

RVI ADVISORY BRIEFS

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Memory Wars in the Balkans: How Srebrenica Genocide Denialists and Bleiburg Conspiracy Theorists are Twisting the Historical Narrative



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Nenad Radićević

There are two commemoration ceremonies that have become the beacons around which nationalists in the post-Yugoslav Balkan space rally every year; the commemoration of the 1995 genocide of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) in Srebrenica committed by the Bosnian Serb forces, and the commemoration of the 1945 massacre of retreating Nazi allies and accompanying civilians by the victorious Partisans. Their commemorations, held annually, have become political flashpoints.

According to the region's prominent historians, manipulation of the history of the Second World War occurs in all post-Yugoslav countries. Similarly, they say the history of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s is following the same trajectory and that history is, in fact, "a platform for continuing the Yugoslav Wars by other means."¹

These Yugoslav memory wars are reignited annually, in the spring and in the summer, as the anniversaries of May 1945 and July 1995 come around. In these periods, a higher degree of mobilisation is seen in nationalist circles, with public events and gatherings being held, which sometimes lead to skirmishes and sporadic incidents of violence. Over the years, the digital stockpile of cherry-picked, misrepresented facts, half-truths and outright lies have been amassed, dressed up as official documents, secret memoranda, eyewitness testimonies or 'objective expert opinion'.

Analysing the digital content, primarily consisting of social media posts and texts published in the online media (both in mainstream and in alternative outlets) around the com-

¹ Defend History Declaration. (2020). Udruženje Krokodil. Available at: https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1-DQ8edN-TS3W5_hhJTWYS-khrP515F_Xh, p.2

memoration of the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Srebrenica, and around the 75th anniversary of Bleiburg commemoration in Sarajevo earlier in May, this Advisory Brief compares the arguments and manipulation efforts of those who seek to promote denial of the genocide in Srebrenica and, those that the Bleiburg “truthers” frequently use.

As others have observed earlier, the prevailing arguments, deployed to fuel and exploit contention in online messaging, relate primarily to the number of victims and their identities. They are supplemented by a steady dose of ‘bothsidesism’ and ‘whataboutism’, drawing attention to crimes and wrongdoing committed by members of opposing factions and groups. Secondly, there exists a long-term strategy to delegitimise the verdicts issued by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and International Court of Justice (ICJ), wherein they found Bosnian-Serb leadership guilty of genocide. This is done by smearing the courts and accusing them of anti-Serb bias. Thirdly, this brief analyses the aggressive tactics, particularly used online, when attacking those who acknowledge and accept the wrongdoing and crimes committed by “their side,” while presenting themselves as victims of censorship.

There were many more/much fewer victims.

The Genocide Denial Report 2020 issued by the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Centre provides a comprehensive overview of talking points and tactics and the first tactic mentioned is the disputing of the numbers and identities of victims². According to official figures, 8,372 people were killed in Srebrenica³, but the number of those killed has been disputed vigorously for years.

2 Genocide Denial Report (2020) Srebrenica Genocide Memorial. Available at: https://www.srebrenicamemorial.org/bs/document/40_p.31

3 Victims and Survivors (2020) Srebrenica Genocide Memorial. Available at: <https://www.srebrenicamemorial.org/en/category/8/1>

Numerous posts and publications reviewed this July, contained attempts to reduce that number substantially. In one identified example, the author alleges that ICTY investigators determined that only 2,361 bodies had been exhumed from 30 mass graves. Others questioned the numbers of those killed in Srebrenica by claiming that Bosniak victims throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina were added to the Srebrenica victim count, or by claiming that names of around 3,000 Srebrenica victims shown up on the list of people registered to vote in 1996 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or claiming the lists contain the names of people who are alive and have emigrated to Germany or America, are inscribed on the monuments.

As for Bleiburg, the ‘truthers’ engage in an effort with the opposite goal - to show that the “real” victim headcount is much higher. Unlike in Srebrenica, there is no list of names and the overall numbers are much higher, resulting in a much wider range of casualties. According to an article published in the journal *L’Europe en formation*, from between 45,000 to 55,000 to widely exaggerated 200,000 or even 600,000 victims.⁴ The online posts created to exploit Bleiburg for ethno-nationalist propaganda are always citing numbers on the inflated side of the spectrum. An article published in 2018 by a Croatian portal that fuels historical revisionism, stated that more than a million people were displaced, killed or expelled from Croatia at the time of Bleiburg. This story resurfaced and was circulated online this year, despite the claim having been debunked⁵.

