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Bosnia-Herzegovina

Mladic, the war criminal, dies - we remember Srebrenica

- IV Online magazine - 2026 - IVP620 - September 2026 -



Publication date: Tuesday 1 September 2026

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The 11th of July marked the 30th anniversary of the genocide in July 1995 of over 8,000 largely Bosniak [\[1\]](#) men and male children by Bosnian Serb forces under the command of Ratko Mladic. They were buried in mass graves. Many thousand more fled into the forest and embarked on a harrowing journey lasting up to 7 days before reaching the eastern Bosnia village of Nezuk. What led up to the massacre and how it has been treated compared to two other wars: Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's genocide against the Palestinians..

Srebrenica remains the worst massacre in a single day in Europe since the second world war and was classed as genocide by both the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ). 16 people were convicted of crimes committed in Srebrenica including army chief Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic President of the Bosnian Serb state Republika Srpska both of whom are serving life sentences in the Hague.

Slobodan Milosevic, former President of Serbia and the main war criminal, was also eventually arrested, sent for trial and imprisoned in the Hague where he died in 2006. His deputy and head of the modern day fascist Cetniks, Vojislav Seselj, is also imprisoned in the Hague. How different from the current situation of Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu.

How different as well from the attitude to the daily massacres of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The murder of 8,000 Bosniaks is called genocide whereas the description of perhaps ten times as many Palestinians is hotly contested, particularly by western governments.

In May 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/78/282 which designated 11 July as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica, to be observed annually.

The same resolution also condemned any denial that genocide had been committed at Srebrenica and urged member states to preserve the established facts and to 'act in remembrance, towards preventing denial, distortion and occurrence of genocides in the future'.

However, the UN failed to explain how the genocide could take place in an area that had been designated 'a safe area' and that was supposedly protected by UN troops from the Netherlands. The Dutch 'blue helmets' were in an almost impossible position because they were 'peacekeepers' and therefore very restricted in how they could respond to Serb and Serbian attacks on the Bosniak population. [\[2\]](#) The Netherlands was the only state that offered to supply troops and western governments were preoccupied with discussing their plan to end the war drawn up by US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and British Foreign Secretary David Owen.

Irish UN troops were shot at by Israeli forces during Israel's recent war in Lebanon. The difficulties faced by the Dutch at Srebrenica do not appear to have been taken on board.

The Srebrenica genocide is not just an important horrible event from the past. It also impacts how we relate to current struggles, in particular in Ukraine and Palestine. To understand that we have to go back in history and look at the dynamics that led to the break-up of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. [\[3\]](#)

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY)

The SFRY [4] was created at the end of the second world war from the ruins of the old Yugoslavia. The dominant forces was the Partisan army in which the Communist Party was hegemonic. The Partisans had fought the invading German armies, the pro-Nazi Serbian government in Belgrade, [5] the equally pro-Nazi Ustase regime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Serb nationalist Cetnik movement before emerging victorious.

The main struggles took place in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although the majority of the Partizans were Serbs, they were predominantly from Serb areas of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina rather than from Serbia itself. Their leading figure Josip Broz (better known as Tito) was part Croat and part Slovene.

The Partizans were fully aware that one of the causes of the break-up of the old Yugoslavia was the conflict between different national groups. In particular they were concerned to prevent domination by Serbs, the largest national grouping. The solution was a federal state consisting of the Republics of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro.

At the same time the Yugoslav Communists were involved in a struggle with Stalin and the Cominform. Under the agreement Stalin had reached with Winston Churchill, Yugoslavia was supposed to be in the British sphere of influence and Stalin was decidedly unhappy that the Yugoslavs had taken power. Tito and the Partizans were ostracised and expelled from international communist organizations.

