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Lara J. Nettelfield’s new book begins with her poignant witnessing of Bosnian wartime survivors mobilizing for justice. On a rainy day in March 2004, a group of widows from the 1995 Srebrenica massacre gather in a protest vigil in front of the United Nations Sarajevo office. This scene, which is also depicted in her striking cover photograph of the women survivors holding a commemorative banner for their perished loved ones, provides an intriguing window into her book on Bosnia-Herzegovina and the UN International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. After setting the scene, she turns to the vexing question of what compelled the women – who viewed themselves as the “original constituents” (p. 1) of the tribunal – to protest against an institution they once held in high esteem.

The Srebrenica widows, and many other Bosnian Muslim survivors, had high hopes for the tribunal, given its UN Security Council mandate to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators of mass atrocities that occurred during the Yugoslav wars of succession. Justice, of course, could not undo the human carnage of war, yet it held significant promise for those who had survived. Perhaps most importantly, as Eric Stover found in his landmark interview study of Bosnian survivor witnesses (Stover 2005), justice “meant piercing the veil of denial about past war crimes that had lain over their divided communities since the war.” (Stover 2004: 115) While individuals from all sides of the Bosnian conflict were implicated in atrocities, Bosnian Muslim communities stood out as the primary victims. Not surprisingly, their backing of The Hague-based tribunal stood in sharp contrast to the antipathy that many
people in the Bosnian Serb Republic, Serbia, and Croatia harbored against the tribunal. But Bosnian Muslim faith in the tribunal has frequently been tested over the years. Their grievances have included the slow pace of trials in The Hague, some controversial acquittals, lenient sentences, and what they regarded as inadequate support for victim communities. As Stover learned from his interviews, many Bosnian survivors viewed “tribunal justice […] [as] capricious, unpredictable, and inevitably incomplete” (Stover 2004: 115).

One point of sharp conflict between survivors and the tribunal centered on tribunal forensic exhumations that lacked the resources to identify most of the murdered at Srebrenica (Stover and Shigekane 2004: 85-103). As a result of this disillusionment, the Srebrenica widows’ optimism had largely soured, even well before the 2004 Sarajevo protest that opens Nettelfield’s book. As she writes, the tribunal “had left the survivors largely disappointed and frustrated” (p. 101).

Still, the Srebrenica widows’ protest at the tribunal’s offices in Bosnia-Herzegovina can actually be considered an act in consonance with the cause of international justice. The widows had come together to speak out against the Security Council’s planned closure of the tribunal at the end of 2010, a cut off date that they feared would obstruct their quest for justice. As Nettelfield emphasizes, “beyond their disappointment and disillusionment, they felt this international institution had not finished its work in Bosnia and Herzegovina and should not close its doors” (p. 2). While the tribunal had already prosecuted some suspects involved in the Srebrenica massacre, the two most wanted men, former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić and former Bosnian Serb general Ratko Mladić remained fugitives in 2004. The UN decision to close the tribunal, even if number of years away at the time, could signal that these fugitives could outlast international justice. However, Karadzic was arrested in Serbia in July 2008 and is currently on trial in The Hague. Mladić was arrested in Serbia in late May 2011 and was transferred to the tribunal less than a week later.

From a different perspective, the widows’ demonstration at the gates of the tribunal’s Sarajevo offices is evidence of the tribunal’s eroding credibility. That victim groups, presumably the tribunal’s natural allies, would feel it necessary to stage a protest speaks of a dispiriting turn of events that casts a shadow over the tribunal’s work and legacy. As Nettelfield acknowledges, the tribunal has certainly fallen short on a number of key dimensions. Yet, as she argues throughout the book, to focus primarily on these inadequacies blinds us to the tribunal’s significant contributions to Bosnia-Herzegovina’s postwar recovery. To Nettelfield, raising one’s voice in protest is a sign of tribunal success insofar