



after the massacre



One night in July 1995, Serbian soldiers in Bosnia carried out Europe's worst atrocity since the Holocaust. But then 24 suspected war criminals were arrested on immigration charges—



Its perpetrators remained at large for a decade.

in Phoenix, Arizona. **BY MATT McALLESTER PHOTOGRAPHS BY GILLES PERESS**



THE STREET MAP YOU BUY AT GAS STATIONS in Phoenix weighs as much as an atlas of the world. Two thousand people move here every week. About 10,000 Phoenix residents are Serbs from the former Yugoslavia, many of whom arrived in the last decade as the Balkan nation spiraled into a war of horrific

violence. I visited Phoenix in November 2005, driving my rental car past cocktail lounges, storefronts offering "immigration fotos," and a herd of llamas grazing behind a fence. Even in late autumn, with the sun setting over the city's sedate sprawl, the temperature was pushing 100 degrees.

Early in the morning on September 13, 2005, federal agents showed up, guns drawn, at homes in northern Phoenix. The agents were following leads that came from Richard Butler, a Homeland Security official who, according to his colleagues, knows more than anyone else in the U.S. government Balkan war crimes. That morning, 19 men and one woman, all Bosnian Serbs, were arrested on suspicion of having lied on their immigration applications. Illegally entering a country more prosperous and peaceful than your own isn't a monstrous crime—hundreds of thousands of people steal across Arizona's border with Mexico every year—but few of them are suspected of having taken part in the worst genocidal act committed in Europe since the Nazis exterminated 6 million Jews.

Despite its brutality and its European setting, the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the nineties failed to rivet the American public. Perhaps the conflict, with its multiple warring factions and ethnicities and unpronounceable names, was too complex to compete with the escapist circus of O.J. Simpson's murder trial. The war's most notorious massacre was carried out by young men in their twenties and thirties—men whose American contemporaries weren't gunning down their neighbors or running for their lives, but drinking Bud and shooting pool, waving their Zippos at Pearl Jam concerts, and checking out something called the World Wide Web.

As was the case with four Bosnian Serbs who'd been arrested in Phoenix in 2004, the 20 who were rounded up in 2005 had allegedly neglected to mention their service in army units that had participated in war crimes more than a decade earlier. The bloodiest of these atrocities had begun at a U.N.-monitored safe enclave near the town of Srebrenica where tens of thousands of Muslim soldiers and civilians had taken refuge. In July 1995, the Bosnian Serb army captured the enclave and bused most of the women and children to Muslim territory but held 7,000 men and boys. Over the following days, the prisoners were taken to fields and warehouses, where they were shot to death and dumped into mass graves. Ten years later, two dozen soldiers who'd served in the units responsible for the most killings had established good lives for themselves in Phoenix. And whatever crimes they'd committed in Bosnia, the U.S. couldn't charge them with anything more serious than immigration fraud.

The inability of the U.S. to prosecute immigrants for war crimes is a national embarrassment. Anyone can line up a bunch of civilians in a field during a war, shoot them dead, and then settle down here, legally untouchable for such a violent crime. That's why Nazi war criminals and Rwandan *génocidaires* living in the U.S. have always faced deportation rather than imprisonment or death sentences.

(A federal law lets the government prosecute a resident noncitizen for having committed torture outside the U.S., but only one person has ever been indicted under the law: Chuckie Taylor, the son of the former Liberian president Charles Taylor, last December.) This year the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a bill, now awaiting a vote in the House, to allow the federal prosecution of non-U.S. citizens suspected of having committed genocide overseas.