The split with Moscow had a real impact on the development of Yugoslavia as a federal state. The Republics were allowed some autonomy; 'workers' self-management' was promoted in contrast to the highly bureaucratized model in the Soviet Union. On the international stage, the Yugoslavs were actively involved in creating and developing the Nonaligned Movement. But behind the scenes developments were taking place that would eventually lead to the destruction of the SFRY after the death of Tito

Kosova [6] Uprising

By the late 1980s the SFRY was experiencing major problems. The economy was in serious trouble, unable to pay the massive borrowing undertaken in the 1970s. Economic problems were most acute in the autonomous province of Kosova, part of Serbia with an Albanian majority but with an almost mythical significance for Serb nationalists. [7] Unemployment was over 20%. Young people took to the streets and demanded that Kosova should become a Republic independent of Serbia but within the SFRY. Their protests were brutally suppressed by the police and army who were increasingly loyal to Slobodan Milosevic who had come to power in 1987.

After he came to power Milosevic set about changing the balance of forces. He replaced the party leadership in Montenegro, abolished the autonomous status of the two provinces of Kosova and Vojvodina (the latter had no majority nationality, but Hungarians formed the largest minority) but retained their seats on the Federal bodies, thereby giving himself a minimum of 4 votes out of 8.

The other Republics were also experiencing severe economic difficulties. But whereas in Serbia and Montenegro Milosevic advocated much greater federal control in Croatia, and especially Slovenia the leadership of the League of Communists wanted looser controls, greater decentralisation.

Slovenia Versus Serbia

The very different perspectives of the leaderships of the League of Communists of Serbia and the League of Communists of Slovenia and the conflict between them are central to understanding the breakup of Yugoslavia. Serbia wanted a more tightly controlled economy alongside a more centralized state: the Slovenes wanted greater economic freedom and a more decentralized state with greater autonomy for the Republics. Both sides wanted greater concessions to capitalism and the market: it is completely wrong to see Milosevic as defending socialism and Slovene leader Milan Kucan supporting capitalism.

Milosevic's increasingly authoritarian tendencies eventually led to the leadership of the League of Communists of Slovenia declaring independence, something they were theoretically guaranteed the right to do under the 1974 constitution. The response of Milosevic and the leadership of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) was military. For ten days, from 27 June to 7 July 1991, the Slovenian Territorial Defence Force and the police fought against the JNA. The war ended with a ceasefire and the withdrawal of JNA forces.

Why did the JNA withdraw and why did Milosevic support this? Primarily because there were very few Serbs in Slovenia and by this time Milosevic was a confirmed Serb nationalist. Milosevic's decision to call off the war against Slovenia would, however, have major repercussions in Croatia and later Bosnia because once Slovenia was allowed to secede from the SFRY then it was almost inevitable that Croatia would follow and that Bosnia-Herzegovina would not be far behind.

War In Croatia: Echoes of Ukraine

Milosevic may well have been willing to let Slovenia go but Croatia was a totally different issue. Croatia, unlike Slovenia, had many Serbs and Milosevic was determined to pull them into a Greater Serbia. Milosevic's supporters in Croatia had initially come into conflict with the then Communist government when they organised demonstrations supporting the repression of the Albanian population of Kosova. Now they came up against the government of former Communist turned Croatian nationalist Franjo Tudjman.

There is little evidence that Serbs in Croatia were initially threatened by the Croatian government, nor is there evidence that the government were Ustase. Just as there is no evidence that Zelenskyy in Ukraine is a neo-Nazi, as claimed by Putin and his supporters. The parallels between the wars in Croatia and Ukraine are striking.

Milosevic and the JNA invaded Croatia just as Putin and the Russian army invaded Ukraine. Both of the invading forces included activists from far-right parties. Vukovar was destroyed in Croatia just as was Mariupol in Ukraine. Fraudulent referenda were used in Croatia to establish the Krajina Serb Republic just as they were to establish the pro-Russian 'republics' in eastern Ukraine. Zelenskyy is accused of being a Banderite just as Tudjman was accused of being an Ustasa. The Serbs in Krajina were not primarily motivated by defending Serbs but by making an independent Croatian state impossible, in a similar way to the pro-Russian (and very often Russian) forces in the Donbass who appear more concerned to destroy Ukraine rather than defend the people of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Sadly, there is also one other parallel: the inability of the left, particularly in Britain, to see beyond their preoccupation with an all-powerful western imperialism that controls all events. So, the Socialist Workers Party at the time claimed that the war in Croatia was the fault of Germany, because Germany recognized the independence of Croatia. The fact that other states recognized Croatia before Germany was ignored as well as the fact that the recognition came after the war had begun.

