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Ratko Mladić: Relativism, myth and reality

Guest Editorial by Aleksandar Bošković

In his discussion of the relation of myth to political violence, Kapferer (1988: 40) argues that there is a tendency among scholars to assume that myth and 'reality' can be easily distinguished. His analysis shows the opposite to be true. Myths form a specific kind of 'reality', the main actors in which are mythic figures. These figures are mythical because a certain community feels them to represent their most fundamental hopes and goals (Rank 1914).

General Ratko Mladić, Bosnian Serb Army commander between 1992 and 1996, was felt by many to epitomize some of the most important Serb cultural traits – bravery, cunning and the will to defend 'his' people. He was liked by Serbs and feared by his enemies, encapsulating the Serb unwillingness to be dominated by foreign powers that forms an important part of local epic and folklore tradition.

But the image of Mladić as a proud national warrior had much darker associations, too: as one of the commanders responsible for the 'ethnic cleansing' that took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995, as a ruthless man whose soldiers had already killed civilians in Croatia in 1991, and as someone accused of organizing the worst massacre on European soil since the Second World War.

On 26 May 2011, Mladić was arrested in a small town in the northern Serbian province of Vojvodina. The capture of this archetypal villain of the modern era was deemed such an important event by the Serbian government that the president, Boris Tadić, himself announced it at a televised press conference. With Mladić accused of, among other things, masterminding the genocide that took place in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica in July 1995, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague had held a warrant for his arrest since that year, and sizable rewards were on offer from both the US and Serbian governments for anyone helping to bring him to justice.

But Mladić, who went into hiding in mid 2001 (having hitherto lived openly in Serbia's capital, Belgrade), had up until this point proved elusive, though in recent years various European figures had made it clear to the authorities in Belgrade that the path of European integration, to which the current Serbian government had committed itself, could only be successfully followed after Mladić's arrest and extradition to The Hague.

In the days that followed the arrest, the reactions of the Serbian public were mixed. Ultra-nationalist politicians, predictably, condemned the arrest, accusing government officials of 'treason'. Only one party, the opposition Liberal Democrats, congratulated the government. Several dozens of – mostly young – extremists rioted in the centre of Belgrade and the northern city of Novi Sad, and members of the Serb Radical Party organized a protest in front of the National Assembly on the Sunday following the arrest. The protest was poorly attended, despite oft-cited opinion polls showing a majority of the Serb public in support of Mladić, considering him a 'hero' and 'defender of Serbs'.

There were renewed attempts to portray the general as a 'brilliant' military strategist, though it is clear from his track record that his victories during the war were achieved only when his troops had huge advantage in

1. Anastasićević (2011) gives the example of fighting around Bihać in 1995, in which Bosnian Serb army units were defeated.
 2. Smith (2007: 230-232) draws attention to relativist arguments being employed by writers who deny the Holocaust, who then accuse their critics of unfounded 'objectivism'.
 3. *Srebrenica: A cry from the grave*, 13/WNET production. The documentary's broadcast was condemned by the opposition in the Serbian National Assembly – not because of the film's content, but because it was shown on 'national television'.
 4. This and similar army and police units are often labelled as 'paramilitary', even though they were equipped and financed by the Serbian government. All the top Bosnian Serb military commanders, including General Mladić, received their salaries from Belgrade. Mladić retired in 2002, and the decree confirming his retirement was signed by the then president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Vojislav Koštunica.
- Anastasićević, D. 2011. Kako se Ratko Mladić odao genocidu. [How Ratko Mladić gave in to genocide] *Vreme* 1065, 31 May. <http://www.vreme.com/cms/view.php?id=993392>.
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- Strategic Marketing Research 2009. Stavovi prema ratnim zločinima, Haškom tribunalu i domaćem pravosuđu za ratne

terms of numbers and firepower – when the forces were roughly even, he did not fare very well.¹

According to journalist Jelena Grujić, who reported on the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mladić won fame beyond Bosnian Serbs only after being indicted by the ICTY in 1995. As the tribunal was viewed by large parts of the Serbian population as unjust and 'anti-Serb', even a 'threat to the safety of Serbs' (Artz 2006: 231-232), anyone indicted by it almost instantly won national renown. Perceptions of injustice and the phenomenon of 'hereditary victimhood' (Bauman 1998) are not, of course, limited to the Serbs – just a few months ago, the mass of Croatian public opinion and almost all the political parties in Croatia near-hysterically condemned the ICTY sentencing of two Croatian Army generals. However, in Serbia, the sense of grievance is intensified by the sense of frustration and loss that issued from defeat in the wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia.

* * *

This widespread feeling of loss and disillusion gave rise in Serbia to a prevailingly *relativist* understanding of the wars – as all sides committed crimes during 1990s, all sides were thus guilty in equal measure.² This relativist position consistently emerges from surveys of Serbian public opinion on attitudes towards the ICTY (Strategic Marketing Research 2009).

