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Seeing the Sorrow Anew: Recapturing the Reality of Suffering Through Srebrenica

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Abstract

Those who know death know mourning. Those who know mourning know the meaning of empty spaces that we all wish had stayed filled. But do we, or even can we, as the few members of this society who habitually reflect upon the tragedies and triumphs of the past, fully understand the immensity of the suffering we dwell upon while wandering our battlefields? [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Seeing the Sorrow Anew: Recapturing the Reality of Suffering Through Srebrenica

October 26, 2015

By Matt LaRoche, '17

Those who know death know mourning. Those who know mourning know the meaning of empty spaces that we all wish had stayed filled. But do we, or even can we, as the few members of this society who habitually reflect upon the tragedies and triumphs of the past, fully understand the immensity of the suffering we dwell upon while wandering our battlefields? In the Civil War field, whether as professors or as history buffs, we deal with the heartbreak and the violation of violence on a daily basis. However, this summer, as I worked at Gettysburg National Military Park and gave my National Cemetery tour almost daily, I quickly realized just how much of a disconnect the ages have put between us and the Civil War generation. I realized how never having known the people in the graves at your feet warps your perception of the events that took their lives. And I realized how, especially for the majority of the park's visitors who have never known war, it is imperative that we try to connect to the reality of suffering that the war generation bore in order to understand not just our fragility as humans, but the long reach and lasting consequences of our actions.



By chance, I also discovered a lens that allowed me to do to this—that lets me reevaluate what the dead of Gettysburg mean, and what their deaths have to teach. This July, as I sat in the break room reading CNN on my phone, [I saw a run of articles detailing the twentieth anniversary of the Srebrenica Massacre in Bosnia. I watched videos of crowds of mourners gathering in the cemetery-memorial to the over 8,000 murdered Muslim men and boys of Srebrenica,](#) and I realized that this is not what we see at the National Cemetery. We see a sense of completeness, of the weight of history. The cemetery is lovely and well visited. To us—to we who have known it no other way—all is well. But we are misled. We no longer see mothers waiting—perhaps forever—to simply bury their sons. From Srebrenica, I heard the voices of people who will be struggling forever to make sense of what happened in July of 1995, their search for answers made infinitely harder because it is torturously emotional, not just an intellectual query. That conversation ended in the National Cemetery with the last person who knew the Civil War dead.

Some will stop me here, and say that the pain felt by the families of the Srebrenica dead holds no similarity to the heartache of the mothers of Gettysburg's dead—that because of its senseless, genocidal nature, the normal mourning of war dead cannot apply, or that the Bosnians cut down in July of 1995 were civilians, and thus wholly unlike the men cut down in July of 1863. Were those soldiers all professionals—had they all willingly signed away twenty-five or thirty years of their lives to military service—I might agree. But the three million soldiers of the Civil War were far from professional. Unlike career soldiers, the vast majority of Civil War servicemen left half-finished lives behind them when they took up the rifle. They never intended to fully live by the sword, so they never built the austere lives given to war—they married, fathered children, supported parents and siblings, and had every intention of doing so to their dying breath. As such, when they died, they disappeared to people who, by rights, should have been allowed to keep them close until their dying days. Instead of disappearing into the hills of Bosnia, they disappeared into the fields and forests of Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia . . . and into the sea and into swamps across the South. They never had the final pouring out of heavy words, the final squeeze of a friendly hand, the final sight of a lover's face, or a child's, or a friend's. Far too many were never identified—the chilling similarities between the photographs of the mass graves in Bosnia, and the pictures of the scattered bones of the dead of Cold Harbor and Gaines' Mill attest to the same problem; the two are just separated by time and space. The hundreds of thousands of unknowns of the Civil War were just as raw to the loved ones they left behind as the one thousand-plus unknowns of Srebrenica are to this day.

Little of that reality is readily apparent to most of the visitors who visit the national cemetery today, and that separation is the driving purpose behind historical interpretation—the answer to the “so what?” of the profession. Never doubt that educating new generations about the mistakes of the old is a crucial service. When doubt rears its head, remember what former President Bill Clinton told to the mothers and sisters and lovers of the disappeared of Srebrenica this July, as we were commemorating the 152nd anniversary of Gettysburg—“I am begging you to not to let this monument to innocent boys and men become only the memory of a tragedy. I ask you to make it a sacred trust where all people here can come and claim a future for this country.” We have been continuing this same human work in our own sphere, at Gettysburg, from the Gettysburg Address to the Sacred Trust talks put on annually by the National Park Service in conjunction with the Gettysburg Foundation. We do it every day with tours and books and casual-but-impassioned conversations. And we must continue to fight to make it known that each

generation has a duty to remember the common tragedy of rows upon rows of headstones, etched with the names of stolen lives, if we can ever hope to avoid repeating the cycle with new stones and new names that are all too terribly familiar. At least for me, this is the meaning of Gettysburg. This is the meaning of Srebrenica. This is the purpose of History.

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