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 Voivodina. 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...
This widespread feeling of loss and disillusion gave rise in Serbia to a prevalingly relativist understanding of the wars – as all sides committed crimes during 1990s, all sides were thus guilty in equal measure. 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 Mladic, 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 Mladic himself 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 Mladic, describing the visits as ‘private’.

Curiously enough, Serb media showed little or no interest in what Mladic 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, hangover from the smell of [the] blood of tens of thousands of [those] killed during the wars we were in, Mladic’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. 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’ unit’ 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...
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 interethic solidarity.

Some believed the violence of June 2010 to have been initiated by the recently ousted president Kurmanbek Bakiev – 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 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. These were ethnically mixed urban hubs with a marginalised Uzbek minority that had become increasingly involved in regional and national politics. In the face of this, the Uzbek women and children that populated the surrounding villages were swept out of their homes, quickly as it had started – the violence, the international response, and the media. And I heard nothing for a while. Perhaps not wishing to hear, I also took a break from reading the news.

One form of ethnic cleansing is conspicuous – prime examples being the forced deportations of Chechens, Crimean Tartars 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 in the real world, yet they are real and may have far-reaching consequences.

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