

The arrest of Radovan Karadzic and the complicity of the West in Bosnia's civil war

By Paul Mitchell
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The capture of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic has unleashed a torrent of historical distortions echoing the propaganda used to justify US-NATO intervention in the former Yugoslavia and to obscure the role of the Western powers in the federation's break-up.

Karadzic was president of the Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska—RS), head of the Serbian Democratic Party and supreme commander of the Bosnian Serb army. He was indicted in 1995 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) on 13 counts of genocide and other war crimes allegedly committed during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992-1995. Included in the charges are his responsibility for the 44-month shelling of the capital Sarajevo and the massacre of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica.

Karadzic disappeared following the signing of the November 1995 Dayton peace accords that ended the war in Bosnia and partitioned the former Yugoslav republic into two ethnically based entities—the RS and the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina (the Moslem-Croat alliance).

He was arrested on Monday, July 21, in the Serbian capital of Belgrade where he was disguised as Dragan Dabic, a doctor of alternative medicine. The circumstances surrounding his capture remain unclear. His attorney says he was arrested on the previous Friday on a bus near the capital and held incommunicado over the weekend.

Reports indicate that Western intelligence services may have played a role and that the capture of former Bosnian Serb police chief Stojan Zupljanin in June revealed new information. Others suggest his whereabouts were known for some time, but his arrest only went ahead after the removal of the Security Intelligence Service chief Rade Bulatovic by the new pro-Western coalition led by President Boris Tadic's Democratic Party. Interior Minister Ivica Dacic, who is also the head of former President Slobodan Milosevic's Socialist Party, denied that officials from his ministry took part in the arrest.

The arrest of all those indicted by the ICTY, including Karadzic and Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic, has been a precondition of Serbian accession to the European Union, which was the main platform on which the new government campaigned.

All eyes have turned on Karadzic following the failure of the ICTY to produce any real proof of the direct responsibility of former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic for the terrible crimes carried out during the civil wars that erupted in Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

"This is a very important day for the victims who have waited for this arrest for over a decade," said chief prosecutor Serge Brammertz. "It is also an important day for international justice, because it clearly

demonstrates that nobody is beyond the reach of the law and that sooner or later all fugitives will be brought to justice."

Secretary of State and special advisor on Yugoslav Affairs between 1989 and 1992 to President George H.W. Bush, Lawrence Eagleburger, said, "I think he's one of the last of a really miserable bunch that is still at large. He's not the only one but he's probably, with the arrest and then later the death of Milosevic, I think he's probably the man who most deserves to be caught and punished."

Former Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, who oversaw the Dayton Accord, singled out Karadzic as someone "whose enthusiastic advocacy of ethnic cleansing merits a special place in history."

Former Secretary of State under President Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, said of Karadzic's arrest, "Well, I think it is a huge event, a watershed event. It should have happened a long time ago, but the fact that it has in fact happened is very important for the Bosnian people and those who suffered as a result of Karadzic's policies."

There is no doubt that Karadzic played a major role in the political developments that sparked off the civil war in Bosnia, but for the Western media and politicians to portray him as the all-powerful "Butcher of Bosnia," who masterminded the destruction of the delicate ethnic balance in the country, is absurd.

What is entirely absent from this version of recent Yugoslav history is the decisive role of the major imperialist powers, particularly the US and Germany, which deliberately engineered the country's break-up, with a complete indifference to the inevitable tragic consequences of their intervention. Neither is there mention of the nationalist and communalist politicians they cultivated, such as Croatian President Franjo Tudjman or the Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic, who were culpable along with Karadzic.

Yugoslavia as it emerged from World War Two was the product of a popular movement against the Nazi occupation and Serbian royalist Chetnik forces, led by Josip Broz (Tito) and the Yugoslav Communist Party. Tito established a delicately balanced federation of disparate ethnic groups and regions. Under the specific historical circumstances provided by the Cold War, Tito was able for a number of years to manoeuvre between the US and the Soviet Union, while maintaining a unified federation based on constitutional guarantees to the various ethnic components—Serbs, Croats, Bosnian Muslims, Albanian Kosovars, etc.

Karadzic was born in Montenegro in June 1945, but he grew up without seeing his father who had been jailed by the Tito regime for fighting with the Chetniks. In 1960, Karadzic studied at the Sarajevo University of Medicine and attended New York's Columbia University from 1974 to 1975 to do advanced psychiatric work. In 1985, he was sentenced to prison along with close friend Momcilo

Krajisnik (later to be speaker of the Serb Assembly) for embezzling state funds in order to build houses for themselves.

Karadzic increasingly came under the influence of the Serb writer Dobrica Cosic, a propagandist for Tito's regime turned leader of the Serbian national revival movement and lauded as the "Father of the Serbian Nation." Karadzic became Dobric's political protégé, but he would probably have played a minor role in politics had it not been for the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation.