There were perpetrators and victims on both sides

‘Bothsideism’ is another way to obscure the truth about what really happened in July 1995, through muddying the distinction between the perpetrators and those killed in Srebrenica. The combat roles and ethnic identity of the victims are often disputed in social media posts and in texts published by alternative media.

4 Pavlakovic, Vjeran(2010). Deifying the Defeated: Commemorating Bleiburg since 1990. *L’Europe en Formation*, 357(3), 125-147. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2010-3-page-125.htm>

5 Benačić, Ana (12/02/2020). Nije točno da je zbog Bleiburga iz Hrvatske nestalo milijun Hrvata. *Faktograph.hr*. Available at: <https://faktograf.hr/2020/02/12/demografaska-katastrofa-bleiburg-priznajem/>

In the content analysed in July this year, false claims, such as the one that no Muslim civilians were killed and that only Serb civilians that were killed in Srebrenica, were often spread. Newspaper articles circulating online stated there were no Serbs living in Srebrenica on 12 July 1995, supported by the claim of one historian that “it was a great omission and irreparable mistake of Serbian statesmen and politicians not having, then or later, informed the public that in Srebrenica the Muslims have killed all the Serbs during their rule”⁶. Additionally, alternative Serbian media also pushed a several-year-old statement by one of the members of the Bosniak community in Srebrenica, who alleges that the Bosniak-led military and political leadership in Srebrenica had made a list of politically ‘undesirable’ Bosniaks who could not be allowed to escape the enclave, and that, as a result, at least between 500 and 1,000 Bosniaks from Srebrenica were killed by their compatriots during the breakthrough towards Tuzla in July 1995. This story resurfaces online every year in July as an argument in questioning the Srebrenica genocide.

Regarding manipulation of the history of events in Bleiburg, one historical fact that is conveniently edited out, is that members of Slovenian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Muslim fascist formations, who were also retreating with the Ustaša,⁷ were also killed at Bleiburg, in an attempt to create a myth of an exclusively Croatian suffering and losses; a “Croatian holocaust.”⁸

In the online content analysed in May, arguments exclusively focus on the fact that the members of the Croatian army and numerous refugees from Croatia were killed near Bleiburg. While not incorrect, an important detail that it was mostly members of the NDH troops⁹, many of whom had committed war crimes or genocide, is conveniently omitted, in an at-

6 Šurbat, Vesna (07/07/2020). U Srebrenici Nije Zatečeno Živih Srba. SRNA. rs. Available at: <http://srna.rs/novosti/805601/u-srebrenici-nije-zate-ceno-zivih-srba.htm>

7 from Croatian: Ustaša – Hrvatski revolucionarni pokret (Croatian revolutionary movement), an inter-war nationalist movement in Croatia seeking the independence of Croatia

8 Bleiburg as the “Croatian Holocaust”. AK Pilberk / Pilberg. Available at: <https://www.no-ustasa.at/en/general-en/2785/bleiburg-as-the-croatian-holocaust/>

9 NDH stands for Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, or Independent State of Croatia, a fascist puppet state established in parts of German-occupied Yugoslavia

tempt to distort the context, strengthening the narrative of victimhood.

What about...?

Ideological and/or ethnic divisions frequently manifest themselves in references to “our” and “their” crimes. Those who dispute the historical facts about what happened in Srebrenica in July 1995, like to deflect blame by bringing up the crimes committed against the Serbs either during the Yugoslav wars or during the Second World War. Introducing the infamous places of civilian suffering, from Vukovar, Operation Storm (Oluja) to the Ustasha-run concentration camp of Jasenovac, where many Serbs, together with Jewish and Roma victims were killed, into the discussion is often employed as an effective deflection technique.

On the other hand, Bleiburg is often used as a deflection in discussions about Ustasha crimes. Another deflection technique in the Bleiburg-related arguments, is to talk about Goli Otok, the infamous jail where Tito’s regime’s political prisoners were held, which connects this narrative to a broader communication strategy of the Croatian ethno-nationalists.

