I can stand the discoveries in the graves, I can even stand the stench. The worst part is meeting families and people in despair.'

Unlike those buried here not all the victims have known graves. Mass graves continue to be unearthed.

WITNESS

'The Major just ordered everyone in the camp to leave, without any option. The Serbs, carrying long dirty knives and full combat equipment, stood at the gate. Their dogs barked at the refugees who were leaving. The Dutch soldiers just stood by and watched them take all the boys and men away from their wives, sisters and daughters. For some reason at such moments you have no brain, you are so obedient that you just do what they tell you. Nobody even complained when they walked towards the gate, knowing they were probably going to die. The last time I saw my family was when they walked through that gate. That evening the Dutch received a convoy with food and beer. There was the sound of music at the back of the camp. They were drinking beer and playing loud music as if nothing had happened. The Dutch, like the French, British and US governments, are trying to forget the Srebrenica massacre.'

'She is half Croat, half Bosniak, and she is only 17. Her father had been killed. She said very little after arriving at the hospital. Later, though, she spoke of being imprisoned with her mother and two dozen other women in the basement of a municipal hall in her home town. Her jailers, Bosnian Serbs, raped her and the others and forced them to have sex with Bosnian Serb troops in the area. They had to watch each other being gang-raped each day for four months. When she became visibly pregnant, she was released. Her jailers said "Go bear our Serbian children". In Bosnia, rape was a weapon of combat. After she give birth, she refused to see the baby. The next day she was nowhere to be found; she hasn't contacted the hospital since. Nor does her name appear on the roll of witnesses to be called at the Hague tribunal.'

'In the British-controlled sector of Bosnia, the former commander of Omarska's notorious concentration camp was employed as deputy police chief in Omarska. In the American sector, an indictee gave an interview in the office where he worked as his town's top official.

Reporters in the French zone spotted Bosnian Serbs indicted for systematic rape making the rounds of cafés and bars. Other reporters visiting a Dutch-controlled area sighted Bosnian Croats indicted for massacres of civilians.

All four of the 1949 Geneva Conventions oblige States to search for and try those suspected of grave breaches, regardless of the suspect's home country or the site of the crime. The United States, Britain and France signed and ratified the Conventions, as did every other participant in the US-led 'Implementation Force' and later 'Stabilisation Force'. NATO, however, devised, and later reinterpreted at its convenience, its own rule for troops: they will detain war criminals "only when they confront them in the normal course of their assigned mission". When challenged, top NATO authorities said States' obligations under the Geneva Conventions were not their responsibility. NATO is not party to the Conventions. The legal adviser to the Allied commander in Europe told Amnesty International that NATO's reluctance to arrest war criminals "reflected the political realities in the region". A United Nations Peacekeeping Operations representative (a general) said, "We are not authorised to enforce law and order. The real responsibility for the apprehension of indicted war criminals lies with the local authorities". By such logic, the deputy chief of police in Omarska should arrest himself.'

ISSUES

There are echoes of the Holocaust here too. How easy is it to imagine the Bosnian conflict taking place in your own part of the world? If it seems unlikely, what are the conditions that make it so? Could those conditions be created in areas where conflict is likely?

Issues arising from Bosnia include the huge problem of displaced persons and refugees - and asylum-seekers. What is it that makes people nowadays hostile to them, and how could that be changed?

There is also the issue of military intervention to stop war. Military intervention sustains people's belief that armed conflict will always be the way to go. Which means that the seeds of genocide continue to be planted, all over the world.