

## Class, Race and Corporate Power

---

Volume 3 | Issue 2

Article 5

---

2015

# How the Srebrenica Massacre Redefined US Foreign Policy

David N. Gibbs  
[dgibbs@arizona.edu](mailto:dgibbs@arizona.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower>

 Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gibbs, David N. (2015) "How the Srebrenica Massacre Redefined US Foreign Policy," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/classracecorporatepower/vol3/iss2/5>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Class, Race and Corporate Power* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

---

# How the Srebrenica Massacre Redefined US Foreign Policy

## Abstract

This special perspectives section features commentary on the implications of the Srebrenica massacre for U.S. foreign policy. Given the 20-year anniversary of the massacre, we felt that it was appropriate to invite a range of scholars to participate in a forum to address different aspects of the tragedy and its aftermath in the context of U.S. foreign policy. The forum is structured around a commentary by David Gibbs, author of *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, Vanderbilt University Press, 2009. Gibbs article, "How the Srebrenica Massacre Redefined U.S. Foreign Policy," is featured below. Within the next month, we will have responses to Gibbs' argument from several experts on the subject, followed by a closing commentary by Gibbs.

As this article goes to press, a new development has emerged: "The Obama administration is moving to designate the Islamic State's murderous attacks on the Yazidi in Iraq an act of 'genocide,'" according to a press report. It should be recalled that last year, the regime of Bashir Assad was widely believed to be committing genocide in Syria, and in 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was at least planning a genocide in Libya. And in all of these cases, the claims of genocide were widely accompanied by calls for US and NATO intervention, as a solution. While readers will rightly deplore the atrocities that attended these events, the word "genocide" is being used with notable regularity, in a way that already has and will continue to erode the meaning of this very important concept, through overuse. --Ronald W. Cox

## Keywords

Srebrenica; Srebrenica Massacre; US Foreign Policy; Humanitarian Intervention

## Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

The mass killing of some 8,000 people in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, in July 1995, has achieved iconic status, as one of the most recognized atrocities in history. The massacre should also be remembered as an event that helped recast the whole idea of military intervention: Prior to the Cold War, the concept was viewed with suspicion as a consummate act of *realpolitik*. Since Srebrenica, interventionism has been viewed with far greater legitimacy, as an altruistic act of genocide prevention. Within the US and Europe, the Srebrenica massacre galvanized a whole generation of political activists around the idea of humanitarian intervention.

Perhaps most importantly, the massacre helped give a new impetus to US hegemony, contributing to its post-Cold War legitimacy. In bolstering America's hegemonic position, the significance of the Srebrenica massacre cannot be overstated: The massacre helped trigger a NATO bombing campaign that is widely credited with ending the Bosnian war, along with the associated atrocities, and this campaign gave NATO a new purpose for the post-Soviet era. Since that time, the Srebrenica precedent has been continuously invoked as a justification for military force. The perceived need to prevent massacres and oppression helped justify later interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as well as the ongoing fight against ISIS. The recent UN doctrine of Responsibility to Protect, which contains a strongly interventionist tone, was inspired in part by the memory of Srebrenica.

Supporters of military intervention often point to the historical lessons of Srebrenica, the most important of which is the need to use decisive military force as a response to humanitarian emergencies, while dispensing with diplomacy. This position was succinctly stated in a 2006 *New Republic* editorial: "In the response to most foreign policy crises, the use of military force is properly viewed as a last resort. In the response to genocide, the use of *military force is properly viewed as a first resort.*"<sup>1</sup> Given the broad way that genocide is now defined, this is a call for interventions without limit.

US interventions carried out after Srebrenica are increasingly presented as humanitarian activities. In 2005, Christopher Hitchens defended the US decision to invade Iraq, with an article entitled "From Srebrenica to Baghdad."<sup>2</sup> In 2011, when *Guardian* columnist Peter Preston advocated military intervention in Libya, he began with the words: "Remember Srebrenica?"<sup>3</sup> In 2012, a CNN call for Western intervention in Syria appeared under the title "Syria, Sarajevo, and Srebrenica."<sup>4</sup> A 2014 article on ISIS advances in Syria warned of a possible new "New Srebrenica,"<sup>5</sup> with the implication that Western military action was needed to prevent this calamity. The massacre has become a handy justification for nearly all interventions, and it was the issue of *genocide* that infused Srebrenica with its potency.

