



"Srebrenica, 30 Years Later: Genocide Still Lives Through Denial"

Dr. Jared O. Bell

Like many other small towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Srebrenica is surrounded by the greenest of hills, its skyline dotted with mosques and modest houses. At first glance, it feels quiet, perhaps even sleepy. But beneath that stillness lies a deep and unhealed wound.

Once a celebrated spa town during the Yugoslav era, Srebrenica has become synonymous with one of Europe's most heinous atrocities: the 1995 genocide of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim (Bosniak) men and boys by Bosnian Serb forces. What unfolded is not only a dark chapter in Bosnia and Herzegovina's history; it is an indictment of Europe, of the United Nations, and of the international community writ large.

In the center of town stands the now-infamous battery factory, once designated a UN "safe area." It was here that Dutch peacekeepers, outnumbered, ill-equipped, and overwhelmed, handed over thousands of Bosniaks to their killers. I don't need to close my eyes long to recall the factory's musty, stagnant air, the heavy silence that clung to its walls like grief itself. The space felt both suffocating and hollow, a haunting metaphor for the thousands of families who never saw their sons, fathers, or brothers again. Just across the street, the Potočari Memorial rises from the earth, a sea of white headstones etched with delicate Arabic script, a solemn testament to the lives that were prematurely ended.

Each July, new victims are laid to rest, and memorials and commemorative events take place across Bosnia and Herzegovina and around the world.

These annual rituals serve as solemn reminders of the horror that unfolded in Srebrenica. Yet it is imperative to recognize that while the mass execution of more than 8,000 Bosniak men and boys is widely acknowledged, the genocide carried out by Bosnian Serb forces was far broader and more systematic. It included rape, forced displacement, starvation, and psychological terror, all designed to destroy a people in whole or in part, precisely as defined under the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. This was not only an atrocity of numbers, but of intent — deliberate, orchestrated, and methodically executed.

According to the Potočari Memorial Centre and recent reporting, after three decades of work, roughly 7,000 victims have been identified and buried, while approximately 1,000 individuals remain missing from the 1995 Srebrenica genocide. This solemn figure underscores the ongoing, painful reality for many families—some mothers, including those from the famed “Mothers of Srebrenica”, tragically passed away never knowing the fate of their sons. Identification has been painstakingly difficult, as many victims’ remains were scattered across multiple mass graves—a deliberate effort by perpetrators to conceal their systematic killings. Families have had to rely on DNA testing to identify the remains of loved ones, in hopes of giving their scattered remains a proper burial.

While we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, we must confront an uncomfortable truth: the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not truly over. Too often, traditional and social media, along with pundits and even some historians, portray genocide as a singular event—confined to a specific time and place, with a clear beginning and end. In reality, genocide is a process. As Dr. Gregory Stanton of Genocide Watch explains, genocide unfolds in “ten stages” that often occur simultaneously and recur cyclically. It begins with “classification,” the division of people into “us” versus “them,” followed by “symbolization,” where those groups are marked by names or symbols. “Discrimination” then uses legal, political, or social mechanisms to deny the targeted group’s rights. This is followed by “dehumanization,” where victims are “likened to vermin or disease,” stripping them of their humanity. The process escalates through

"organization," usually by the state or other structures of power, and "polarization," where extremists deepen divisions and silence dissent. Then comes "preparation," where victims are identified and separated, and "persecution," in which they suffer forced displacement, violence, or segregation. These lead to "extermination," the stage where "mass killings are carried out under the justification that the victims are subhuman." Finally, there is "denial," the last and enduring stage, where perpetrators "cover up evidence, minimize the crime, blame the victims, or actively rewrite history."

Despite multiple convictions at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and its successor, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT), genocide denial continues to undermine justice. In total, the ICTY and IRMCT indicted 20 individuals for crimes connected to the Srebrenica genocide. Of these, 18 were convicted of genocide and related crimes. Among them is Ratko Mladić, the Bosnian Serb commander infamously nicknamed the "Butcher of Bosnia." Mladić led the siege of Srebrenica and was later convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. In 2017, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, a historic judgment, yet one that has not prevented the persistent rewriting and denial of these atrocities across parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Serb-majority entity, the Republika Srpska (RS), like the capital Banja Luka, it's not uncommon to find entire souvenir collections at kiosks including — socks, t-shirts, key chains, and mugs — proudly displaying the image of Ratko Mladić as a hero. These disturbing tokens glorify a perpetrator of atrocity, turning him into a nationalist icon. Yet the image on those souvenirs pales in comparison to the man I saw with my own eyes from the gallery of the ICTY at his trial in The Hague in 2016. In the courtroom, Mladić appeared frail and aged, his face sunken with time. He looked bored and distant, as if the proceedings were just another routine part of his life. His outward demeanor, detached and unmoved, matched the chilling lack of remorse that has defined his legacy. It was not just the man, but the banality of his presence in that space, that was most haunting.

Across the RS, genocide denial remains rampant, entrenched in both political rhetoric and state institutions. In recent years, Milorad Dodik, the former Serb member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite presidency and current president of Republika Srpska, has repeatedly denied that the Srebrenica massacre constitutes genocide, despite the rulings of both the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Dodik has referred to the genocide as a "fabricated myth" and has called convicted war criminals like Ratko Mladić and war time RS president Radovan Karadžić "Serb heroes."

