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Mladic's Arrest and Corrosive Bosnian Myths

| [More](#)^[1]

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The arrest of accused war criminal Ratko Mladic, the commander of Serb forces during Bosnia's civil war in the 1990s, creates an opportunity to correct the historical record and provide a more balanced treatment of that episode.

One hopes that the media coverage of Mladic's arrest and forthcoming trial will not be a repetition of the simplistic mythology about the Bosnian conflict that was so pervasive when it occurred. U.S. and European officials, the Western news media, ethnic lobbies, and much of the foreign policy community spun a Manichean melodrama. In that melodrama, the Serbs were almost entirely responsible for the breakup of Yugoslavia and for the violence that followed, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Serbs became arch villains, while Croats and Bosnian Muslims became innocent victims.

Inflated casualty statistics were the staple of government statements and media accounts to provide evidence for the villainous Serbs thesis. To this day, many accounts of the Bosnian conflict cite the figure of 250,000 (or sometimes even 300,000) fatalities—with the implication that the vast majority of victims were Muslim civilians. Yet analyses by groups as diverse as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the BBC, and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute have all concluded that the number of fatalities was much lower.

The definitive blow to the credibility of the larger figures came in January 2010, when the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia—the same entity that will try Mladic—completed its comprehensive assessment of the wartime casualties. [That study concluded](#)^[3] that the number of deaths was 104,732, and that only about 40 percent were civilians—a total that included Serb and Croat as well as Muslim civilians. Neither figure was unusual in a conflict that lasted three years.

It is time to jettison the myth that casualties in the Bosnian civil war were so extraordinarily large as to constitute genocide. A second myth that needs to be corrected is that the fight was a two-way struggle between Serbs and Muslims, and that the former committed the overwhelming

majority of atrocities. At the time, there was a curious lack of attention paid to the violent encounters between Muslim and Croat forces in Bosnia. Yet some of the worst fighting—and accompanying atrocities—occurred on that leg of the triangular civil war [4]. The extensive bloodshed, and the tragic destruction of the historic bridge in the bitterly divided city of Mostar, characterized that phase of the internecine struggle.

There is no doubt that Ratko Mladic is a repulsive character and that he was responsible for repulsive acts. But the true lesson of the Bosnian war is that Mladic was hardly unique in that respect and that the conflict itself was hardly unique in the context of even recent history, much less history over the centuries. Even as Western pundits and human rights activists were repeatedly venting their outrage about the suffering of innocent civilians in Bosnia, far worse bloodletting was taking place in Sierra Leone and other locales.

If we are to learn anything worthwhile about the Bosnian civil war, it is important to move beyond the self-serving myths about genocide that were primarily used to justify an interventionist policy by the United States and its NATO allies. Mladic's apprehension provides that opportunity for a more sober assessment.

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- [3] <http://www.icty.org/sid/10591>
- [4] <http://www.amazon.com/Muslim-Croat-Civil-War-Central-Bosnia/dp/1585442615>