

Fifteen years on, Srebrenica victims are laid to rest

Bosnia

Janine de Giovanni Srebrenica

Huddled around the hundreds of green-draped coffins, the mothers, wives and children wept for the men finally being laid to rest as others squatted near by in the dirt beside monuments to those already buried.

In all, about 8,000 Muslim men and boys were slaughtered in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica 15 years ago.

Yesterday, to commemorate the atrocity, 775 coffins with the remains of victims whose bodies were dumped in mass graves as the murderers tried to cover their tracks were at last buried with dignity.

They were remembered by nearly 50,000 people who gathered under a fierce sun at Potocari, the site of the former UN base where the men and boys were handed over by Dutch troops, and where the Srebrenica war memorial is located.

This year, in what he described as "an act of reconciliation", those gathering to mark Europe's worst massacre since the Second World War were joined by President Tadic of Serbia, who stood holding the hand of one of the Mothers of Srebrenica.

In the past few months Mr Tadic has been attempting to reach out to his neighbours in reconciliation and last March the Serbian parliament passed a resolution that "expressed regret".

Even so, the more cynical would point out that a continued failure to arrest Ratko Mladic — the Bosnian Serb general who allegedly masterminded the atrocity — has hindered Serbia's progress towards European Union membership.

There were some catcalls yesterday of "Where is Mladic?" Speeches echoing "never again" by dignitaries including Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister, and Bernard Kouchner, the French Foreign Minister, were translated as Muslim prayers and songs rang out.

"The horror of Srebrenica was a stain on our collective conscience" was the message sent by President Obama.

The reburial of some of the victims — the youngest was 14 — is deeply symbolic for many of the families, who cannot have full closure about their loved ones until their remains are found.

After the Bosnian Serbs killed them, they dumped the bodies in mass graves and later moved them with bulldozers



A Bosnian Muslim woman weeps at the funeral at Potocari, Srebrenica. The youngest victim of the 1995 massacre was 14

100,000

people died on all sides during the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, the costliest conflict of the Yugoslav break-up

2 years

before the massacre, the town of Srebrenica in Bosnia was designated a United Nations Safe Area

8,000

were killed in the town in the summer of 1995 in the worst massacre in Europe since the Second World War

Sources: Reuters; Times archives

to 70 sites. It was a brutal, cold-blooded decision to cover their tracks and has made the identification process incredibly challenging.

"It is, in effect, deleting a life," says Kathryn Bomberger, the head of the International Commission on Missing Persons in Sarajevo, who pioneered the DNA testing that has so far managed to identify more than 6,500 victims. Already buried in the Potocari graveyard are 3,749 bodies.

Starting on July 11, 1995, the Bosnian Serb forces overran Srebrenica, a so-called safe area that had earlier been disarmed. Its defenders were hampered by a Western-imposed arms embargo and the fact that General Mladic

was bent on seizing the town he had been brutalising for 3½ years as part of his quest for Greater Serbia.

As the Bosnian Serbs grew closer, nearly 30,000 terrified people flocked to a small UN base staffed by Dutch soldiers near Potocari. They were ultimately handed over to the Serbs, the men and boys separated from the women.

Mothers remember dressing their boy children as girls, but failing to save them, and having them ripped from their arms.

The Dutch soldiers later claimed that they were short of weaponry and did not have a clear mandate to protect the population.

Mladic diaries may be used in Karadzic's genocide trial

David Charter Europe Correspondent

Fifteen years after his forces massacred thousands of Muslims at Srebrenica, Ratko Mladic is providing evidence to the UN's Yugoslav tribunal while on the run from charges of genocide.

The former top Bosnian Serb general recorded plans to drive Muslims out of Serb territory in 18 diaries found behind a false wall at his Belgrade home. The volumes also recorded talks with Croat leaders on carving up Yugoslavia.

Prosecutors have applied to use Mr Mladic's words in the trial for genocide of Radovan Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb President, amid suggestions that the diaries could provide evidence of direct links between top Serb politicians and the Bosnian Serb military. Serbia was cleared of a state genocide charge brought by Bosnia in 2007 at the International Court of Justice.

Srebrenica yesterday marked the anniversary of the worst mass killing in Europe since the Second World War and heard appeals from politicians for renewed efforts to bring Mr Mladic to justice. The general, 68, is one of two fugitives from the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and is believed to be in Serbia under the shelter of sympathisers.

His diaries "are one of the most important sets of documents we ever received at the tribunal," said Serge Brammertz, the chief prosecutor. "You very seldom get so much information coming from such a central figure." The diaries consist of nearly 3,500 pages and record dates and details about supplies of weapons and fuel, as well as troop orders and discussions of strategy during the Balkan wars of 1991 to 1995.

Prosecutors said that they also covered discussions about the treatment of civilians in the UN safe haven of Srebrenica on the eve of the massacre in July 1995 of about 8,000 Muslim men by Mr Mladic's forces and Serb paramilitaries.

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