The origins of its break-up in the late 1980s and early 1990s are directly linked to the impact of policies dictated by the Western powers and imposed through International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment programmes. The aim of the West was to dismantle the state-run economy and restore the economic domination of international capital over Yugoslavia.

Pressure from the West contributed to soaring inflation and huge job losses, which sparked strikes and other mass protests by the Yugoslav working class. Seeking to divert the class struggle, ex-Stalinist bureaucrats promoted nationalist sentiments, while vying for support from Western governments.

By the time of multiparty elections in Bosnia in November 1990, three ethnically based parties had been formed. Alongside the Serbian Democratic Party set up by Karadzic, Krajisnik and Biljana Plavsic, who was to become RS vice-president, were Izetbegovic's ethnic Muslim Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ). The SDA won most seats in the Assembly, followed by the SDS and then the HDZ. The remaining seats were split between other parties, including the former Communist Party.

The ethnic tensions that had developed were to explode with the collapse of the USSR and the reunification of Germany in 1991. The geopolitical position of Yugoslavia as a bulwark against a Soviet thrust into the Mediterranean fundamentally changed. A resurgent German imperialism saw its interests in the Balkans—historically a German sphere of influence—best served through the promotion of secession by Slovenia, the most prosperous Yugoslav region, and then Croatia.

It was inevitable, given the history and politics of Yugoslavia, that the piecemeal break-up of the federation would lead to civil war. The secession of provinces would suddenly deprive ethnic minorities of the constitutional protections they had enjoyed under the federation. The creation of new nation states based upon ethnic nationalism led to "ethnic cleansing."

The US administration, after first opposing the break-up of Yugoslavia, changed its strategy in order to further its goal of hegemony over the former Eastern bloc countries newly opened to capitalist exploitation. It became the chief sponsor of Bosnian and then Kosovan independence and targeted Serbia, which defended the unitary state as its most powerful component, as its enemy. The US opposed ethnic cleansing only when the Serbs carried it out, while supporting Croatia, Bosnia and the Kosovo Albanians when they pursued identical aims through the same bloody methods.

In April of this year, the former Kosovo Liberation Army leader and ex-prime minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, was acquitted of war crimes committed against Serbs in Kosovo during 1998. The ICTY prosecution, which is seeking a retrial, claimed that two crucial witnesses did not come to The Hague to testify against the accused because they felt it unsafe to do so, and the trial chamber itself said that the trial was conducted "in an atmosphere where witnesses felt unsafe."

Last month, the US envoy in Croatia from 1993 to 1995, Peter Galbraith, denied that the 1995 offensive known as Operation Storm, which drove 200,000 Serbs from the Krajina area of Croatia, constituted "ethnic cleansing." Galbraith was appearing at the ICTY in the trial of Croatian generals, including Ante Gotovina, indicted for war crimes against Serbs committed by troops under their command during the military operation. Galbraith revealed that the US government had taken an "understanding attitude" towards Operation Storm, but insisted he would not have asked Washington "to give it the green light" if he had believed Tudjman intended to remove the Serbs. Earlier in his testimony, Galbraith admitted Tudjman and his associates wanted an "ethnically clean country".

As a result of the June 1991 war that broke out in Slovenia and Croatia after the two republics declared independence, chaos engulfed Bosnia. The SDA increasingly agitated for Bosnian independence whilst the SDS wanted Bosnia to remain a part of Yugoslavia. Within months, Izetbegovic had held a referendum on independence, which was approved by two thirds of the population but boycotted by the Serbs. For their part, the Serbs had formed a separate Bosnian Serb Assembly, which proclaimed the "Serbian republic of Bosnia" and created an army commanded by Ratko Mladic. Civil war was all but inevitable.

Srebrenica was the scene of the killing of an estimated 8,000 Bosnian men and boys in July 1995 by units of the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) under the command of Mladic—officially the largest mass murder in Europe since World War Two.

Srebrenica was designated as a "safe area" by the United Nations and was protected at the time by 200 Dutch troops. It became a base for the Bosnian Muslim Army (ABiH) to attack Serb forces. When Mladic's forces entered the town on July 11, they slaughtered a column mainly comprising men trying to escape to Tuzla with no distinction made between ABiH soldiers and civilians.

The ICTY prosecution will now have to prove Karadzic's command responsibility for the crimes that occurred during the civil war. Last year, the International Court of Justice found RS forces had committed genocide, but only in reference to Srebrenica, not elsewhere in the Bosnian war. So far, the tribunal has only proven genocide against two Bosnian Serbs for direct involvement in the Srebrenica massacre. It was unable to prove genocide against Karadzic's co-defendant Krajisnik.

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