In the days following the mass executions of July 1995, the Bosnian Serb army knew it had a problem on its hands. The world would notice the sudden disappearance of more than 7,000 people. The army tried to hide the evidence, digging up many bodies from the mass graves and hiding them at other sites. Months later, the warring factions hammered out a peace deal at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. Most of the region's numerous war criminals shuffled home, but a number the alleged murderers immigrated to America. Investigators suspected that some of the 24 Bosnian Serbs arrested in Phoenix were not just simple draftees carrying out what they'd been told was a routine military operation—but were executioners.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT PHOENIX? WHY HAVE SO MANY PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCED the horror of genocidal warfare in the Balkans been drawn to this desert city in the American Southwest? Everyone in Phoenix's expanding Serbian community had a variation on the same answer: "My brother was here"—or "my cousin" or "my friend"—"and he said it was a good place to live."

Serbs began arriving in Phoenix 50 years ago, according to Father Milan Katanić, the long-bearded, black-cassocked priest of St. Nikolas Serbian Orthodox Church. "Some people like the weather," he said. "It's very healthful for people. We have four seasons here. If you live in Chicago, it's going to be like Serbia"—frigid in the winter, baking in the summer. And Phoenix, Father Milan said, promised a new world, a new life. "They came first of all to work," he said. "They came from Serbia, Bosnia, Montenegro, from everywhere in the ex-Yugoslavia. If you want to work, you can work."

St. Nikolas is one of the most prominent gathering places for Serbs in Phoenix. There are others around town—a Bulgarian joint that hosts Serbian-music nights; an Italian-Serbian restaurant in nearby Glendale; a Bosnian restaurant (which, despite the recent history, is friendly to Serbian customers)—but if you want to see the bulk of the local Serbian community, you come on Sunday morning to this quiet domed church in the northern part of town, built next to a terra-cotta-colored hill. In the Serbs' homeland, the church is the most powerful (and often most nationalist) force in society, and it's a formidable entity in Phoenix, too. Svetlana Hercegovac, the wife of one of the 24 suspects, a mechanic named Rajko Hercegovac, told me that when her husband arrived in the U.S., the church gave him three months' rent and helped him find a job.

After the 2005 arrests, hundreds met here to organize a protest. Father Milan laughed at the idea that there might be war criminals among his flock. "The people who were in the war don't visit the U.S.," he said. "Is somebody guilty if his coworker kills somebody?"

IN HIS INTERVIEWS WITH U.S. IMMIGRATION OFFICIALS IN 1998, MLADEN Blagojević lied about his military service to get into the country. (Some 200,000 refugees from the former Yugoslavia have come to the U.S. since the nineties.) Seven years after arriving, he'd built a decent



SHALLOW GRAVE: Pages 322–323: Victims of the July 1995 massacre in Srebrenica, Bosnia, in which Serbian soldiers killed 7,000 unarmed Muslims. Above: The burning headquarters of Bosnian war mediators in 1996. Below: A cemetery in disarray in 1996, after Serbian civilians exhumed their war dead for reburial.



TRIED TO IMAGINE MLADEN BLAGOJEVIĆ, THE SUBURBAN AMERICAN DAD WITH THE YOUNG SON AND THE WIDE-SCREEN TV,

life for his family. Blagojević's wife, Dajana, worked in a bank, and Blagojević, a longtime soccer enthusiast, was studying for exams to become a referee. One of his best friends in town, Karl Gibbs, a fellow electrician and soccer fan, says Blagojević was a highly sought-after referee in Phoenix and was universally respected for his fairness.

As darkness fell, I visited Blagojević's home on West Hartford Drive. I walked past tall cacti and under a sand-colored brick arch and rang the doorbell. A slim, dark-haired man in red shorts answered; behind him, a boy about 8 years old sat glued to a wide-screen TV. The man nodded—yes, he was Mladen—and pulled a Marlboro Red from a pack and peered into the night. Blagojević was a decent-looking guy, skinny and nonthreatening, with a large mole in the center of his forehead and a gentle and intelligent demeanor: a far cry from the killers I'd met in the Balkans, guys with crew cuts and tattoos and drug addictions.

Standing on the porch, Blagojević said several times that I should speak with his lawyer. But he kept talking. "I don't have secrets," he said.