In a move emblematic of institutionalized denial, Republika Srpska authorities have imported Serbian history textbooks that downplay or omit entirely the events of July 1995. Additionally, Dodik's government has enacted laws criminalizing the use of the term "genocide" to describe Srebrenica within the RS, effectively constructing a legal framework for historical revisionism. These measures stand in direct opposition to the July 2021 decision by outgoing High Representative Valentin Inzko, who imposed legislation criminalizing genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals across Bosnia and Herzegovina. In a further attempt to distort historical truth, Dodik established a so-called "Independent International Commission" on Srebrenica in 2019, which issued a widely discredited report in 2021. The report downplayed the genocide and sought to reframe the victims as mere wartime casualties rather than the targets of systematic extermination. Critics, including international legal scholars and human rights organizations, have condemned the commission as a propaganda tool, designed to legitimize denial under the guise of academic inquiry and pseudo-objectivity. The lead author, Israeli academic Gideon Greif, later distanced himself from parts of the report, including its disputed victim numbers, after widespread backlash and international criticism.

This isn't just historical distortion; it's a deliberate political project aimed at erasing memory, obstructing reconciliation, and reasserting ethno-nationalist narratives. The denial of genocide in Republika Srpska not only retraumatizes survivors and their families but also threatens the fragile peace and democratic progress of the entire region.

While the then High Representative may have believed he was doing the right thing by criminalizing genocide denial in Bosnia and Herzegovina, I disagree. As much as we may wish it were otherwise, we cannot legislate the way people think, believe, or feel. And in practice, the criminalization of genocide denial, however well-intentioned, has not fostered reconciliation or reflection. Instead, it has often had the opposite effect: further inflaming nationalist sentiment and entrenching denial. Rather than silencing dangerous narratives, it has, in some cases, made them louder.

Bosnians, including Serbs, will ultimately need to forge an organic, nationally driven process to confront not only the competing narratives of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also the enduring truth of the Srebrenica genocide and the deep pain that continues to scar thousands of families. Such a reckoning must come from within, rooted in honest reflection and collective courage. Yet that process remains painfully out of reach so long as denial persists as a dominant narrative, shielding perpetrators, silencing survivors, and obstructing any path toward genuine reconciliation.

This year, the Srebrenica Memorial Center released new guidance for journalists, academics, and others who write or speak about the events of July 1995. One particularly poignant point stood out: “Call it what it is.” Not a massacre. Not ethnic conflict. Genocide. The word itself bears weight and power. Naming it truthfully is not just a matter of historical accuracy—it is a moral imperative. While we cannot undo the stages of genocide that unfolded in Bosnia, we can confront the final one: denial. We can stop it in its tracks by bearing witness, speaking plainly, and refusing euphemism. And we can honor the victims and survivors—many of whom still carry the scars of PTSD, survivors’ guilt, and enduring grief—by ensuring their stories are told with the dignity and truth they deserve.

For those of us in the international community, honoring the victims of the Srebrenica genocide must go beyond laying wreaths or issuing solemn declarations — it must mean learning from a haunted past to prevent its recurrence. And yet, nearly thirty years later, even as we acknowledge the international failures that enabled Srebrenica, we continue to struggle to name mass atrocities and genocide for what they are, especially when doing

so threatens political interests. We condemn in hindsight but remain paralyzed in real time.

What, then, will we say thirty years from now about the horrors unfolding today? Will we once again speak of “lessons learned,” grieve retroactively, and hold solemn vigils for crises we lacked the courage to confront? Or will we act, clearly and unapologetically, before history repeats itself?

The memory of Srebrenica’s victims demands more than ceremony and regret. It demands courage, moral clarity, and the resolve to confront evil—not in hindsight, but in the very moment it matters most.

About the Author:

Dr. Jared O. Bell is a global expert in post-conflict development and transitional justice, with over 15 years of experience designing, monitoring, and evaluating international development programs across fragile and conflict-affected states. A former Foreign Service Officer (U.S. Diplomat) with USAID, he served in numerous roles in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nicaragua, and at USAID headquarters in Washington, D.C., and previously directed the ABA Rule of Law Initiative’s Central Asia portfolio. While serving at USAID/Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dr. Bell managed the initiative *Continued ICMP Assistance to Bosnia and Herzegovina to Account for Persons Missing from the Conflicts of the 1990s*—a critical program supporting efforts to identify and account for the thousands of individuals still missing as a result of the wars that devastated the Western Balkans. His work spans global institutions such as UNDP, the UN Human Rights Council, Peace Direct, and the American Red Cross, with a focus on governance, atrocity prevention, civil society, and democratic transitions. Dr. Bell currently teaches graduate courses on designing, monitoring, and evaluating international development programs at NYU’s Center for Global Affairs. He is the author of *Frozen Justice: Lessons from Bosnia and Herzegovina’s Failed Transitional Justice Strategy* and has presented widely across Europe, Africa, and North America. His policy voice has been featured in Al Jazeera Balkans, The Hill, The Peace Chronicle, and other international media. He holds a Ph.D. in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, with additional advanced training from institutions including the

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