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On the Political Significance of Ratko Mladić's Rhetoric

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> General Ratko Mladić, commander-in-chief of the Bosnian Serb Army, entered Srebrenica on July 11, moments behind the first Serb soldiers, accompanied by a television crew. "We present this city to the Serbian people as a gift," Mladić said, speaking to the camera. "Finally, after the rebellion of the Dahis, the time has come to take revenge on the Turks in this region." (Tom Gjelten)

Consider the infamous utterance of Ratko Mladić upon the capture of the UN-declared safehaven, Srebrenica, during the planned slaughter of thousands of men and boys as well as the murders and rapes of numerous women and children. The perpetrators of war crimes believe they had the right to play with discourse, and with this right they act in bad faith. Ratko Mladić shows a sadistic joy in his speaking to the world at this moment, and this sadistic joy, at some crude aesthetic level, fascinates the listening world and blinds the world to the speaker's motivation and character. The world is looking for a rationalization for this evil event that it knows is happening, and Mladić recognizes this need and panders it by mouthing banal history as an explanation for the violence he leads and promotes. The imperative of Mladić's bad faith is to deny respect for any imperative to which the world order is obliged. By simulating the structure of an ethical imperative, "the time has come," the substance of the ethical imperative with which to grasp exactly what it is that Mladić is doing is concealed. The purpose of the utterance is to camouflage the evil of the crime as it is occurring. The purpose is to cloak the world's recognition of the occurring crime in "real time" and thus the world's ability to stop the crime before it is completed.

Perpetrators of war crimes used language to discredit the seriousness and responsibility of their interlocutors who would attempt to speak on behalf of world order and the principle of justice. The more truthful and responsible their interlocutor, the more empty and ignoble the utterance. The more ethically informed their interlocutor, the more debased the response. This was a pattern that repeated itself many times during the war against Bosnia-Herzegovina and continues still today. The purpose of these utterances is to intimidate and disconcert; the purpose is identical to that of the shelling and killing.

The shells used to commit war crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina were sometimes measured and studied by military experts. The language used by war criminals also needs to be examined. Just as a million mines now lay in the ground of Bosnia, hundreds of utterances lay in the collective memory of Bosnians. Many shells were fired; many utterances were spoken. To understand only a few of these utterances may be sufficient to our purpose, which is to explain the action rather than the behavior of war criminals and to critique the perverse model of political discourse they perpetuate which so heavily influences our times.

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