I asked him about that eastern Bosnian town, its name now associated with execution squads and mass graves and Western passivity in the face of genocide. Blagojević replied that he'd spent July 1995 in a town called Bratunac, serving in the Bratunac Brigade. He was 24 at the time. "I was not in Srebrenica," he said. But that, I learned later, hardly proved he was innocent. The real heart of darkness wasn't in Srebrenica but in its nearby villages and towns—in places like Bratunac. Srebrenica had all the reputation; Bratunac had witnessed even more horror.

"I'm here seven years," he said, shrugging. His English was seven years old, good but imperfect: "I don't have any crime, even a traffic ticket."

"What do you do for a living?" I asked.

"Electrician."

"Do you know the other guys who are in trouble?"

"They were in the army. I don't know all of them. Some of them." They came to the U.S., to northern Phoenix, one by one. "We helped each other."

Phoenix gave Mladen Blagojević more than he'd ever dreamed of. He'd grown up in a small, ramshackle house on the main road to Bratunac, where his parents still live, harvesting onions and apricots in the garden outside their house. When Blagojević first visited Bratunac from Phoenix, he'd become the big man. He wouldn't let his friends pay for anything; in America, he told them, you could buy anything you wanted. One of his friends, a comrade from the Bratunac Brigade who earns \$200 a month, told me he found Blagojević's boasts humiliating.

But Blagojević's money didn't come just from his electrician's salary—he was playing the all-American sport of leveraging his equity. By the time I met him on his porch that night, he owned at least four houses in Phoenix and the suburbs of Surprise and Glendale, juggling mortgages, picking up rent, and watching his equity grow. He'd taken out at least one line of credit. The house I was standing

in front of was comfortable: six rooms, two bathrooms, and a two-car garage on a lot of more than 7,000 square feet. He'd bought it in 2000 for \$105,000—on a 100 percent mortgage. You don't get deals like that in Bosnia.

I asked Blagojević if he would ever move back to Bosnia. "No, I got a family," he said. "There's going to be a war over there again. This is Balkans. Maybe not now, but in 10 or 20 years. It's like that."

His kid came to the door: just a sweet, gentle American 8-year-old. After he wandered back to the TV, his father said, "I came for my son. To give him future."

I asked him about July 1995. Was it true that thousands of Bosnian Muslims had been killed? "It was mostly men, not civilians," he said, meaning soldiers. "They take their uniform off." He spoke with authority, as though he had seen the Muslim prisoners up close.

Blagojević was angry at the U.N. soldiers in the Srebrenica enclave, who he felt should have been protecting the Serbs as much as the Muslims. In the years before July 1995, Muslim soldiers routinely emerged from the enclave to attack Bratunac and the surrounding area. They conducted raids and offensives, and they killed Serbian civilians. It's hard to say how many Serbs died, but few families in Bratunac did not lose a member between 1992 and 1995. At least 40 Serbian soldiers and civilians died in one infamous Muslim attack on January 7, 1993, the Orthodox Christmas Day.

"In my city, about 2,000 die. By Muslims," Mladen told me, his lips pursing. "Some soldiers, but mostly friends, family, neighbors . . . Two of my best friends were killed. A lot of people. Every day some die. The Muslims came from Srebrenica and attack on Serbs." He added, "Sometime it's got to stop."

And he'd fought the Muslims, he told me. "I'm proud of that, because I protect my family. If I do something bad, I didn't proud of it. If you protect your family . . ." His words trailed off as he raised his eyebrows.

Was he afraid of being deported to Sarajevo, of being tried in the Bosnian courts? "No," he said. "Cause I didn't do nothing bad over there." He motioned inside to his son, sitting on the floor. "I'm afraid for him, because maybe he take gun after 15 years. For me? No."

BY SUNSET ON JULY 13, 1995, THOUSANDS OF THIRSTY, TERRIFIED MUSLIM men and boys were being held in the Vuk Karadžić elementary school in Bratunac, Bosnia. The Bosnian Serb army had so many prisoners that some were held on buses all night on the road outside the school. The killing began after dark.

