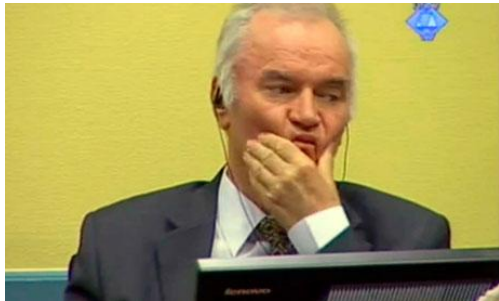


### The only way to respond to Ratko Mladic's obscene slit-throat gesture

Mladic's threat speaks to the politics of ethnic cleansing. Instead of rage, we must ensure such horror never happens again

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The former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic is on trial for war crimes at The Hague. Photograph: SIPA / Rex Features

A year after his arrest, the former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladic, who is accused on 11 accounts for war crimes, finally faces justice at the international criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

The accusations against him are grave, including the genocide committed in Srebrenica in July 1995. The prosecution will try to prove that Mladic ordered the killing of some 8,000 men after the fall of the Bosnian Muslim enclave. If anyone expected some display of remorse for what is now considered the worse war crime in Europe since the second world war, it did not come. Instead, the thumbs-up, the handclaps, a sarcastic smile to the public. No remorse, not from this man. On the contrary, from his behaviour one might doubt if this elderly man fully understands what he did.

Then again, perhaps he understands it all and wants to remind the world that he would do it again?

Like the other accused war criminal, Slobodan Milosevic, Mladic obviously loves theatrical gestures. On Wednesday, he was afforded such a chance. The TV cameras showed him entering with pomp, as though this were his moment of triumph. The cameras also documented the smirk on his face, showing his disdain for the ICTY. Just as Milosevic did, he wanted to show that he does not recognise these judges and that he despises the public who came to see him on his knees. But Mladic was not only defiant: he was obscene.

The cameras did not capture this gesture, but the public in the courtroom as well as journalists saw him draw his finger, like a knife, across his throat in the gesture of a threat. This was, allegedly, his reaction to a provocation from the public gallery where – he knew – there were 25 people from Bosnia, and among them women from Srebrenica. But it's one thing to be threatened in such a way by some thug in the street, quite another to face such a gesture from a man who perhaps caused the death of your teenage son in a mass slaughter he ordered. Of course his gesture caused outrage among them. How dare he? How is it possible for this man not only to laugh at them, but also to threaten them in the courtroom, at his own trial?

The Bosnians who witnessed this could not simply dismiss it as the gesture of a lunatic. His gesture does not only speak of an individual act of killing, it speaks to the politics of ethnic cleansing: we slaughtered you, we will do it again. And although it is now 17 years since the killings in Srebrenica, it should send a shudder down the spine of every person in former Yugoslavia – those who survived the wars as well as those born afterwards. Because this means that the war is not over.

Nowadays, defiance is all that is left to Ratko Mladic, just as helpless rage is all that is left to the people from Bosnia who could not believe their eyes watching him sliding his finger over his throat in a split second. But what is left to the rest of us, and to the world? Being shocked is not enough. Preventing it from happening again might be. Taking a closer look at the present situation in Bosnia might be one way to do it. Then Mladic's threat would acquire a different meaning, and surely not the one he wanted it to have.

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