I will argue that the conventional wisdom about Srebrenica is mistaken. Contrary to popular belief, the NATO interventions in Bosnia actually worsened the atrocities they were intended to resolve. There is also abundant evidence that diplomacy might have prevented the Bosnian war and thus prevented the Srebrenica massacre, but this option was blocked by pro-

---

<sup>1</sup> "Again," *New Republic*, May 15, 2006. Emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "From Srebrenica to Baghdad: What the Genocide Taught Us about Intervention," *Salon*, July 11, 2005, [slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2005/07/from\\_srebrenica\\_to\\_baghdad.html](http://slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2005/07/from_srebrenica_to_baghdad.html).

<sup>3</sup> Peter Preston, "Remember Srebrenica? The West's Intervention in Libya is a No-Brainer," *Guardian*, May 29, 2011, [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/29/srebrenica-libya-intervention-no-brainer](http://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/29/srebrenica-libya-intervention-no-brainer).

<sup>4</sup> Tim Lister, "Syria, Sarajevo, and Srebrenica: When Outrage Isn't Enough," CNN, May 30, 2012, [cnn.com/2012/05/29/world/meast/syria-sarajevo-and-srebrenica/](http://cnn.com/2012/05/29/world/meast/syria-sarajevo-and-srebrenica/).

<sup>5</sup> "The Last Days of Kobani: A Decisive Battle in the Fight against Islamic State," *Speigel Online International*, October 13, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/kobani-battle-against-islamic-state-reveals-west-turkey-shortcomings-a-996809.html>.

interventionist forces in the United States, which demanded a military option instead. The lesson that the foreign policy establishment has learned – on the need for more not less US intervention – is the wrong lesson.

## The Facts of the Srebrenica Massacre

The massacre took place near the end of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, which resulted from the dissolution of the Yugoslav federation in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup> The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina was composed of three main ethnic groups, Bosnian Muslims, with approximately 44 percent of the population, Serbs with 31 percent, and Croats with 17 percent. The Muslims' political party won the country's first presidential election and a Muslim, Alija Izetbegović, became the new state's first president. Izetbegović established a political alliance between the Muslim and Croat groups, and this alliance formed the basis of the new state. The ethnic Serbs feared that the Muslim-Croat dominance in Bosnia would be directed against their interests, and these fears set the stage for war. When Bosnia officially became independent in April 1992, the Serb regions seceded from Bosnia; with their superior weapons and training, the Serb militias undertook an offensive campaign to expand their landholdings, by driving out members of other ethnic groups, especially the Muslims. Stated simply, the Serbs engaged in mass ethnic cleansing, which was accompanied by massacres, rapes, and other crimes. Of the three ethnic groups, it is clear that the Muslims suffered the most, accounting for 70 percent of the total civilian deaths; while the Serbs accounted for 20 percent, according to recent estimates.<sup>7</sup>

Beginning in 1992, the Serb military besieged Srebrenica, while the mostly Muslim inhabitants of the town were defended by Bosnian government forces, along with a small United Nations peacekeeping contingent. Then in early July 1995, Serb forces attacked Srebrenica at a time when the Muslims had removed the main body of their defense forces. The Serb attackers encountered little resistance, and they easily overran Srebrenica. The horrific events that followed Serb conquest have been well documented: The Serbs first expelled the town's women and children, while they rounded up military-age males. Over a period of several days, the Serbs executed some 8,000 people, overwhelmingly males sixteen and older. While the Bosnian war entailed numerous massacres and atrocities (with most of them committed by the Serbs), none approached the scale of Srebrenica, which was surely the largest mass killing in Europe since the 1940s. According to an investigation of Srebrenica authorized by the Dutch government: "In some places the Muslims were slaughtered like beasts."<sup>8</sup>