Mevludin Orić spent that night aboard a packed bus monitored by Serbian soldiers from the Bratunac Brigade. He heard the screams of men as they were led off the bus, and then gunshots, and he saw that the men did not come back. The next day, he stood blindfolded in an execution field near Srebrenica, and the bullets that tore into hundreds of Muslim men standing around him somehow missed him. But he fell with the others onto the grass, where his cousin's legs lay heavy on him. He sprawled motionless amid the blood and

LINING UP CIVILIANS OUTSIDE THE BUILDING AND SHOOTING THEM TO DEATH.

the corpses until it was dark. Then he ran.

At 11 o'clock one April morning this year, I sat with, his sister Sabaheta Mašić, and her 12-year-old daughter, Sedina, on the grass outside the house Orić is building in a village near Sarajevo. He was a couple of glasses into a two-liter bottle of beer: a daily escape from an inescapable story. Orić is in his late thirties—about Blagojević's age. They don't know each other, but they grew up just a few miles apart. When I told him about Blagojević and his move to Arizona, he laughed.

"I was in Arizona, in Phoenix, once," he said. "For a concert."

Orić spent a few lost years working and traveling in the U.S. after the war, and one night a Bosnian folksinger was playing in Phoenix. "The Serbs there got drunk, and we had a fistfight with them," Orić said. He wondered whether Blagojević had been in the crowd. If the two men had rubbed shoulders—or exchanged blows—that night in Phoenix, it would have been the second time they had both unknowingly been involved in a confrontation. At the elementary school in Bratunac on that July night, while Orić sat on a hot bus, terrified for his life, Blagojević allegedly was carrying a gun and making sure none of the Muslim prisoners escaped.

The U.N. tribunal in The Hague has found six men guilty of war crimes relating to Srebrenica, only one of whom was a foot soldier, a triggerman. Hundreds and perhaps thousands of men who herded, guarded, tortured, and executed the Muslim prisoners remain free, some of them in America. Those haunted by the memory—the victims' families, prosecutors, some politicians and journalists—argue that justice is not just about capturing the commanders and the architects. To prevent such wartime massacres, then at least some of the small fish, the low-level killers, must face justice as well.

Twelve years after the massacre, Orić and Blagojević were about to meet again—in a courtroom in Sarajevo, a few miles from Orić's house.

RICHARD BUTLER WORKS FOR THE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATORS AND Public Safety Unit, an obscure office of the Department of Homeland Security that's part of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Butler has an unassuming title ("I'm a researcher," he has said), and he doesn't even work in Washington. But federal agents and prosecutors come to him when they need something explained about the Balkan conflicts: all those complicated names, all those religions, all that history.

Butler was working as an investigator in The Hague in 2003 when immigration agents in Boston sent a request to his unit. They had a man in custody who they believed was a killer at Srebrenica, and they wanted The Hague's list of all known soldiers in the units chiefly responsible for the massacre. Butler and his colleagues sent a list of about 12,000 names, and the Boston agents, checking that list against a database of all U.S. citizens and legal immigrants, found a sobering number of matches: about 150.

After returning to the United States, Butler began work in February

2004 building cases around the 150 names, and he discovered that two members of the Bratunac Brigade's Military Police Platoon—Zdravko Božić and Blagojević—were living in Phoenix. Srebrenica suspects in Chicago, Cleveland, Orlando, and St. Petersburg, Florida, would have to wait, Butler decided: Phoenix was the priority. FBI and immigration agents began surveillance.

