



Damir Kovačević

Assistant Professor
Department of
Political Science

Visions of Greater Serbia: Local Dynamics and the Prijedor Genocide

This article asks, “what explains the onset, severity, and timing of genocide at the local level?” I utilize the meso-level --micro-comparative analysis focusing on subnational regions--to investigate the episode of genocide that unfolded in the municipality of Prijedor. The article’s contributions are threefold: Empirically, I investigate the underexplored local dynamics of the Bosnian War. Methodically, I situate my research within the burgeoning micro-comparative approach to political violence. Scholars across the discipline of political science have used the micro-comparative method to study civil wars, genocide, and rebellions. Theoretically, I argue that structural control and agent collaboration are instrumental in explaining the escalation and radicalization of violence to genocide in Prijedor.

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Damir Kovačević
University of Wisconsin
Eau Claire, Wisconsin, USA

When the academic community, media, or policy experts mention the Bosnian genocide, it is unclear what they are referring to. Their reference to the event is often twofold. First, the term focuses on the macro-level, failing to disaggregate the intensity, location, and timing of violence. In other words, the term is used unwittingly to lump various events into a single, coherent story. The problem is that by lumping events into a unified story, the idiosyncrasies that define the various localities are lost in exchange for a simplified understanding of a rather complex and dynamic phenomenon. Second, the term is commonly used in reference to the atrocities committed in Srebrenica. Though this event is noteworthy and stands as the quintessential example of the type of violence the international community vowed would never again happen, it does not give a full account of what occurred during the war.

By taking a closer look at the meso-level, we see that the genocide in Bosnia was a coordinated campaign that extended across numerous municipalities, varying in time of execution and severity. The meso-level is a tool that studies violence at an analytical level below the nation-state.¹ Aside from offering insights into subnational regions and localities, the meso-level is also “the least developed among the three prongs of genocide research.”² For the purposes of this paper, I utilize the meso-level to investigate the episode of genocide that unfolded in the municipality of Prijedor in the spring and summer of 1992.³ The case of Prijedor is important for several reasons. First, Prijedor accounted for the most deaths in northwestern Bosnia, and the third most deaths out of any municipality during the war.⁴ Second, Prijedor was situated in the strategically important location known as the Serbian Arc, where the Bosnian Serbs sought to link the Bosnian Serb populations of Serbia proper, eastern Bosnia, northwestern Bosnia, and Croatia, under the Greater Serbia umbrella.⁵ Third, Prijedor accounted for a total of twenty-eight concentration camps – a significantly high number that included the notorious camps of *Keraterm* and *Omarska*.⁶

I argue that structural control and agent collaboration highlight the factors that contributed to the escalation and radicalization of violence to genocide in Prijedor. This causal argument

¹ Charles King, “The Micropolitics of Social Violence,” *World Politics* 56, no. 1 (2004), 431-455, accessed March 27, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2004.0016>.

² Evgeny Finkel and Scott Straus, “Macro, Meso, and Micro Research on Genocide: Gains, Shortcomings, and Future Areas of Inquiry,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 7, no. 1 (2012), 59, accessed February 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3138/gsp.7.1.56>. Although this analytical level is underdeveloped, crucial research relating to genocide in Rwanda and civil war violence in Bosnia has been conducted. On the importance of local elites in the Bosnian civil war, see Fotini Christia, “Following the Money: Muslims versus Muslims in Bosnia’s Civil War,” *Comparative Politics* 40, no. 4 (2008), 461-480, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041508X12911362383390>. On the patterns of mass violence in Eastern Bosnia, see Edina Bećević, *Genocide on the Drina River* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). On subnational violence and genocide in Rwanda, see Lee Ann Fujii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Scott Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

³ It is important to note that there have been many prosecutions for crimes committed in Prijedor by the ICTY, most notably the cases of Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, but the court has deemed these crimes short of genocide. In fact, from an international legal perspective, only the case of Srebrenica was deemed genocide.

⁴ Patrick Ball et al., *The Bosnian Book of the Dead: Assessment of the Database (Full Report)* (Falmers, United Kingdom: The Institute of Development Studies, 2007), accessed March 27, 2019, <http://www.hicn.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/rdn5.pdf>.

⁵ Guido Acquaviva, “Robert Donia, From the Republika Srpska Assembly 1991-1996: Excerpts from Delegates’ Speeches at the Republika Srpska Assembly as Body of Evidence for the International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague,” *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 11, no. 1 (September 2013), 931-951, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jicj/nqt049>.

⁶ United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *The Final Report of the Commission of Experts Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780*, December 28, 1994 (UN Doc. S/1994/674/Annex VIII, Prison Camps), 22, 185-267. The report lists 36 total camps, but only 28 that can be corroborated. It is also important to note that there were vast differences between concentration camps. Some were larger in size, whereas others were garages and smaller spaces. Pages 185-267 of the report include a more detailed account of the concentration camps.

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