

## Truth and Revisionism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

As scholars whose research involves public understandings of recent history, conflicts over public memory, and efforts to achieve justice in relation to massive crimes committed in the wars of succession in the former Yugoslavia, we feel obligated to provide some context for understanding the two commissions recently appointed by the government of the Republika Srpska (RS) entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first is charged with revisiting the conclusions of the 2004 Srebrenica commission, and the other with investigating abuses committed against members of the ethnic Serb population in Sarajevo.

While regional media continue to trade in predictable nationalist recriminations, we begin with a simple point: There are already existing frameworks for reaching truth and reconciliation, both globally and in the Yugoslav region, and the newly announced RS commissions fit into a pattern of deliberate revision of established truths. Here we want to lay out the issues at stake.

- 1) *“Truth” commissions have a global history.* Priscilla Hayner in her landmark book *Unspeakable Truths* reviews the work of 40 commissions, successful and unsuccessful, around the world, starting with the first commission founded in Uganda in 1974. The motivations for naming a commission vary, from assuring that incidents are documented, to substituting for initiatives in the area of retributive justice, to providing a foundation on which governments can offer reparations or apologies. In addition to the 40 commissions highlighted by Hayner, many states around the world have created commissions to document and explain incidents in their own internal history or in the history of colonialism, most of which have produced reports that accompanied a policy of apology or reparation. Often, particularly in Central and South America, commissions have functioned as a compromise solution when unstable political environments made criminal prosecution risky. In African states in particular, commissions have been regarded as a part of a comprehensive enterprise of facilitating social healing, often involving community and religious leaders in addition to researchers. A related effort recently concluded in Canada with respect to the “Indian residential school system,” which the responsible commission characterized as an act of “cultural genocide.” In the best cases, commissions have succeeded in contributing credible information to the historical record and assisted in the process of building peace. In the worst cases, they have substituted for more ambitious programmes for achieving justice and have provided one-sided or selective versions of historical experience.
- 2) *The experience of commissions in the post-Yugoslav space is mixed.* Most efforts to found commissions have not succeeded. Only one commission in the region has actually produced a credible report, and that is the commission on Srebrenica appointed by the RS government in December 2003, which published reports in June 2004 and in October 2004. This commission was appointed following outraged responses to a 2003 report that was universally dismissed as a work of historical falsification. Several local and statewide initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina proved to be unsuccessful, largely because of weak public support and perceptions that the impulse behind these initiatives came from outside of the local public. In both Croatia (“Council for Dealing with Consequences of the Rule of Non-Democratic Regimes”) and Serbia (“Commission of Truth and Reconciliation”) top-down initiatives have

failed, principally due to partiality, obvious political motivation, and an overall approach that sought to justify abuses through relativisation.

In general where initiatives in the region have failed, it has either been because a lack of public legitimacy or because of an appearance of partiality or insincerity. The worst efforts have been those which have attempted to trivialise crimes as “inevitable” byproducts of war, to dissolve them into the mud of relativisation, or to minimise them by broadening contexts to expand into a variety of irrelevant considerations. Common to every unsuccessful initiative is disrespect for the needs and experiences of victims.

- 3) *The current effort in the RS fits into a context of instrumental appropriation of history.* Although the RS Srebrenica commission report of 2004 accepted the historical context and established facts from the Radislav Krstić judgment, who was convicted for convicted of aiding and abetting genocide, and was followed by an official apology by then entity president Dragan Čavić, it did not end efforts at denial. In their attempt to diminish the conclusions of the Commission for Srebrenica report, the RS government financed the “Srebrenica Historical Project,” a group dedicated to undermining the existing evidence in relation to events in and around Srebrenica. Though it offered other arguments, the SHP’s principal argument was that a “holistic” view of events would consider not only the murder of civilians in 1995, but all of the violence around Srebrenica between 1992 and 1995. It then sought to minimise the number of the 1995 murders and to inflate the numbers of ethnic Serb victims in the preceding period, seeking a kind of equivalence. This effort was in conflict with the facts, but consistent with an overall rhetorical approach that sought to establish equivalence between all groups of victims, symbolically annulling the importance of them all. A similar strategy is visible in the initiative to establish a new commission to investigate abuses committed against Serbs in Sarajevo. The strategy here is to turn legitimate grievances into material for trivialising grievances suffered by others.

The rhetorical technique apparent in the record of denial is reminiscent of the very controversial theses offered in the 1980s by Ernst Nolte, who sought to legitimate outrages committed by the Nazis by dissolving them into grievances against modernity and Soviet Communism.