Relativism is, of course, a key anthropological concept, as well as a concept that provokes a great deal of controversy, particularly in regard to its political applications. The classic example of the relativism/universalism debate that springs to the minds of most anthropologists is the drafting of the 1948 UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the time, anthropologists, especially those around the American Anthropological Association, immediately raised concerns about any attempt to universalize particular conceptions of human rights, and debates on the issue and the role of anthropologists in influencing these kinds of political decision are ongoing (Rapport & Overing 2007: 180-190).

As in some African countries, where parts of the population have resented the prosecution by the international courts of their erstwhile leaders, and have argued that the funds spent on the prosecution would have been better used to aid the country's economy and feed its poor, many Serbs view prosecuting war criminals as a waste of time and money, speaking disparagingly of 'human rights' as an unnecessary 'import' from the West. But while we might conclude, with Wilson, that in Serbia, 'a culture of human rights [has been] constructed upon the quicksand of a culture of impunity' (2003: 369), a – relativism-inflected – human-rights culture has nevertheless taken hold there, finding expression in the wake of the move to democracy in 2001 in a new insistence on freedom of speech and expression.

Interestingly, this new emphasis has meant that the authorities do not object to publications glorifying Bosnian Serb leaders, or to many other extreme publications, including those denying the Holocaust and promoting hatred towards non-Serbs and other minorities (both ethnic minorities, such as Roma, and other kinds, such as sexual minorities). Any attempt to ban such publications would now be likely to be considered an infringement of human rights.

And, following the arrest of Mladić, Serb media were full of expressions of concern about *his* human rights – how did he look, was he ill, was he fit to stand trial, should he be allowed to visit the grave of his daughter? Although some news outlets reported reactions from Bosnia and Herzegovina (especially from the mothers of the Srebrenica victims), and from Croatia, the issue of how Mladić him-



Fig. 1. General Ratko Mladić.

self was feeling was what captured the front pages. Thus all outlets reported that, on being brought before the presiding judge of the Special Court in Belgrade, the general had requested fresh strawberries. He had also requested a visit from the Serbian health minister, and the Speaker of the National Assembly. All these requests were granted. Unfortunately for the media, neither the minister nor the Speaker wanted to say what they talked about with Mladić, describing the visits as 'private'.

Curiously enough, Serb media showed little or no interest in what Mladić was actually accused of – the issue of war crimes and genocide remains almost invisible in Serbia, and it is widely believed that any politician who dared to speak openly about them would be condemned to oblivion. In the week of the general's arrest, the editor of Belgrade's leading weekly magazine, *NIN*, expressed the issue thus:

How is it that we are still unaware of the extent of the crime in Srebrenica, the causes of war, how is it that as a society and a nation we have not yet questioned our own responsibility for everything that happened to ourselves and what we did to others? Numbed by the necrophilic mythology, where we only see the injustice committed against us, hungover from the smell of [the] blood of tens of thousands of [those] killed during the wars we were in, Mladić's arrest did not make us realize the basic fact – that in the time we live in, national, state and social issues do not relate to blood and soil, but to the corpus of civilizational values. (Spaić 2011: 3)

There have been several opportunities for Serbia to begin the process of coming to terms with the past – the first came in 2001, shortly after the change of government, when a documentary about the Srebrenica genocide was broadcast on national television.³ The film provoked almost universal condemnation of the crime.

Four years later, in June 2005, video footage was aired of members of the Serbian 'Scorpions' unit⁴ executing six Bosnian Muslims in July 1995. The brutality of this crime too shocked the international and the Serbian public. But this state of shock did not last very long. At each point, some other event, such as an acquittal in The Hague of

zločine [Public opinion and attitudes toward the ICTY in The Hague]. April. Accessible from: <http://bgcentar.org.rs>.

Wilson, R.A. 2003.

Anthropological studies of national reconciliation processes. *Anthropological Theory* 3(3): 367-387.

someone accused of crimes against Serbs, would turn the spotlight back on the perceived injustices and unfairness of the 'international community', making the road to coming to terms with the past an even longer and more winding one.

Given all this, the arrest and extradition of one of the most wanted men of the past 16 years is still only a first

step towards reconciliation – though, in view of Mladić's overall mythical status in Serbia, a highly significant one. Shifts in feelings of victimhood and perceived injustice will take more time, as will any moderation in the prevailing ethos of moral relativism. Given anthropologists' interest in all things 'relative', Serbia will remain an important field site for observing, testing and interpreting the limits of relativism. ●

Leaving for work, leaving in fear

Guest editorial by Julie McBrien

Julie McBrien is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. Her email is j.a.mcbrien@uva.nl

1. According to the 2009 census, 71% of Kyrgyzstan's population is Kyrgyz and 14% is Uzbek. Kyrgyz Republic National Committee for Statistics 2009. <http://www.stat.kg/stat.files/tematika/demograf/Kyrgyzstan%20в%20цифрах/демо6.pdf>.

