

Dr. Admir Mulaosmanović  
Institute for History Sarajevo

## **Atrocities against Muslims in Bosnia in 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Case study of Višegrad town in eastern Bosnia**

**Abstract:** *In this article I will try to give strong arguments for attestation of genocidal attacks on Bosnian muslims during two wars; World War 2 and aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. Case study is small town of Višegrad in eastern Bosnia and destiny of its Bosniak/muslim population. I will show almost the same pattern of war crimes committed in two circles, firstly in 1941-1943, then in 1992. There will be individual stories which have to impersonate tragic Bosniak history in late century.*

I believe that following text gives a sufficient material and strong arguments for attestation of genocidal attacks on Bosnian muslims during two wars; Second World War and aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. Case study is small town of Višegrad in eastern Bosnia and destiny of its Bosniak/muslim population. I will show almost the same pattern of war crimes committed in two circles, firstly in 1941-1943, then in 1992. There will be individual stories which have to impersonate whole Bosniak history in late century. In a context of Bosniak history, 20th Century can be seen as a century of genocide and decline of this small European muslim nation.

But, firstly I should give historical context and some general remarks. There are a many processes which ‘helped’ Bosnian muslims to become vulnerable community; Diseases and suffering from death caused by wars on East in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, rebellion against Sultan and Porta and punitive expeditions after Reforms in Empire, etc. Yet under ottoman rule Bosniaks (Bosnian muslims) became ‘community in danger’ and their development were stopped. Postottoman era, on the other side, brought more insecurity and poor political position under new circumstances; being a part of Austria-Hungary, then being a part of erected common Southslavic state. In these circumstances which we can describe as a cultural shock, muslims of Balkan, especially Bosniaks, were in big dilemma. To stay or to go. Actually, after 1878 and Berlin Congress, it has been shown that international law was not enough to protect the Muslims out of the Ottoman Empire, and to simultaneously strengthen their collapsed social and economic status.<sup>1</sup>

As my colleague from Institute, Safet Bandžović, explains there were several cycles of emigration of Bosniaks to the Ottoman Empire at the turn of centuries. These emigrations took away the core of political, economic and intellectual elites of the nation and it was one of the reasons why Bosniaks had tremendous political problems in 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

When we talk about Second World War, Bosniak elite, or it’s better to say what was left of it, was divided and disoriented. As Marko Atilla Hoare explains: “Different overlapping factions existed among Muslim political elite”.<sup>2</sup> Pro-Partisan, pro-Ustasha and pro-Chetnics forces among the Muslims witnessed this disorientation. On the other hand, this approach among

<sup>1</sup> Bandžović, Safet (2013): *Deosmanizacija Baklana i Bošnjaci*. Sarajevo. Autor: 237.

<sup>2</sup> Hoare, Marko Attila (2013): *The Bosnian Muslims in the Second World War*. Oxford University Press: 141.

Bosniaks tells about existence of strategic possibility that aimed to reduce attacks on Muslims on either side.<sup>3</sup> Latest research and new discovered documents that Bosniak strategy put closer to the truth.

There are several studies about Bosniak demographic loss, but unfortunately, even to this day all data are not explored, primarily when talking about the number of casualties. The used data are based on the method of statistical or demographic character. Two researchers, Bogoljub Kočović in 1986 in London and a few years later Vladimir Žerjavić in Zagreb, presented data based on the census of 1921 and 1931 and then the first census of the new socialist Yugoslavia. On the basis of demographic indicators both got similar results: in Yugoslavia during Second World War there were a million and one hundred thousand or one million and fifty thousand victims. But when it comes to Bosniaks, both authors found that the number of those who got killed was 103-105 thousands. This is around 8,1% of total Bosniak population. This is highest percentage among Yugoslav nations.

Professor Smail Čekić from University of Sarajevo claim, how he said, without any exaggeration, that there was no National Liberation Movement and Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Bosniaks would have been exterminated yet in Second World War. This can be seen from the documents of the Ustasha movement, as well as documents of the Chetniks of Draza Mihailovic. Partisans, he continues, led by Josip Broz saved Bosniaks of biological extinction and it is historical fact that cannot be forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

In the famous "Instruction" to Chetnik detachments of 20<sup>th</sup> December 1941, on the organization, the goals and the use of the Chetniks, D. Mihailovic, who was promoted to the rank of general and soon became the minister of the army in exile of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, gave a very crucial remarks. According to him, the goal of fighting the Chetnik movement led by King Peter was:

(...) To create a Great Yugoslavia and in it a Greater Serbia, ethnically cleansed, within the borders of pre-war Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Srem, Banat and Bačka (...) (...) cleaning national territory of all national minorities and national elements (...), (...) To immediately create the common border between Serbia and Montenegro, as well as between Serbian and Slovenian, cleansing Sandjak of Muslim population, and Bosnia and Herzegovina of Muslim and Catholic population (...)<sup>5</sup>

How is it conveyed and explained on the ground shows letter of commander of the Ozren Chetnik corps sent on February 13<sup>th</sup> 1943 to commander of the Zenica military Chetnik detachment. Both are in Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is stating the objectives of the Chetniks according to general Mihailović "Instruction" and says the following:

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<sup>3</sup> Very fruitful explanation Hoare gives on this topic: "Political division among Muslims were not ideological but rather between conflicting strategies of how best to safeguard its position and the Muslim population as a whole in the face of two threats: the assimilationism and hegemonism of the Croat Ustashes and then genocide of the Serb Chetniks. The two threats were in fact two sides of the same coin". (*Bosnian Muslims...* 39-40.)