- 4) *Some commissions succeed in settling historical accounts and some do not.* We have already noted that some investigative commissions are successful while others are not. The factors that contribute to the success of a commission include: 1) founding in response to a genuine and shared desire for truth, 2) popular and institutional legitimacy, 3) a commitment to fairness, completeness, and accuracy, 4) leadership and membership with unassailable reputations for objectivity, probity, and professionalism, and 5) a genuine orientation toward social reconciliation. Little argument is necessary to show that the new RS commissions fail on all these counts.

We note here that the newly created commissions represent the culmination of more than a decade of genocide denial and historical revisionism by the SNSD government in the RS, a period which has coincided with a dramatic decline in the overall democratic legitimacy and transparency of the government in Banja Luka. Moreover, the membership of the commission is composed of fringe elements, individuals who do not represent either the consensus views of the academic or legal communities, and who appear handpicked to produce narratives that will advance the revisionist politics

of the current RS government.

- 5) *A “holistic” approach to crimes committed in the conflict might not produce the result that is desired politically.* One of the central assumptions behind relativizing projects is that a more “complete” account will reveal a greater number of crimes committed by members of groups that are generally regarded as victim groups, and will consequently relieve perpetrators from the perception that they share a uniquely guilty status. This would not necessarily be the result of revelation of additional facts. One possible outcome of a “holistic” exploration of mass violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina between 1992 and 1995 could be a finding that forcible change of the population was a principal military and political goal of one of the warring parties, and that this is visible in other locations in Bosnia and Herzegovina well before the Srebrenica genocide. Although the ICTY did not accept prosecution arguments that RS strategy in and around Prijedor, for example, constituted genocide by legal standards, by historical standards it recognisably follows the pattern described in Gregory Stanton’s Ten Stages of Genocide, from classification and symbolization right through to persecution, extermination, and denial. A similar pattern can be observed in other sites of mass killings in eastern Bosnia and Herzegovina under the control of the then RS forces: Bijeljina, Zvornik, Višegrad, Foča and others. The result of this kind of “holistic” research would be to show that genocide did not occur in an isolated instance in 1995, but represented a widespread and continuous policy.
- 6) *There is an already existing framework for reaching the “whole truths” that are demanded.* A stated goal of the new commissions is to move beyond partial truths and achieve a type of fairness. Among the reasons that this initiative is not likely to achieve this goal is that it is politically imposed from above, is carried out by people lacking scientific credibility and objectivity, and is designed to function with a conclusion that has been determined in advance of the gathering of information. If there were a genuine desire to tell complete stories legitimately, it might be noted that a popular initiative in the region has been pursuing that goal since 2008. The Coalition for REKOM unites human rights groups, victims’ groups, veterans’ groups, and a number of other organisations throughout the region in an effort to appoint a multigovernmental coalition that will establish facts about all aspects of the violence that accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia. If the REKOM proposal were to be put into practice, it would produce credible data on Srebrenica, on the treatment of residents of Sarajevo, and about a large number of other incidents of organised violence, some of which are already well documented and some of which are not. If authorities in RS, and everywhere else in the region, are genuinely sincere in their declared goal of establishing reliable facts, they should support the REKOM initiative, which the government in Banja Luka has, to date, pointedly refused to do.

Although we regard the recent initiative by RS authorities as illegitimate overall, we understand that it represents a flawed response to a legitimate need. Citizens of the states of Southeast Europe have a right to truth, are hurt by the persistent denial of this right and its replacement with a steady diet of tendentious propaganda, and are being deprived of the opportunity to live in peace and move toward reconciliation because of this. There is a genuine need for facts to be established, for facts that have already been established to be recognised, and for knowledge to operate as the foundation for communication and moral responsibility.

Eric Gordy, University College London  
Edin Hajdarpašić, Loyola University Chicago  
Jasmin Mujanović, Elon University  
Marijana Toma, Memria  
Florian Bieber, University of Graz  
Srđan Vučetić, University of Ottawa  
Kurt Bassuener, Democratization Policy Council  
Tanya Domi, Columbia University  
Carl Dahlman, Miami University  
Aida Hozić, University of Florida  
Darryl Li, University of Chicago  
Gerard Toal, Virginia Polytechnic Institute  
Bruce Hitchner, Tufts University  
Ana Croegaert, University of New Orleans  
Sarah Wagner, George Washington University  
Refik Hodžić, Journalist  
John Paul Newman, Maynooth University  
Gerry Kearns, Maynooth University  
Karen Till, Maynooth University  
Danijela Majstorović, University of Banja Luka  
John O'Brennan, Maynooth University  
Emil Kerenji, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum  
Hariz Halilovich, RMIT University  
Safia Swimelar, Elon University  
Amila Buturović, York University  
Louis Bickford, Memria  
Valery Perry, Analyst  
Jessie Hronešova, Analyst  
Laurence Cole, University of Birmingham  
Iva Vukušić, Utrecht University  
Andy Aydın-Aitchison, University of Edinburgh