

'Butcher of Bosnia' faces trial

But western powers also have blood on their hands

Judy Beishon

Bosnian Serb ex-general Ratko Mladic is now detained by the 'International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia' (ICTY) near The Hague, Netherlands, facing charges of genocide. He joins Radovan Karadzic, the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs during the 1992-95 Bosnian war. Among the atrocities they are being tried for are the July 1995 Srebrenica massacre where 8,000 Bosnian Muslims were executed and the 44-month siege of Sarajevo during which 12,000 people died.

The 1991-95 Croatian and Bosnian wars followed Slovenia and then Croatia declaring independence from Yugoslavia. Right-wing nationalist leaders of each section of society whipped up nationalism and division to try to widen their spheres of influence. They leant on widespread anger at the austerity measures of the Yugoslav federal government and on fears of discrimination, especially in the minority populations of the states being formed as Yugoslavia broke up.

The Croat and Serb leaders in Bosnia were fighting to carve up Bosnia and link their areas with adjoining Croatia and Serbia. 300,000 people died during their quest and over four million were made homeless. The Bosnian Muslim-majority town of Srebrenica, surrounded by Mladic's armed forces, was supposed to be a United Nations (UN) protected 'safe-haven'. But the UN forces were impotent while tens of thousands of starving refugees were forced out of the town and around 8,000 Muslim men and boys were slaughtered.

The Bosnian Muslims bore the worst of the atrocities - not just in Srebrenica but also elsewhere, such as the hundreds, maybe thousands, murdered on the bridge at Visegrad. Serbs and Croats suffered too; the largest single 'ethnic cleansing' act of those years was the Croatian army brutally forcing 200,000 Croatian Serbs out of the Krajina area of Croatia.

The Bosnian war ended with the Dayton agreement, imposed in 1995 by the imperialist powers when the warring sides had mainly exhausted any furthering of their interests through military means.

Bosnia was declared a single multi-ethnic entity but in practice the deal cemented division into a Bosnian Serb entity and an unstable Croat-Muslim federation. A Nato-led 'peace implementation force' (I-FOR) was installed.

Representatives of US imperialism, while publicly condemning 'Serb aggression', had been involved in behind-the-scenes talks with the Serbs in which they offered them more land in return for signing a deal.

Capitalist decline

The descent into rabid nationalism and bloodshed in the 1990s was a legacy of the weakness of the workers' movement at that stage in Yugoslavia and the restoration of capitalism.

Before its stagnation and collapse, Yugoslavia, like the former Stalinist regimes in the USSR and Eastern Europe, was not a genuine socialist society. It had a centralised planned economy but was run, bureaucratically, by a privileged elite, with no genuine workers' democracy.

Capitalist restoration did not just bring greater unemployment and poverty but also ethnic division and war as the new ruling classes fought



Mladic's militiamen carried out atrocities against the non-Serb population during the war in Bosnia

to establish their own 'pure' nation states.

The continued failure today of the market economy to deliver decent living standards means there is potential for further rounds of bloodshed, particularly because many ethnic issues remain unresolved and the workers' movement is still weak. Right-wing gangster capitalists can draw behind them sections of the young unemployed who feel that society offers them no future, using despair and desperation to whip up nationalism.

20 years after the 1990s' wars began, Mladic is still viewed as a hero by a section of Serbs; on Tuesday 31 May in Banja Luka, capital of the Serb region of Bosnia, Republika Srpska, thousands protested at his arrest. Great inter-ethnic tension in Bosnia remains - a journalist recently reported seeing Serb nationalists scream insults when they passed by a cemetery where victims of the Srebrenica massacre are buried.

Republika Srpska is mainly autonomous with its president sneering at Bosnian state institutions, and the Bosniak-Croat federation that forms the rest of the country is in crisis. Paddy Ashdown, former 'international representative' in Bosnia, concluded earlier this month that "Bosnia is now embarked on a dangerous slide towards dissolution".

