



SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Balkan Affairs Brief

Ratko Mladić: A Biography of the Butcher of Bosnia

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Early Life

Ratko Mladić, the "Butcher of Bosnia," was born in March 1942 in Božinovići, Yugoslavia, in what is now modern-day Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was born in an isolated village in the middle of World War Two. His father was an ethnic Serb resistance leader who was executed by the government of the Independent State of Croatia, a fascist puppet state. The Ustaše committed devastating war crimes against ethnic Serb and Bosniak populations that rivaled the Nazis themselves. After the war, Mladić grew up in Tito's unified, multiethnic Yugoslavia. This was a time of peace and growing economic opportunities. He joined the Yugoslav People's Army and quickly rose through the ranks. He was a Brigadier General in the army when the Bosnian War first began.

The Bosnian War

Within the first six months of war, Bosnian Serb forces took control of much of northern and central Bosnia, where torture and mass killings began. After a brief stint in Croatia, in May of 1992 he was assigned command of the Army's Second Military District in Sarajevo. He was then named the commander of the Bosnian Serb army and served as the right-hand man of Radovan Karadžić, president of Republika Srpska. Throughout 1993, Bosnian Serb assaults drove Muslim Bosniak forces out of much of the country, and Mladić's army laid siege to Sarajevo, where he indiscriminately shelled civilian populations, earning him his infamous title of the "Butcher of Bosnia." His war crimes continued in ethnic Croat and Bosniak towns across the country, where his assaults were followed by mass killing and use of concentration camps. It was in July of 1995 when the Srebrenica refugee zone was assaulted, and the genocide ensued.

Hunt and Trial

On July 24, 1995, Mladić was indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague for the genocide against the Bosnian people in Srebrenica and crimes against humanity in Sarajevo. For six years, the war criminal lived free under the protection of Serbian President Slobodan Milošević. Pressure mounted after 2000, when Milošević was overthrown and arrested. The new Serbian government wished to gain good standing with the West and planned to arrest Mladić, yet again he fled. The Serbian government arrested around fifty Serbs complicit in his escape, but the general continued to evade capture. It is now known that from 2002-2006, Mladić was hidden by a series of former Bosnian Serb military officers, but after government clampdowns in 2006, he switched to hiding in the homes of his family members. Justice was finally served on May 26, 2011, when the Butcher of Sarajevo was arrested at his cousin's home.



Pretrial proceedings began in earnest in June 2011, but the main hearings began in 2012. The Butcher refused to enter any plea, and he refused to testify in the trial of his former president and fellow war criminal Karadžić. His trial began in earnest in December 2016, when the charges of genocide were leveled. The prosecutors presented images of mass graves and personal testimonies of the massacres. This led to his conviction on ten of eleven counts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, and he was sentenced to life in prison on November 22, 2017. Though he attempted to appeal the charges, they were upheld in 2021 by a UN court. He filed several requests to be freed on health grounds, but all were denied by the UN.

Death and Funeral

The Butcher of Bosnia died in The Hague on August 27, 2026, at 84 years old. His body was transferred back to Belgrade by a Serbian military aircraft, surrounded by an armed guard and with his full medals and honors. On September 7, 2026, he was given a hero's funeral. This was full of military and religious pomp and circumstance in a small Serbian Orthodox church in Belgrade. Thousands flocked to see a man they revered as a Serbian war hero. His coffin was then marched to the cemetery where he was buried with full military honors. Though Serbian President Vučić was not in attendance due to a prior engagement, his son was there, along with numerous government officials, and most strikingly, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia. The funeral was condemned by the European Union and UN officials as a glorification of war criminals, and that "any such glorification constitutes an affront to the memory of victims and survivors." The EU further stated that this glorification was completely out of line with the values of the European Union and EU candidate countries.



In the end, Ratko Mladić, an international war criminal and the man responsible for the genocide of 8,000 Bosniaks and a 1,460-day siege resulting in 10,000 deaths, was buried as a hero in his home country. This result is a dangerous sign for the future of Serbia and its swing between the democratic, rules-based order of the European Union that they claim to desire membership in, and its nationalist, warmongering ally in Russia.

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