Recasting Bleiburg as a place of exclusively Croatian suffering contributes to, or is a part of a broader endeavour, to present the anti-fascist struggle as a fight against the Croat people and their identity. In the online posts of those with whom this narrative resonates, especially in the diaspora, every mention of Yugoslav communism, including the celebrations of the end of WW2, is followed by arguments about the political persecution of Croats, the suppression of Croatian statehood and communist crimes against Croats, starting from Bleiburg. This narrative purposefully ignores the role of around 140,000 ethnic Croats who were members of the anti-fascist movement and the Yugoslav People’s Liberation Army. As mentioned earlier, it also edits out the Bleiburg’s victims of other nationalities, and the main context in which the massacre took place, i.e. the surrender of those aligned with Axis powers at the end of the war.

Your war criminals are our martyrs/liberators

Being able to engage in the glorification of convicted war criminals, as is the common practice in the post-Yugoslav online space, requires that the legitimacy of the tribunals and their verdicts is constantly questioned and eroded.

In an alternative narrative popular amongst Serb nationalists, the 11 July is considered “the day of the liberation of Srebrenica” and the military commander General Ratko Mladić responsible for the killings is hailed as a hero. Often, experts from outside the Balkans who outright reject or question Mladić’s responsibility for the Srebrenica genocide are quoted, lending the air of objectivity.

An example from July this year, a Serbian tabloid Informer published an article titled “The Mladić Case! A scapegoat for NATO war crimes in Yugoslavia! A well-known Canadian lawyer busted the lies of the Hague Tribunal!” An obscure blog called Zanimljiveinteresanone, published a post titled “Finnish historian shocked the world: Mladić is a hero! He defended Europe from Islamists!” Both of these circulated online widely in July, around the time of Srebrenica commemoration. The last one was primarily shared among Facebook groups which bring together Serb nationalists, members of the far-right, pro-Russian activists and sympathizers, achieving a reach of more than 450.000 Facebook users, and prompting more than 43.000 interactions.

Even online discussants who do not outright deny Serbia’s role in the war crimes committed in Srebrenica, still often dispute the genocide verdict, by delegitimising ICTY or ICJ. This line of reasoning is further supported by the fact that the genocide verdict was never accepted by the Serbian government’s representatives. The resolution introduced in the United States Congress under the title “Condemning the genocide and other crimes against the Bosniak community perpetrated by Bosnian Serb forces at Srebrenica in Bosnia

and Herzegovina in July 1995”¹⁰, is widely seen as an attack on Serbia and a result of the opposition lobbying efforts in Washington.

For Bleiburg, the strategy is quite similar - while the mainstream narrative maintains that the enemy combatants were killed - the alternative narrative focuses on downplaying the Nazi connection and justifying any actions committed by the Croat patriots killed at Bleiburg as defence of the homeland.

They want to silence us.

While the commemoration in Srebrenica, is a solemn event, attended by heads of states (including the then Serbian Prime Minister, now president, Alexander Vučić in 2015), the organisation of the Bleiburg commemoration is rife with controversy. This year’s gathering in Loibacher Feld/Libuško polje near Bleiburg was cancelled by the organisers due to coronavirus restrictions, which led the main event to be organised in Sarajevo instead¹¹. The practice of commemorating Bleiburg have evolved over a long period of time in Croatia, with an important role played by the Croatian diaspora. These practices are now also creeping into Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹²

On the other hand, even prior to this year’s exceptional circumstances of the global pandemic, the Austrian government has been pushing back on, and restricting commemoration in Bleiburg, which had become a magnet for the far-right extremists across Europe¹³. In March 2019, the Carinthian Diocese rejected a request from the Croatian Bishops’ Conference to hold an annual mass at the Bleiburg

10 H.Res.1045 - Condemning the genocide and other crimes against the Bosniak community perpetrated by Bosnian Serb forces at Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 1995. (13/07/2020) US House of Representatives. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/1045/text>

11 See the May Resonant Voices Radar for more details about the Sarajevo event and the reactions

12 For a historical overview see: Milekić, Sven (25/06/2020) Croatia has Tarnished its Image Over the Bleiburg Mass. Balkan Insight. Available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/25/croatia-has-tarnished-its-image-over-the-bleiburg-mass/> or the more detailed report at: Pavlakovic, Vjeran(2010). Deifying the Defeated: Commemorating Bleiburg since 1990. L’Europe en Formation, 357(3), 125-147. Available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2010-3-page-125.htm>

13 Stojanović, Dušan (18/05/2019) Croats gather in Austria for controversial commemoration. AP News. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/a9f0f144f3384dc6aff9ba913764be7c>

commemoration¹⁴, citing the experience of the previous year. The justification for the rejection further mentions that the event is “politically instrumentalised” and serves a selective interpretation of history and that the Diocese considers the event is damaging to the reputation of the Catholic Church. In the same year, Ustasha symbols were banned in Austria.

