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## Return to Bosnia-Herzegovina: the Not-So-Safe Areas

This is the ninth part in a series about Bosnia-Herzegovina thirty years after its civil wars.



Srebrenica-Potočari Genocide Memorial and Cemetery near the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica, one of the so-called UN “safe areas” (that wasn’t) during the 1992-95 Yugoslav wars. Photo: Matthew Stevenson

Martin Bell’s book about the Yugoslav war, *In Harm’s Way: Bosnia: A War Reporter’s Story*, excels on the confluence of war and television, and how much of modern warfare is directed to the ratings. I thought about his conclusions on my several day trips outside

Sarajevo, which during the war lived under siege for 1,425 day—a year longer than what Leningrad endured during World War II.

Even in the Second World War General Dwight Eisenhower said: “Public opinion wins wars,” and in the Yugoslav conflicts it dictated strategy, if not small unit tactics.

In Sarajevo, the two market bombings in the 1990s did more to affect the outcome of the fighting and thus postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina than many bloodier engagements across the country, and to this day there is disagreement on who fired the fatal mortar volleys that killed so many civilians in the center of Sarajevo.

Bell, a BBC correspondent, writes: “The satellite is as much a weapon of war as the sniper’s rifle, and the soundbite is an extension of warfare by other means.”

### **The Market Bombings**

In all likelihood both mortar volleys were fired from the surrounding hills that the Serbs controlled for most of the siege. At the same time forensic evidence collected by the head of the UN peacekeepers, British General Sir Michael Rose, indicated some uncertainty as to the origin of the first shelling (in 1994) and speculated that it was possible that the Bosnian army might have been responsible for the attack.

By the time, however, the mortar shells rained down on the Sarajevo market again in August 1995, the world had made up its mind: the aggressors were the Serbs, and the victims were the Muslims and Croats, and the only response to such an attack on civilians was for NATO aircraft to bomb Serb positions around Sarajevo, which is what happened.

In time those NATO airstrikes led to a ceasefire and the Dayton Peace Accords, in December 1995, which ended the war on terms that suggested the Serbs were responsible for the bloodshed, but as Bell writes in his memoir: “One thing these stories all had in common was that they tended to reinforce the stereotype of good Muslims and bad Serbs. The ethnic and religious mix was actually more complicated than that—as indeed were the moral issues, for the Serbs also suffered.”

### **A UN Chain Without Command**

Bell makes similar points about the failure of peacekeeping in Bosnia (it was under UN control), arguing that in many cases combatants in the civil war could manipulate the peacekeepers for the own advantage.

Bell writes: “The commanders of the newly arriving UN battalions thus found themselves in an impossible position: not only were they mandated to deal with the effects of aggression rather than with the aggression itself, but they were involuntarily acting as agents of ethnic cleansing. As usually practised this was not so much a killing as a

squeezing process. The Serbs would overrun a town, then leave open one road out through which non-Serbs would be expelled.”

In theory, UN troops were there to keep the opposite sides from killing each other, but the UN forces were too few to do much more than assist civilians caught up in the violence.

Most controversial was the UN declaration in 1993 by the French General Philippe Morillon that certain Muslim enclaves in Serbian districts would be declared “safe areas” and enjoy the protection of the UN forces.

On paper, such a declaration made sense, except that the UN forces lacked the resources to protect so many civilians, and that the UN command structure often lacked immediate control over some forces in the peacekeeping battalions, who well into the conflict preferred to follow orders only from their home country’s ministry of defense.

It made for a patchwork peacekeeping effort that, tragically, might well have contributed to the massacre of some 8,000 men and boys who were marched out of the safe area around Srebrenica and killed by members of the Bosnian Serb Army.

**‘Indifference is a Sin...’**

Leading up to the massacre, which took place in July 1995, the UN had declared Srebrenica a safe zone so that the surrounding Serbs would not overrun the Muslim town, which is in eastern Bosnia, close to the border with Serbia.

At the same time, the UN deployed insufficient troops to protect Srebrenica. Nor did it authorize those troops protecting the town to use force against the Serbs when they showed up on the UN’s doorstep.

Finally, what doomed Srebrenica was that several Muslim commanders in the enclave took the opportunity to shield their guns behind the skirts of the UN peacekeepers and fire at the surrounding Serbian positions. It all came to a head in July 1995, when the Serbs brushed aside a company of Dutch peacekeepers and occupied Srebrenica, then ordered the men and boys in the town on their death march.

Bell points out that when the Dutch peacekeepers refused to fight, it was on orders from their home ministry, not the UN command structure. He writes: “Much later, in July 1995, the defence of the UN’s safe area of Srebrenica, garrisoned by Dutch troops, was ended by order of their Chief of Staff in Holland, who was far outside the UN’s chain of command. It was not so much a chain of command as a web of incoherence.”

Bell later added: “I am in controversial territory here. But it seems to that the trail of culpability for Srebrenica leads—as with the earlier genocide in Europe—not only to those

who made it happen but also to those who let it happen. (Remember Elie Wiesel's point about indifference: 'Indifference is a sin and a punishment.')

### **No European Consensus**

The biggest problem facing the peacekeepers in disintegrating Yugoslavia was that there was no consensus in western or eastern Europe on the solution to the crisis.

For its own internal reasons, Germany wanted to expand its Balkan sphere of influence in independent Slovenia, Croatia, and Bosnia. The United States took the position, according to Secretary of States James Baker, that it "didn't have a dog in that fight." Russia especially supported the integrity of Yugoslavia and later Serbia, and it decided that NATO would one day dismember Russia as it was then dismembering Yugoslavia and later Serbia (in Kosovo).

In her book *Fool's Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions*, Diana Johnstone writes:

What could "Europe" have done? The answer in principle is simple, although the application would have been complex. It could have offered Yugoslavia's people and politicians a prospect of an overall solution to their supposed problems of coexistence by offering a clear, feasible program for integration of all of Yugoslavia – all the republics, simultaneously – into the European Union.

That never happened, obviously, and later in the war—after so many nightly broadcasts of atrocities in Sarajevo and elsewhere—all NATO could think to do was bomb Serbian positions and impose a peace settlement on the combatants so that in one so-called federation, the three sides to the conflict could live independent lives.

Johnstone concludes: "The Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s were used to assert both U.S. dominance over the European Union through NATO, and NATO's dominance over the United Nations."

Sadly, especially for the Ukrainians, one way to interpret the recent Ukraine war is that it is Russia's pushback against the earlier conflict.

*Next installment: Tuzla then and now.*

*Earlier pieces in this series can be read [here](#).*

*Matthew Stevenson is the author of many books, including [Reading the Rails](#), [Appalachia Spring](#), and [The Revolution as a Dinner Party](#), about China throughout its turbulent twentieth century. His most recent book, about traveling in France and the Franco-Prussian wars, is entitled [Biking with Bismarck](#). His new book is: [Our Man in Iran](#).*

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