The U.S. can deport a suspected war criminal to the country where the crimes occurred, but unless charges await him at his destination, he can shake hands with the U.S. agent who's escorted him, hail a cab at the airport, and vanish. Bosnia's newly formed war-crimes court and prosecutor's office didn't want to see that happen with the suspects heading their way. They may have been small-fry, but they were small-fry in hand. Of the 24 arrested in Phoenix, seven couldn't be criminally charged, because the statute of limitations had expired, but they will face deportation proceedings after November. Of the 17 other cases, all were charged with immigration fraud. One was dismissed, three are going to trial, and 13 pleaded guilty. Five of the 17 have been deported to Bosnia, and the U.S. will try to deport the others through immigration court.

IN DECEMBER 2005, THE MONTH AFTER I VISITED PHOENIX, I OBTAINED a copy of an old Bosnian Serb army payroll document. Among the 33 names on the list were Mladen Blagojević and Zdravko Božić. Both had served in the Military Police Platoon of the Bratunac Brigade, and both had told U.S. investigators that they were in the platoon and were in the area around the Vuk Karadžić elementary school on the night of July 13, 1995. (When I'd knocked on the door of Božić's blue house in November 2005, I found only shoes lined outside the front door, a Nissan in his driveway, and a FOR SALE sign in the window. Božić was already in custody serving a one-year term for immigration fraud.)

Testimony and confessions of the Srebrenica defendants in the Hague tribunal revealed that the military police of the Bratunac Brigade who guarded the school killed scores of people that night. I found accounts specific to Blagojević. There was the Muslim woman who told me she'd watched Blagojević force Muslim civilians out of Bratunac at gunpoint in 1992, at the start of the war, when the term *ethnic cleansing* was born. There was the old Muslim man who said Blagojević had personally ordered him to leave his house in 1992.

But most haunting was a former soldier who was tracked down by my invaluable fixer in the region, a gentle but steely young man named Jovo. In February 2006 Jovo met the soldier at a mountainside bar on the Bosnia-Montenegro border. Jovo asked him what he'd witnessed at the school, and as the soldier spoke, his hands shook so much that he couldn't hold his cigarette.

"I let inside two military policemen," the soldier said. "They were holding a Turk"—many Serbs refer to Muslims as Turks, using the term pejoratively—"while a civilian came with pliers and was breaking up his toes with pliers," the soldier said. "I couldn't bear the screams. I would never do such a thing." He went on: "There were others going into the hall and shouting Turk names. . . . Some Turks



LIFE DURING WARTIME: Over nearly four years in the nineties, several ethnic groups fought in the Balkans, devastating Bosnia-Herzegovina. Above: Bosnian soldiers crouch while on patrol in the northwest in 1995. Below: At a checkpoint in 1996, a Croatian man in a Hitler mask intimidates Muslim civilians.



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were beaten to death, and others were left bleeding. Corpses had to be dragged away. The school was littered with blood. And the children attend the school now. I would vomit to be taken there again. There was a Turk dead in the toilet with no face."

MLADEN BLAGOJEVIĆ PLEADED GUILTY IN FEDERAL COURT AFTER MY visit to his porch. He was given a one-year suspended sentence for his immigration violations; as part of his deal, he agreed to go directly into the custody of immigration officials upon his sentencing in September 2006. He spent two months in jail. Then, on November 15, he was flown back to Bosnia. Blagojević kept working until the day he was taken into custody, says his friend Karl Gibbs, who visited Blagojević during his incarceration. The last time they saw each other, Gibbs says, Blagojević was downcast about having to return to Bosnia but hopeful that he'd face just a few police interviews before returning to live in Bratunac. Gibbs says Blagojević told him he wasn't afraid because he'd done nothing wrong.

On the flight to Sarajevo, Blagojević was discreetly shackled and accompanied by two immigration agents. His wife, Dajana, had arrived in Bosnia the day before. She was waiting to greet him at the airport, Gibbs says, but so were police officers. "He was thrown to the ground by two or three people and made to look like an animal in the airport," Gibbs says. "And they threw him straight in prison in Sarajevo."