The Austrian government is now looking for a permanent solution and plans to deal with the event strategically. Recognising that the annual meeting poses a challenge for the authorities, especially for the police, this July, the Austrian government formed an interdisciplinary working group¹⁵ to initiate a holistic assessment of commemoration in Bleiburg and to create the basis for a decision on policy for future events.

Unfortunately, the bans and cancellations also play into the narrative of censorship and free speech martyrdom, which the alternative media in Croatia heavily exploit. The complaints of censorship also follow the Facebook ‘down-ranking’ of misinformation about Bleiburg, posted by some of these outlets, based on reports from the Croatian fact checkers.

Similarly, the Serb-nationalist ‘outrage machine’ fighting the ‘global conspiracy’ of the “Srebrenica truth” is very vocal online. The black-and-white thinking is visible in the vicious attacks on those who dare acknowledge that genocide was committed in Srebrenica or suggest that the government and people start dealing with the past. They are immediately branded as traitors. This year, the director of performance dealing with the subject of Srebrenica genocide¹⁶, Zlatko Paković, as well as other participating actors, received multiple serious threats after the piece was shown in Belgrade¹⁷.

14 Gedenkfeier am Loibacher Feld: Katholische Kirche Kärnten erteilt für 2019 keine Erlaubnis zur Feier der hl. Messe (08/03/2019) Katholischen Kirche Kärnten. Available at: <https://www.kath-kirche-kaernten.at/dioezese/detail/C2488/gedenkfeier-am-loibacher-feld-katholische-kirche-kaernten-erteilt-fuer-2019-keine-erlaubnis-zur-feier-der-hl-messe>

15 Nehammer: Start der Arbeitsgruppe zu “Gedenken auf dem Loibacher Feld” (10/09/2020) Innenministerium <https://bmi.gv.at/news.aspx?id=74797776633662677251513D>

16 Sabljaković, Una. (11/07.2019)Srebrenica - Kad mi ubijeni ustanemo. Deutsche Welle. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/bs/srebrenica-kad-mi-ubijeni-ustanemo/a-49545532>

17 Sejdinović, Nedim (13/10/2020) Zlatko Paković: Srbija – najmračniji od svih tamnih balkanskih vilajeta. Tacno.net. Available at: <https://www.tacno.net/novosti/zlatko-pakovic-srbija-najmracniji-od-svih-tamnih-balkanskih-vilajeta/>

And while the civil society organisations and some political parties in Serbia are - so far unsuccessfully - advocating that 11 July is proclaimed as Day of Remembrance of the Srebrenica genocide in Serbia, the closest Sunday to 15 May, the day of the Bleiburg commemoration, has been commemorated in Croatia for years as the Day of Remembrance of Croatian Victims in the Struggle for Freedom and Independence.

The cumulative effect of these above-mentioned efforts to flood the public discourse with flawed arguments, is that the historical accounts get muddled and the audience gradually loses the ability to distinguish between the facts and the misinformation and propaganda, to the point that it becomes easier to accept or dismiss the information presented, based on ideological alignment or ethnic identity. More concerningly, the mere notion that it is possible to establish historical truths and that it is possible to reconcile and move on are being seen as more and more distant and unattainable options.

This Brief attempted to show these two, seemingly separate efforts, around two different historical events, are following the same script and use similar techniques, highlighting both dynamic and permanent features of these narratives, responding to the complexity context.

More effective, comprehensive and long-term responses to these denialist and truther narratives are needed, as these resonate way beyond the borders and the context of the Balkans, where they are picked up, repackaged and deployed by assorted groups seeking to sow fear, doubt and further erode trust in democratic institutions, scientific method, and international cooperation.



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