Western intervention was blamed, the people of Croatia mere puppets to be manipulated at will by imperialism. More echoes of Ukraine where much of the left in Britain denies any agency to the people of Ukraine in their war against

Putin. They too are mere puppets in the hands of imperialist powers. The Maidan protests were all manipulated by the USA or neo-Nazis – and other nonsense.

In any case, is not recognizing a state not also a form of imperialist intervention? Are we indifferent as to whether or not the British government recognizes a Palestinian state for example.

War in Bosnia

The conclusion of the war against Croatia led Milosevic inevitably into war against Bosnia-Herzegovina. Given his determination to gather the largest possible of Serbs into a single Greater Serbia state there was no way he would ignore the large Serb population in Bosnia. His attempt to carve up Bosnia was aided by his former enemy Franjo Tudman who also tried to carve out the largely Croat Herzegovina for his vision of a Greater Croatia.

Much of the left in Britain again failed to understand the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, seeing it as purely a clash of different nationalisms. [8] They didn't have an understanding of the complexities of Bosnian society and particularly failed to grasp the multi-national nature of the state and, for that matter, the government in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite the worst efforts of Milosevic and Tudman, a multi-national government survived including Bosniaks, Croats, Serbs and other national minorities. The head of the Bosnian army was a Serb. The editor of the pro-government daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje*, which continued to publish throughout the war, was a Serb.

Above all the workers' movement remained multi-national. In the industrial town of Tuzla, the trade unions organized defence forces which included Serbs, Croats and Bosniaks, Yugoslavs who refused ethnic categorization, and all the nationalities of the region. Tuzla became a central focus for those on the left throughout western Europe who could understand the difference between the multi-national, multi-ethnic government of Bosnia and the ultra-nationalism of Milosevic and Tudman. The Fourth International is rightly proud of the role of its militants in aiding the struggle of the workers of Tuzla and building International Workers Aid. [9]

Source: [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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[1] Bosniaks are also known as Bosnian Muslims who were classed as a 'nation' in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia before its destruction. About 1,000 of the dead remain unidentified.

[2] For an account of the difficulties faced by the Dutchbat troops see: Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, Penguin 1996.

[3] What follows is a brief sketch of the formation and disintegration of Yugoslavia from 1945 to the 1990s. For a more complete analysis see Geoff Ryan (ed) Bosnia 1994: **Armageddon in Europe** available at [Scanned Image](#) – Marxists Internet Archive)

[4] Strictly speaking the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia until 1963 when the name was changed to SFRY. For convenience I have

used SFRY throughout.

[5] This government is often forgotten about in accounts of the second world war in Yugoslavia. The brutality and antisemitism of the Ustase government in Croatia is frequently mentioned yet the fact that the Serbian government was the first in Europe to declare its country judenrein (cleared of Jews) is ignored.

[6] I have used the Albanian spelling rather than the Serb Kosovo.

[7] It was in Kosova that the Serbian army was defeated by the Ottoman army and Serbia came under Ottoman control. The battle took place in 1389, though for Serb nationalists it could have been yesterday.

[8] There were some exceptions, particularly Workers Power and the Workers Revolutionary Party who in their own ways supported the right of Bosnia-Herzegovina to exist but the sectarianism of the WRP in particular made it impossible to build a joint solidarity campaign. International Workers Aid was supported by the Fourth International and comrades from Belgium, Denmark, Sweden and Britain amongst others played important roles in getting aid to Bosnia. As indeed did the WRPs Workers Aid for Bosnia.

[9] For more information on Workers Aid see Nicholas Moll, Solidarity Is More Than a Slogan available to [download](#) from Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.