<sup>4</sup> 'Tito je spasio Bošnjake' (Intervju sa prof. dr. Smailom Čekićem). <https://www.bhdani.ba/portal/arhiva-67-281/269/intervju.shtml>

<sup>5</sup> Dizdar, Zdravko. "Četnicki zločini genocida nad Hrvatima i muslimanima u Bosni i Hercegovini i Hrvatima u Hrvatskoj tijekom drugoga svjetskoga rata (1941.-1945.)". <http://www.hic.hr/books/jugoistocna-europa/dizdar.htm>

... Maybe to you and your fighters these goals seem great and unfeasible. Remember the great struggle for liberation under the leadership of Karadjordje. Serbia was filled with Turks (it means Muslims). In Belgrade and other Serbian towns were Muslim minarets and mosques where the Turks performed their dirty rituals which they performing even now in Serb Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hundreds of thousands of Muslims flooded our motherland. And go through Serbia today. You do not find single Turk (it means Muslim), you will not find even one of their graves or any tombstones... This is the best proof and greatest guarantee that we will succeed in today's holy battle and that we will exterminate every Turk from our Serbian lands. Not one Muslim will remain among us...<sup>6</sup>

This quotation shows us how chetnik commanders understood 'Instruction' and what it meant to them. Their job was very simple, they had to exterminate muslims from region of Sandjak where muslims were majority and which was divided between Serbia and Montenegro and from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

About Chetnik crimes and the situation in the besieged city of Višegrad in 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1941 Reis-ul-ulema's envoy reported to Sarajevo. He states:

The Chetniks have into their own hands the entire surroundings of Visegrad except village Orahovica. As long as they come they kill everyone, men of 12 years and more and they are doing it in a cruelest way. One removed throats, other live peel, third cut ears, nose and eyes removed. Women killing and before that girls are sexually used. Young women have to go with them to the camps to serve them and to be sexual slaves. So far it is estimated that the killed Muslims in the district of Visegrad in a manner mentioned above is about 2,500. There are cases and a lot of them that children are killed ... Since the population of the villages settled in Visegrad, Visegrad is a passive place, there is gripped by unspeakable hunger and poverty so that there is a lot of the people, which does not have to eat, or to get dressed nor somewhere to prone. Today it is only possible to obtain food through Mostar, Kalinovik and Foca. Till I ending this note, the Chetniks are burnt all the villages, people need quick and lasting help, because the refugees have no place to recover and to wait for circumstances to get better.<sup>7</sup>

On the situation in Višegrad about half a year later the District Office of Višegrad informed central authorities on 28 May 1942:

The population of the area of 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1941, until today survives the darkest days of his life. Villages have been torched. The population is dying of hunger and disease through the streets ... To present day, in this district about 5 000 people were killed and number is still increasing. In the city is located about 10,000 vulnerable refugees. There is no food, and if you can find it, the prices are too high to the poor part of the population that could keep them alive.<sup>8</sup>

The report from the same area of 12<sup>th</sup> June 1942, gives a complete insight on the "Circumstances and political situation in the district of Višegrad from the arrival of the Italian authorities (9<sup>th</sup> November 1941) to the present day". There are allegations for these Chetnik

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<sup>6</sup> Dizdar. "Četnicki zločini genocida nad Hrvatima i muslimanima u Bosni i Hercegovini i Hrvatima u Hrvatskoj tijekom drugoga svjetskoga rata (1941.-1945.)."

<sup>7</sup> Despot, Zvonimir. "Nastanak četničkog pokreta". <http://www.geni.com/projects/WWII-Cetnički-pokret-i-zločini-u-Hrvatskoj-i-Bosni-i-Hercegovini/12412>

<sup>8</sup> Despot, Zvonimir. "Nastanak četničkog pokreta".

crimes: 3 January 1942 in the village of Dobrun "collected in a house 82 persons (small children, old women, adult men and the women) bombs were thrown at a house that was later set on fire and where all 82 burned "; January 6<sup>th</sup> 1942 in the village of Strmica "in one house were burned 46 persons (children, women and men)" and 5<sup>th</sup> March in the village of Resnik "were forced into the Drina River 52 people where everyone drowned except one boy who, although wounded in shoulder emerged on the right bank of the River and avoided this Chetnik atrocity". It states that it is already about 300 refugees in Višegrad died of hunger.