Capture of Mladic

There are plenty of reports indicating that Mladic was long protected by the Serbian authorities from arrest for war crimes. But in 2008 a



Ratko Mladic

more pro-European Union government took office and came under pressure to deliver him over as part of seeking greater foreign investment and membership of the EU.

The claim of Serbia's president, Boris Tadic, that Mladic was captured "the moment we discovered him" therefore didn't carry much weight, especially as the arrest came just a week before an assessment of Serbia's cooperation with ICTY, and EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton happened to be in Belgrade on the day he was caught.

Most people worldwide probably don't doubt that Mladic oversaw atrocities and are not sorry he is in detention. In particular, relatives of Bosnian Muslim victims are understandably keen to see him convicted and punished by the UN tribunal. Socialists also call for the trial of suspected war criminals like Mladic. Unfortunately, however, ordinary people in the Balkans and globally cannot rely on the international tribunals to achieve real justice.

Imperialism

The greatest war criminals in the world are among the political leaders of the imperialist elites that set up the international tribunals in the first place. US and British top politicians for instance are not indicting themselves for authorising the killing of many tens of thousands of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nor are western governments offering to stand trial for their role in the brutal Nato air assaults on Bosnian Serb areas during the Bosnian war, or the vicious 1998 Nato 'humanitarian' bombing of Serbia to force Serbian troops out of Kosovo.

Also, what about their role in the break up of Yugoslavia? The German government, in its rush for influence, broke ranks with the other western powers and in 1992 supported the separation of Slovenia and Croatia from Yugoslavia, which opened the door to war in Croatia and Bosnia. German imperialism was the leading culture but other ruling classes were waiting in the wings.

Then, during the Bosnian war the interventions of the UN and Nato - tools of western imperialism - only served to worsen the conflict.

Representatives of western powers courted Slobodan Milosevic, then Serbia's president, and other Serb nationalists when it served their masters' interests. But they then condemned them when they

judged them to be going too far against their interests - particularly in destabilising the region and leaning on Russian support.

To counter Serbia's aspirations in Kosovo, the US and other western powers later moved to sponsor and promote Hashim Thaci, the ethnic Albanian Kosovan prime minister. Recently, a Council of Europe report named Thaci as the boss of a criminal network dealing in human organs and heroin - laying bare yet again the unprincipled, self-motivated interventions of western imperialism.

The Hague

The Hague courts are part and parcel of the global political manoeuvring of the main capitalist powers. They were set up by the UN Security Council in order to be 'seen to be' responding to atrocities such as genocide. But they also serve the purpose of removing individuals that the western imperialist powers want out of the way and deflecting blame from those they want to protect.

Over 60% of the 80 ex-Yugoslavians that the international criminal court has so far convicted are Serbs.

The Serb and Croat leaders shared most of the responsibility for the war but this did not lead the forerunner of the Socialist, the Militant, to ignore the violence perpetrated by the Bosnian Muslim warlords and to give them support. The warlords' desires were similar to those of their Serb and Croat counterparts and they acted in their own particular interests and not those of Bosnian Muslim workers.

The only way for working class people in the Balkans from all nationalities, ethnicities and religions to achieve decent living standards and prevent further bloodshed is to place no trust in any such nationalist 'leaders'. Neither is there a way forward from those who have turned away from nationalism in a search of elusive capitalist investment and growth.

Instead, workers need democratically organised, independent political organisations that firmly oppose ethnic and religious division and have a programme of advancing the interests of workers against capitalist exploitation and nationalism. As organisations like this are rebuilt in the coming period, they can also organise genuinely independent, working class based investigations into past events.

The Committee for a Workers' International

The Committee for a Workers' International (CWI) is the socialist international organisation to which the Socialist Party is affiliated.

The CWI is organised in 45 countries and works to unite the working class and oppressed peoples against global capitalism and to fight for a socialist world.

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