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Hayden, R. 1996. Imagined communities and real victims: Self-determination and ethnic cleansing in Yugoslavia. *American Ethnologist* 23(4): 783-801.

In mid June 2010, violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks broke out in several cities and towns in southern Kyrgyzstan. These were ethnically mixed urban hubs with predominantly Uzbek populations, a trait that differentiated them from the surrounding villages, whose populations were mostly Kyrgyz.¹ The violence arose in a fragile political and economic environment. The Kyrgyz state had long been weak but had eroded further in the aftermath of the 2005 'Tulip Revolution'. In this period, the politically marginalized Uzbek minority had become increasingly involved in regional and national politics, and had made more vocal demands for equal treatment and opportunities. Economic hardship continued to be rampant in Kyrgyzstan as economic inequality increased, with a perceived disproportionate number of Uzbeks among the most successful in business. Not unrelated, the years up to 2010 had also seen an intensification of nationalist Kyrgyz rhetoric and a concomitant decline in sources of interethnic solidarity.

Some believed the violence of June 2010 to have been initiated by the recently ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiyev – who fled the country in April 2010 – in an attempt to destabilize the country and undermine the legitimacy of the interim government (Weir 2010). But whatever may have motivated the first attacks, once they were under way, it was ethnicity that was mobilized to mark targets, find allies, and serve as a rallying cry in the violence. There were no stated agendas or aims for the killings. For several days Kyrgyz murdered, maimed and raped Uzbeks. Uzbek men and boys fought back, killing and wounding Kyrgyz, but Uzbeks were the majority of the victims. Uzbek women and children fled across the nearby Uzbek border seeking refuge. In three days, Uzbekistan saw 111,000 refugees cross into its territory, while 300,000 others were internally displaced within Kyrgyzstan (Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission 2011).

Almost as soon as the violence started, as I sat thousands of kilometres away in Amsterdam, I received a flurry of emails, Facebook wall posts, and other digital messages. All carried similar subject lines: events in Kyrgyzstan. Some went like this: 'I'm in Turkey and my mother and sister made it to Uzbekistan. But I'm worried about my brother and father; they are hiding in our house.' Others, like this: 'It's horrible. You have to let people know. The world must know.' Most were like this: 'Julie, what have you heard? What do you know?' I also made and received many phone calls.

As the violence increased, I listened to the voices of friends: 'Our children are safe in my father's home village.' 'We tried to leave, but we couldn't get across the

border.' 'We are scared. We hear gunfire. We see smoke.' The email from a former student telling me about the gruesome violence witnessed and experienced by his friends was the worst. I cried. But then, it all stopped, just as quickly as it had started – the violence, the international interest, and the communication. And I heard nothing for a while. Perhaps not wishing to hear, I also took a break from calling Kyrgyzstan. I did not want to confront what was staring me in the face: a likely eruption of murderous ethnic cleansing (cf. Mann 2005).

Media outlets explained the violence with reference to popular notions of 'ancient ethnic hatred', imposed Stalinist-era borders at odds with 'ethnic realities', and idealistic failed attempts at creating 'Soviets' out of essentially separate, antagonistic ethnic groups (e.g., Associated Press 2010; *The Economist* 2010; Fedynsky 2010). Anthropologists discussing the events in the ensuing weeks rightly aimed to temper the essentialist notions being propagated in these forums. They described the complex ways in which ethnic identity had been constructed over the long Soviet period, and how it had been reinvigorated and entrenched following independence; they combined these histories with a much more critical and accurate reading of the violence as situated in contemporary political and economic landscapes (e.g., Beyer 2010; Reeves 2010a; Reeves 2010b). Yet these observers too were confronted with the unsavoury fact that the violence fell along ethnic lines (Reeves 2010a). When the widespread, massive violence finally stopped, the ethnic divisions and tensions it forged unfortunately seemed to remain.

Some non-murderous forms of ethnic cleansing are conspicuous – prime examples being the forced deportations by Soviet authorities of Chechens, Crimean Tatars and Meskhetian Turks to Central Asia, or the various kinds of bureaucratic and legal discrimination practised during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia (Hayden 1996). Other forms, such as the creation of a hostile, uncertain environment in which a minority population is faced with few opportunities and great risks, may not be. These forms may be difficult to discern, only registering in an increase in already-existing trends, such as internal migration to urban centres and international labour migration. But their consequences are similar – the reduction or elimination of a minority population.

The aftermath of ethnic violence extends beyond mourning, physical and emotional healing, reconstruction and population resettlement. It carries on in the way those involved understand and imagine their lives, the way they orient themselves towards and envision their future and, thus, in the kinds of choices they make about where and how to make their livelihoods. The question of why