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Srebrenica: 10 years on, a wound still bleeds

Maria Tumarkin

Today the world marks the 10th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre - the event commonly viewed as the single largest act of genocide in Europe since the Holocaust.

On July 11, 1995, 8000 Muslim boys and men were slaughtered by Bosnian Serb troops in the designated UN haven of Srebrenica under the control of Dutch peacekeeping troops.

Since then, the name Srebrenica has come to stand for the moral bankruptcy of the United Nations and the startling inaction of the international community, which allowed crimes against humanity to continue unchecked in Bosnia, Kosovo and other parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Across the world, the 10th anniversary of this atrocity is marked with commemorative events, conferences and exhibitions, many of them taking place under the slogan of "Srebrenica Never Again".

It is impossible to argue with this sentiment, yet there is a danger in allowing a place of tragedy and loss to become a turn of phrase: a rhetorical device used to arouse emotions and moral outrage.

Hiroshima, Auschwitz, Beslan - other places of atrocities - have emerged as universally recognisable symbols of humanity's capacity for destruction and evil. Yet when living communities grappling with pain, betrayal and loss are turned into symbols frozen in history, their ability to endure traumas is crippled.

The more we speak of "Srebrenica No More", the more Srebrenica stops being a small Bosnian town rising from the human remains, covered in ruins, riddled with poverty, uncertainty, and pain. Instead, it becomes a catch-cry, a placeless metaphor emptied of meaning, a cliche.

Yet 10 years later, countless people are still displaced from Srebrenica, unable to return home. In the town itself, Muslim and Serbian populations live in a state of continuous and dangerous tension.

Women of Srebrenica still have little knowledge of what happened to their sons, husbands and brothers. Most have no bodies to bury.

A recent news report revealed that should it proceed at the current pace, the identification of Srebrenica victims would take 45 more years. By that stage all of the women waiting to be told the truth about their families will be dead. While Serbia's former president, Slobodan Milosevic, is standing trial at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, two
people directly responsible for Srebrenica - the Bosnian Serb president, Radovan Karadzic, and his military commander, General Ratko Mladic - are still at large.

Carla Del Ponte, the prosecutor at The Hague Tribunal has refused to take part in the commemorative activities marking the anniversary.

She said she could not face the people of Srebrenica while Karadzic and Mladic were still allowed to enjoy impunity 10 years after they were first indicted by the tribunal.

"How can the international community justify this in front of the mothers, sisters, daughters and other loved ones of those killed in Srebrenica?" she told a recent briefing at the UN. "It cannot. It is a disgrace and a shame."

It strikes me that when we turn places like Srebrenica into symbols and metaphors, this allows us to imagine that the tragedies, which had brought them into the limelight in the first place, are effectively over, contained in the past.

Yet a decade later, nothing is over at Srebrenica. The massacre is not a distant if unpalatable past. Its legacy, and reverberations are everywhere. If Srebrenica is a symbol, it stands not just for the crimes of the past, not just for one of Europe's darkest hours, but also for our present inability to deal with the after-effects of the Bosnian war, domestically and internationally.

Last year I was in Minsk, the capital of Belorus. There I went to the Pit, the site of the mass execution and burial of the city's Jewish population by Hitler's invading troops in 1942. In the middle of Minsk, the Pit is surrounded by the apartment blocks, their windows facing in.

As I stood looking at the buildings leaning over a mass grave, it occurred to me this was precisely how we all lived.

Just like that - with our windows facing the sites and histories of suffering and endurance. We can shut the blinds, we can fence off the Pit or we can pretend that nothing has happened there. We can even plant trees or build countless monuments to make the place look civilised and pleasant, but the reality will remain the same.

Every day, inescapably, unawervingly, the Pit will be there looking back at us. To wish it otherwise is human, to pretend that it is otherwise is profoundly dangerous.

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