That boy, who survived, was Ševal Tabaković who is in the spring of 1992, similarly thrown into Drina. This time chetniks, because they knew his story, didn't leave him any chance to survive. He was slaughtered then thrown in the river. His remains were found during excavations in Perućac in the summer of 2010.

Other story is about Hasan Tufekčić. This is the man from Višegrad to whom in 1943 Chetniks killed his 10 children. Less than 50 years later, in 1992, Chetniks killed his three children that he had got after war. In two wars he lost 13 children.

So, almost copied Chetnik rampage took place at the time of aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1992 to 1995. The goal of the Serb attack in the spring of 1992 was to master over the Drina River, cutting off communication between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sandjak, and ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks from the left bank of Drina River in the area from town of Bijeljina (northeastern Bosnia) to Foča (south Bosnia). As an example of the methodology of action of the Yugoslav People's Army and Serbian paramilitary units can be taken Bijeljina, where the fighting went from 1 to 4 April in 1992.

Demographic expert of Hague Prosecution Eva Tabo at the trial of Milan and Sredoje Lukic presented an analysis of changes in the ethnic structure of the municipality of Visegrad during the period from 1991 to 1997. According to the analysis, said Tabo, it is clear that the Muslim population "completely disappeared" from Visegrad after conflict in which before the war accounted for two-thirds of the population, and after the war, less than one percent. At the same time the percentage of Serbs in the city after the war had risen to 96 percent. RDC (Research Documentation Center) data speaks about 1760 killed Bosniaks, and some sources go up to the number of 3000 killed.

Already on May 12<sup>th</sup> both mosques were burned, and then destroyed. Actually, on that day Serb Assembly in BiH proclaimed '6 strategic goals of Serbs in Bosnia', which were based on ethnically cleansed territory, and they established Army of Republic of Srpska. Newly appointed commander, Ratko Mladić said crucial remark about these goals and I quote: ... I do not know how Mr. (Radovan ) Karadzic and Mr. (Momcilo) Krajisnik think to explain it to the world. Folks, that is genocide".

The dramatic reversal took place 19<sup>th</sup> May, after a relative lull after the occupation, when Serbs formed the Serbian municipality of Visegrad. After the villages and towns in eastern Bosnia was under control of Serbian forces, the same pattern is always applied: Muslim houses were systematically searched and looted and burned, and the citizens are arrested or rounded up in one place, beaten or killed. Men and women were separated, and most are detained or massacred in the camps. Serb forces started killing people in houses, yards, barns, streets, on Mehmed-pasha Bridge and New Bridge, all over the city and its surroundings.

There are countless testimonies of the atrocities committed. One of the most brutal methods was the 'flame grave' which was usually applied by Milan Lukic. The well known 'flame grave' is the one in Bikavac when in Meho Alic's house were closed and burned 73 Bosniaks on June 27<sup>th</sup>. Women Zehra Turjančanin somehow survived and told in detail what happened.<sup>9</sup>

In Visegrad then began mass rape in the way that women and girls were taken to the place where were the camps of the Serbian army. The women were taken to various detention centres, where they lived in intolerably unhygienic conditions, abused in many ways, while most of them were systematically raped. Serbian soldiers or policemen came to the detention camps, selecting one or more women, take them out and rape.

An horrible example is the infamous hotel Vilina Vlas (it means maiden hair). This special 'war tactic' had quite specific reasons for implementation in the minds of Serbian fascists. Kill dignity and will to resist. In addition of Vilina Vlas there were dozens of camps for Bosniaks; at the fire station, primary school, Institute for the Protection of Children and Youth, enterprises Terpentine, Varda, Komunalno etc. In Visegrad by some accounts during the aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina about 800 women were killed, and before that most of them were raped. About 120 children were also killed in Visegrad.

The history of Visegrad in the 20th century is history of genocide on the one hand and history of forgetting, on the other. In the span of 50 years, chetniks have performed almost same crimes and pogroms against Bosniaks. Even individually, as examples of Ševal Tabakovića, Hasan Tufekčić and many others testify. But, as I said at the beginning, Višegrad impersonate entire Bosniak history of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The same situation will be found in north western Bosnia in town of Kulen Vakuf, south Bosnia in town of Foča and every corner of Sandjak and Bosnia and Herzegovina where Bosniaks lived. Let us hope that 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be much more positive for every nation and without genocidal attacks on anybody. Reality is not so bright, so we have to make efforts to change this reality. This conference is such attempt and I want to congratulate to our hosts.

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<sup>9</sup> Sjećanje na 70 spaljenih civila u Višegradu (The memory of the 70 burned civilians in Višegrad).  
<http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/sjecanje-na-70-spaljenih-civila-u-visegradu>