

Handke does not deny the massacre in Srebrenica¹

The Nobel Prize awarded to Peter Handke has aroused very strong feelings. In an agitated situation, it is essential to have grounds for one's claims, but it is obvious that many who comment on the prize have not read Handke, especially not what he has written on Serbia.

This also applies to Peter Maas (*Dagens Nyheter*, 15 October) although he does have an acquaintance who read "A Journey to the rivers Danube, Sava, Morava and Drina or Justice for Serbia". Maas is right in stating that the book provoked an outcry in Germany, when published in January 1996 as a serial in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. However, he fails to properly convey its content.

Maas writes: "In the book, which is based on a short trip to the country, he regrets that the media " relentlessly portray the Serbs as evil ". By writing that "I stand behind the Serbian people, not Milosevic" Handke appears to distance himself from the Serbian leader. The problem is that the quotes cannot be found in the book. I have read it several times and finally scanned it in order to be able to search the text. Maybe it's based on a summary by David Rieff, but Handke has not expressed himself in this manner.

It is impossible to discuss the book in full, but given the charges against Handke, it may be of interest to find out what he is actually saying on the most controversial issue. Srebrenica is mentioned three times. One case is trivial. The writer observes a timetable for buses no longer valid: Belgrade - Tuzla - Srebrenica. The other instances deserve to be dealt with more extensively. During his travels in Serbia, Handke arrives in a small border town on the Drina, a mile away from the war scenes of eastern Bosnia. There he meets an elderly woman:

"She bitterly lacked the companionship of her Muslim friends, whether they came from Višegrad, the place in Bosnia that she liked best (Ivo Andrić's " *The Bridge on the Drina* takes place there) or from Srebrenica which is closer. She was convinced that it was true that thousands of people had been murdered in Srebrenica during the summer of 1995. The war in Bosnia was generally conducted on a smaller, far smaller scale. One night people were slaughtered in a Muslim village, the next in a Serbian, and so on. Now the Serbs in this border town lived for themselves and had no more to say to one another. The brand new, semi-elegant shops and bars on the main street were owned by Serb war profiteers from Bosnia and she would never set foot there " [p. 121]²

Handke's description of the war, with the exception of the summer of 1992, is essentially correct. About half the military and civilian casualties in Bosnia occurred during the first year of war.

When the author is back in Paris he speaks with his wife:

"But You would not question the massacre in Srebrenica, as well, would You?" S says after my return. "No," I said. "But I would ask how such a massacre may be explained, a massacre carried out, it is said, in the view of the world community, after three years of war, when, allegedly, all parties, including the dogs of war, were tired to death, and what happened, they say, was an organized, systematic and long-planned execution". Why this killing, thousands of times? On what grounds? For what reason? Instead of an investigation ("psychopaths" is not enough), we get no more than a simple promotion of market-driven facts and semi-facts?" [p.147]

Handke does not deny what happened in Srebrenica. And his question is legitimate. No massacre of that magnitude had occurred earlier, and there were no evident military reasons. If we refer to the Hague Tribunal, we can only conclude that it is as unclear in the judgment against Radovan Karadžić (2016) as in the judgment against general Krstić (2001) when and by whom orders were given.

Handke is portrayed by his critics as either a stupid idiot or an evil manipulator. There is nothing in this travelogue that endorses such views. The question is why the reaction in Germany was so resentful? It must be remembered that there was a strong anti-Serb mood in German media reports and commentaries. I lived with my family in Berlin in the summer of 1990 and the war was still far away. On the evening news in the public service channel, the host spoke about Slovenes and Croats, as well as "Serb armoured communists [Serbische Panzerkomunisten]" and openly expressed his contempt. One may understand that a communist like Milošević, who ended the democratic renewal in Serbia and represented a Titoist rhetoric, was not popular. More difficult to understand is that they accepted a nationalist and Holocaust denier like Tudjman, who in the 1990 election campaign thanked God that his wife was not Jewish or Serbian. Before any violent acts had taken place, Germany had already taken a stand and unfortunately sabotaged an orderly dissolution of Yugoslavia in 1991 and 1992.

Against this background, the 1996 criticism was not so much about the contents of Handke's book, as about what he did *not* say or do. Why did he travel to Serbia, why did he not condemn Milošević and the genocide in Bosnia? This criticism was in several ways one-sided, and the Swedish Academy (Mats Malm and Eric M. Runesson) is right when suggesting (*Dagens Nyheter* 12.10) that one should consult scholars like Kurt Gritsch³ and Karoline von Oppen⁴.

Handke himself is aware of the controversial nature of his project. In the book he asks himself:

"But is it not, in the end, irresponsible, I thought at the Drina river, and still do, to focus on the modest suffering in Serbia, a little freezing here, a little loneliness there, with secondary issues like snowflakes, hats, and kajmak [a kind of sour cream cheese], while

great suffering reigns on the other side of the border, in Sarajevo, Tuzla, Srebrenica and Bihać, compared to which Serbian ailments are nothing? Yes, I have often asked myself, phrase by phrase, if this notetaking is not obscene, tasteless, forbidden - the author's journey becoming yet another adventurous, dangerous, often depressing (believe me) journey, where I have learned the meaning of "between Scylla and Charybdis". Does not he who writes about small defects (lack of teeth) make the large one being watered down, silenced, obscured?" [p. 158]

The answer is to be found in the book. It would be important to translate *Eine winterliche Reise*.

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¹ This is a translation from Swedish by the author of his article in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, October 17, 2019. <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/kjell-magnusson-handke-fornekar-inte-folkmordet-i-srebrenica/>

² The page references refer to *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa and Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien*, published with two other essays, 2017 (1998) in Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 2905. In English the book is entitled *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*, Viking 1997, translated by Scott Abbott

³ Gritsch, Kurt. 2009. *Peter Handke und "Gerechtigkeit für Serbien" Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte*- Studien Verlag, Innsbruck, Wien.

⁴ Von Oppen, K. (2013). "Justice for Peter Handke". In: Tom Cheesman (ed.), *German text crimes: Writers accused, from the 1950s to the 2000s*, pp. 175-92. New York, The Netherlands: Brill. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=1402864>