

## Book Review

**Hikmet Karčić. 2022. *Torture, Humiliate, Kill. Inside the Bosnian Serb Camp System*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, United States: University of Michigan Press. 277 pp., ISBN 978-0-472-90271-2 (Open Access)**

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This in-depth study of one crucial aspect of the victimization, expulsion, and dispossession of non-Serbs during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), between 1992 and 1995, begins with a gruesome incident in Višegrad, eastern Bosnia. This town will be familiar to readers interested in the breakup of Yugoslavia, as it became synonymous with violence, especially rape and sexual abuse of women and girls. Karčić commences the story in June 1992, at the height of the Bosnian Serb effort to seize territory, when hundreds of Bosniak civilians were incarcerated in the Hasan Veletovac Elementary School. This is just one of the locations where illegal detention, beatings, torture, murder, and rape were perpetrated against ordinary civilians, especially the elite such as doctors, professors and lawyers, politicians, and community leaders. This book is the first scholarly analysis of some of the numerous places of detention, big and small, “official” or “unofficial” (i.e., operating privately in peoples’ garages), long-lasting or brief.

The book describes the camps as “echoes” of the Holocaust, quoting the British journalist Ed Vulliamy who was part of the group of reporters visiting Omarska and Trnopolje camps in the summer of 1992, bringing widespread attention to civilian suffering there (2). The stage is set by placing the camps in a wider context of illegal, illegitimate detention of civilians across different territories, through the 20th and 21st century. The book is comprised of eight chapters, where a brief overview of the history of inter-ethnic relations in BiH is followed by a chapter presenting the groundwork for the main argument of the work—about the purpose of the camp system being the collective traumatization of non-Serbs—which is then followed by four empirically rich chapters and a conclusion. The four case studies are Višegrad, Prijedor, Bijeljina, and Bileća, where the latter especially represents an important contribution to scholarship as it is a municipality which is virtually unknown to non-expert scholars.

This valuable book answers the call made by researchers to deepen our knowledge on perpetrators in the former Yugoslavia of the 1990s, given that, even 30 years after the war started, we know surprisingly little about them.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

**1** Clark, J. N. 2009. “Genocide, War Crimes and the Conflict in Bosnia: Understanding the Perpetrators.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 11 (4): 421–45.

it is vital to focus on perpetration and investigate what the perpetrators actually did and why.<sup>2</sup> Karčić does that masterfully, by analyzing massive amounts of primary sources, including the voluminous archives of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. Researchers find these records challenging to work with, because they are incredibly voluminous, comprising of thousands of pages of documents from dozens of trials, and because much of the material remains confidential.<sup>3</sup> Karčić, however, succeeds in using them to investigate structures behind the camps.

The analysis unveils the details about the places of suffering that littered the towns and villages around BiH, especially in the spring and summer of 1992. The absence of scholarly works on camps is puzzling, given how central they were to how the Bosnian Serb political project of seizing territory was pursued. Some places, like Omarska, Keraterm, Trnopolje, and Vilina Vlas, are well known, but others like Uzamnica or the Moša Pijade barracks are not, and this book allows a deeper insight into what it took to seize territory and make sure many of its inhabitants—undesirable from the perspective of the perpetrators—disappeared (for good).

Karčić convincingly lays out the differences between the camps: from military-to police-run places of detention to the important role of local authorities. His analysis, drawing on demography, geography, and history, explains some of the differences in conditions and treatment in the camps. Importantly, he brings nuance to the experiences of the detainees, by using their own recollections but also by discussing concrete events, such as St. Peter's Day (July 12) of 1992 in Omarska, when a "ceremonial theatrical murder of several detainees" (202) took place, with perpetrators burning the victims in a bonfire (127).

The author is particularly well-placed to conduct this study, being a Bosnian fluent in the local language, having personally visited many former camps in the years since the end of the war, and having interacted with survivors of these truly awful places. The book can be read together with another recent publication, Christian Axboe Nielsen's work on ethnic cleansing in BiH and the role the police played in it.<sup>4</sup> Given that Karčić discusses the police in considerable depth, these two works complement each other perfectly.

The book's main argument is straightforward yet original. It states that the purpose of the camps was collective victimization—inflicting such suffering, both

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2 Gudehus, C. 2018. "Violence Studies: Social Theoretical Considerations towards Understanding of War Crimes." In *War Crimes and Investigations: A Multi-Disciplinary Introduction*, edited by J. Waterflow and J. Schumacher, 85–101. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

3 Vukušić, I. 2022. "Archives of Mass Violence: Understanding and Using ICTY Trial Records." *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70 (4): 585–607.

4 Nielsen, C. A. 2022. *Mass Atrocities and the Police: A New History of Ethnic Cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. London: Bloomsbury.

physical and psychological, that survivors would never want to return to, thus enabling the Bosnian Serb authorities to secure long-term control of the seized territory. Crucially, the author makes the often-forgotten point that people who were taken to the camps were separated for being *perceived* as members of an ethno-religious community, not because of their *actual* identity and choices (122).

If there was any critique to present concerning this work, it would be the need to further elaborate on a claim that perpetrators learned from one another (46–7). I wish this would have been explored more, as part of the effort of understanding the camp system. How did this learning take place? Furthermore, what could have been strengthened was the depth and conceptual clarity of the work. The author uses various terms for camps, but insufficiently differentiates between what constitutes a detention camp, what is an internment camp, and how they are different from concentration camps. This conceptual analysis remains to be written, to provide the tools to better understand how expulsion, and ultimately genocide, are perpetrated. In the case of BiH, these policies were overwhelmingly successful, which Karčić demonstrates with demographic data that makes it obvious that only a fragment of the non-Serb population remains in these areas, and that many of the survivors left, possibly not to be reminded of all that was so violently taken from them.

Finally, what I want to emphasize is what Hikmet himself states on the first pages of the book: “The names of those killed that fill the following pages were supposed to be erased forever—that is the point of genocide—but here their tragic stories are shared, and the memory of what happened to them, and who did it, are preserved” (5). That is why this work is important, beyond the scholarly insights it undoubtedly presents; it is an act of remembrance.