On December 13, 2006, prosecutors filed an indictment against Božić, Blagojević, and two other members of the MP platoon. Amid the descriptions of unlawful imprisonment, torment, shootings, and forcible transfer to execution sites, the ninth count of the indictment was striking: "On the night of 13/14 July 1995, at Vuk Karadžić . . . unidentified VRS [Bosnian Serb army] soldiers forcibly removed at least five (5) unarmed civilian Bosniak [Muslim] men from the interior of the School who were being detained there by members of the Bosnian Serb forces, and lined them up in row outside the school in an execution line-up, whereupon Božić Zdravko, Blagojević Mladen and up to six (6) other (unidentified) members of the VRS, shot and killed these (unidentified) Bosniak men with automatic weapons thereby depriving them of their lives."

Richard Butler and the other U.S. investigators on the case were delighted to hear of the charges. Along with Mevludin Orić, who survived the elementary-school massacre, Butler is tentatively scheduled to testify at the trial as a witness for the prosecution.

A few days before the trial was set to begin, on April 20 of this year, I drove northeast from Sarajevo to Bratunac. The Vuk Karadžić school is still there—it's been renamed the Branko Radičević school—and after classes one day, a teacher gave me a tour. I tried to imagine the beatings, the terror, the thousands of Muslim men and boys cowering on the floor the night before their executions. The floors of these classrooms had literally been stained with their blood. I tried to imagine Mladen Blagojević, the suburban American dad with the young son and the wide-screen TV, lining up civilians

outside the building and shooting them to death.

Initially the teacher had mistaken me for an aid worker, and when I explained that I was writing for an American publication, he became hostile. He leaned in close to my face, sneering, and told me I should go to Virginia—where, the day before, a student had killed 32 people and himself on the Virginia Tech campus—so I could write about Americans going nuts with guns rather than coming to Bratunac to look into things that neither I nor the United States had anything to do with.

Other staffers berated me as I stood in the hallway. The a cleaning woman appeared and said what I'd suspected was on some of their minds: "They deserved it."

COURTROOM NO. SIX OF THE STATE COURT OF BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA IS elegantly appointed. Red leather chairs for the three presiding judges. A wall of plate glass between the public gallery and the courtroom. Video screens, cameras, headphones for simultaneous translation.

The four defendants walked into the courtroom from a door on the right, without handcuffs or leg irons. Mladen Blagojević wore a black suit, a maroon shirt, and a brown tie. He was the only one of the four who'd dressed formally. The others looked like thugs: strong and sullen, two of them in denim jackets. Božić, in a light-colored jacket, was tall, with graying hair.

Blagojević was the only one in the courtroom who didn't use the headphones, and he was calm and unfailingly polite. During the opening statement by the prosecutor, a British lawyer working for the Bosnian prosecutor's office, Blagojević shifted in his chair. After his own lawyer made his rebuttal, he was allowed to speak.

"I have trust in my attorney," he said, standing up. "And I believe he will prove we are innocent." He sat down.

The trial may take months, with a verdict possible before the end of the year. If they're found guilty, the four could each serve up to 45 years in prison, and the prosecutor's office has yet to lose a case. At the same time, in the United States, the government is still finding, arresting, and prosecuting Bosnian Serbs alleged to have participated in the Srebrenica massacre; on June 19, four Serbs were arrested in the Chicago suburbs.

As I watched Blagojević coolly assert his innocence in the courtroom, I thought back to my morning outside Mevludin Orić's house near Sarajevo, when I'd shown photographs of Mladen Blagojević and Zdravko Božić to Orić and his sister, Sabaheta Masic. Orić hadn't recognized them. But his sister stared at the photo of Blagojević. "I recognize that one from when they were separating us" from the men, she said. He had yelled at the civilians, she said. She couldn't remember what he had said.

"He had some kind of military T-shirt, a yellowish T-shirt," she said. "It's exactly the same person—the same hair."

Her daughter, Sedina, said nothing. I did not see her smile once. "My husband is still missing," her mother said. "I was pregnant with this kid. She's never met her father." ■