



Twilight of Impunity: The War Crimes Trial of Slobodan Milošević

Penny Booth

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The 1980s and 1990s brought exciting but often alarming change on the political front in Europe. Who could fail to have noticed? The demise of communism in Eastern Europe and the resurgence of nationalism in the Balkans, and in particular the break-up of Yugoslavia, produced an inevitable upheaval in the region.

The past came back to commit grievous bodily harm on the present, and has shaped the future of a vibrant and volatile area. The ramifications of these geographical and political changes were widespread; and, in the legal field, they produced a criminal trial of great length, complexity and at times sheer mockery that has shaken an often complacent view of the workings of international justice.

This book is about the trial of Slobodan Milošević, the former leader of Serbia, who would become a pariah on the international stage. In ways hardly imaginable in many states, individual views of Milošević were and are massively varied in Serbia. He was lionised by many Serbian nationalists after his death, which occurred before his trial in The Hague came to an end.

The question still being asked is what sort of man he was. A nationalist leader who cared deeply about his people and his state and who did everything necessary to protect the Serbian people - or a deluded demagogue and war criminal?

Those are the extreme views, and in neither can there be much humour - in fact, not much but aghast horror. If he was merely an ardent nationalist, he was treated badly, and the truth did not reach the public stage, despite what the book refers to as Milošević's efforts to make his trial a public exposition justifying the aggression in the Balkans.

If he really was a war criminal responsible for genocide in the Serb region of the Balkans, then what emerges in this account of his trial is almost beyond comprehension for the late 20th century.

Many will imagine that the events that led to the trial were the kind we had left behind in Nuremberg or Cambodia. Not so, for the killings and other violations of the Geneva Convention cited in Milosevic's prosecution did take place. The international community's determination to take action against perpetrators of such crimes is necessary if we are to assert that there are standards of conduct, even in war, and that judicial action, however difficult, must be taken against transgressors.

Here, Armatta - a journalist, scholar and human rights lawyer who had a front-row seat at the proceedings - trains her focus on the trial of Milosevic itself rather than attempting to offer a pure history of the conflicts in Serbia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Croatia.

Nevertheless, indications of the many different versions of that history do emerge, and clearly the complexities are huge.

Particularly useful is her commentary on the operational failings of trials of this nature. There is good reason to hold such trials: to expose, explain, reveal and exonerate; to cleanse, exculpate and hear versions of the truth. They are not, however, at all easy to carry out.

The intricacies of history in the region make the book's chronology, bibliography, "cast of characters" list and boxed explanations as essential as they are welcome in digesting this complex story. The detail is overwhelming at times, and in places one finger really must be kept on the glossary. This is not a history, but it tells a history; it is not a law report, but it reflects how justice might - or might not - work.

There are never excuses for genocide, but what, in the end, is truth?

Armatta's absorbing work suggests that it is found somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of views on such events, and that the victors do not have a monopoly on truth or morality. That much, at least, is certain.

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