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In the Land of Blood and Honey, or How Angelina Jolie Adopted Bosnia

LSE Ideas

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Angelina Jolie's *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, a film about the Bosnian war, is neither [particularly good, nor unbearably bad](#). But you might not know this if you got most of your information about it from Serb or Bosniak commentators.

What the film did....

As Ms. Jolie has herself noted, her film has revealed yet again the deep divisions between Bosniaks and [Bosnian Serbs](#). The initial controversy surrounded a rumour that the script featured a Bosniak rape victim falling in love with her Serb rapist (the rumour was untrue). The Sarajevo-based *Association of Women Victims of War* led the charge against the film that resulted in a temporary suspension of Jolie's [licence to shoot in Bosnia](#). The head of the Association, Bakira Hacesic, continues to speak against the film, arguing that it deepens the suffering of the Bosniak women who were brutalized during the war.

Soon thereafter, the debate over Jolie's picture settled into a much more predictable pattern, adding another layer to the tediously unproductive Bosniak-Serbian feud. Many Bosniaks have praised the film as an accurate rendering of what happened to them, whereas a number of Serbs have dismissed it as one-sided propaganda that paints them as exclusive villains, and 'the other side' as [exclusive victims](#).^[1] In fact, in the predominantly Serb-inhabited part of Bosnia, the film has not been shown at all, presumably due to the lack of [audience interest](#). This is a distinct possibility given the film's premiere in Belgrade, where only a handful of [people attended the opening night](#).

And what it said...

This 'debate' reflects the impoverished and ideologized local understandings of what happened during the Yugoslav wars. To most Bosniaks, the story is cut and dried: they were the victims, the other side the aggressor. On the Serb side, the reactions are as typical: sure, things did 'happen' to those other people, but what about our suffering? At this point, any interaction tends to degenerate into an auction frenzy of numbers, dates and recriminations. In a word, no understanding is shed on what was from the start a fairly complex story.

It would be unfair to blame Angelina Jolie for failing to foster greater understanding of the Bosnian conflict had she not set [this goal for herself](#). Yet, as historical commentary, the movie does not offer anything that we have not seen in the Oscar-winning "No Man's Land", or the better and much less well-known movie "[Grbavica](#)." It also does not go beyond the mostly simplistic media accounts of the war.

...about the Bosniacs...

Ironically, it is Bosniaks who could be as angry as the Serbs about Jolie's script. Consider the following features of the film's storyline. The war is shown as a sudden shock to an otherwise harmonious society. The hapless Bosniaks are found scrounging for bare survival, with little to no political 'agency' (an academic code word for one's capacity for independent action). Their resistance is reduced to isolated and ineffective skirmishing, and a couple of men cowering in a bombed-out ruin, feebly counting bullets, and not doing much else to counter their predicament.

One could forgive any proud, politically conscious Bosniak for being insulted by this representation. Serb motives were portrayed in some detail through the person of General Vukojevic, played by Rade Serbedzija. Yet, Bosniaks seem not to exist as political subjects at all. They appear as mere recipients of action, not its active protagonists. Their support for the political project of independent and unified Bosnia and Herzegovina is not even hinted at. The well-organized, if improvised and under-supplied, Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina is also conspicuously absent from Jolie's narrative. Again, this would not be particularly objectionable if she strove to portray the vagaries of war in the abstract. But the movie is an explicit history lesson. Bosnia's first president, Alija Izetbegovic, noted on one occasion that the war offered the Bosniaks the opportunity to finally show their teeth to the Serbs. Few such proud people exist in Ms. Jolie's film.

Of course, acknowledging this type of agency would complicate the simplistic, and, yes, profoundly 'Hollywoody', story about victims and perpetrators. It would suggest that Bosniak politicians had a part to play in contributing to the outbreak of violence. If this is true, and some of the [best scholarship](#) on the subject of the Bosnian war suggest that it is, it in no way justifies either Srebrenica or hundreds of other mass crimes committed against the Bosniaks. It does, however, enable us to consider the many shades of grey that exist in the real world, in Bosnia no less than in other places. It also forces us to understand that to

assign blame does not necessarily help us understand what happened, either on that broader, societal canvas, or on the smaller, personal one.

...and about the Serbs

The Serbs might have reason to complain about the film as well. [Critics](#) have already noted the cardboard cutout quality of Jolie's 'villains,' so it is unnecessary to go into greater detail here. But consider the male lead, Danijel, a Serb with misgivings about the treatment meted out to Bosniaks, who becomes the sole symbolic hope for rescuing Serb humanity in this movie. He is nevertheless unable to find it in himself to forgive his ill-starred Bosniak lover her 'betrayal'. She passes on knowledge about a Serb military gathering, which leads to a bombing during which Danijel almost loses his life. In a fit of rage, he executes her. Thereby, the only hope for the 'good Serbs' is lost in the narrative. The final scene has Danijel melodramatically dropping to his knees in front of UN peacekeepers, twice repeating "I am a war criminal."

Hand in Hand

Thus, the film draws together impotent Bosniaks and almost equally impotent Serbs. The former are the wretched victims of the latter and must be saved, since they are incapable of saving themselves. The latter, in turn, are their own worst enemy, and cannot accept what they had done without the gentle guiding hand of Ms. Jolie. The words "I am a war criminal" beckon as the promise of salvation at film's end. Ultimately, in this land of blood and honey, both sides find deliverance at the hands of the great liberal 'empire' and its good will ambassador.

Among Bosniaks there are those who believe that the film is good simply because of its portrayal of 'their' side. Among the Serbs, some dismiss Jolie's movie because they feel it demonizes 'their own'. The only criterion of the story's merit seems to be the extent to which it strokes hurt collective egos. By engaging in such exchanges, people on both sides surrender more than merely their own good judgment about mediocre films. They might get angry at how Angelina Jolie chose to represent them. But since they accept the roles she assigned to them, do they not surrender their right to outrage?

[1] See also http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/entertainment/2017582903_apeuserbiajoliemovie.html

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