At the level of responsibility: The killings in Srebrenica were largely orchestrated by Bosnian Serb military commanders, notably Generals Radislav Krstić and Ratko Mladić; as well

---

<sup>6</sup> Regarding the background to Yugoslavia's collapse and the Bosnia war, see: Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution after the Cold War*. Washington, DC: Brookings, 1995; Lenard J. Cohen, *Broken Bonds: Yugoslavia's Disintegration and Balkan Politics in Transition*. Boulder: Westview, 1995; and Steven L. Burg and Paul S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Zwierzchowski and Ewa Tabeau, "The 1992-95 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census-Based Multiple System Estimation of Casualties' Undercount," Conference Paper for the International Research Workshop on 'The Global Costs of Conflict,' The Households in Conflict Network (HiCN), and The German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), February 1-2, 2010, Berlin, p. 17, [http://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/War\\_Demographics/en/bih\\_casualty\\_undercount\\_conf\\_paper\\_100201.pdf](http://www.icty.org/x/file/About/OTP/War_Demographics/en/bih_casualty_undercount_conf_paper_100201.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, *Srebrenica – A "Safe" Area: Reconstruction, Background, Consequences, and Analyses of the Fall of a Safe Area*, 2003, Summary for the Press, <http://www.niod.knaw.nl/en/srebrenica-report/summary-press>.

as the Serbs' political leader, Radovan Karadžić, all of whom have either been convicted or are currently being tried at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Hague.<sup>9</sup> The Republic of Serbia and its unsavory president Slobodan Milošević bore some responsibility as well, for having supported Bosnian Serb militias throughout the war. The battalion of UN peacekeepers in Srebrenica took no action to defend the town, and they have often been blamed for the massacre. While the UN soldiers hardly distinguished themselves with heroism, these lightly armed peacekeepers could not realistically have repelled the much larger Serb forces. The frequent scapegoating of the United Nations seems unjustified.

While Serb forces must bear the overwhelming burden of guilt for the massacre, the Bosnian government also contributed to the tragedy. The widespread view that the Muslim-led government was comprised of innocents has little to do with reality. On the contrary, Bosnian officials deliberately allowed Srebrenica to fall to the Serbs, according to Swedish diplomat Carl Bildt, who served as the European Union mediator during the Bosnian war. Bildt noted in his memoirs that Bosnian government forces assigned to protect Srebrenica were “not putting up any resistance. Later it was revealed that they had been ordered by the Sarajevo commanders not to defend Srebrenica.”<sup>10</sup>

Bildt's account is supported by Tim Ripley, who covered the Balkans for the highly regarded *Jane's* series of defense publications. Ripley provides copious evidence that the Bosnian government allowed the town to fall:

British, Dutch, and other [UN] personnel and many veterans of the Sarajevo press corps, including [Martin] Bell of the BBC, and Nick Gowing of the Channel Four television network all came to the conclusion that *the Bosnian government decided to let Srebrenica fall to increase the pressure on the international community to intervene* against the Serbs... A month before [the Serb attack], Sarajevo had ordered the charismatic local Bosnia military commander... to leave for no apparent reason. He was then prevented from returning. As the situation worsened, the Sarajevo leadership made no effort to launch diversionary attacks... Dutch peacekeepers near Tuzla told Gowing that they saw Bosnian troops escaping from Srebrenica... carrying brand new anti-tank weapons, still in their plastic wrappings... [British UN peacekeeper Lieutenant-Colonel Jim] Baxter said “they [the Bosnian government] knew what was happening in Srebrenica. I am certain they decided it was worth the sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup>

The Bosnian government was adopting an overall strategy of exposing its civilians to Serb attacks, so as to shock world opinion into intervening against the Serbs, as described at length by Ripley, who concludes: “To Western military men in Sarajevo, the Bosnian strategy of using children, old people, and other civilians as ‘staked goats’ to generate international sympathy was abhorrent.”<sup>12</sup> It would seem likely that these Machiavellian methods contributed to the fall of Srebrenica, and at least indirectly to the massacre that followed.

Serb nationalists have long claimed that the Muslim commander at Srebrenica Brigadier Naser Orić had repeatedly staged attacks against Serb villages in the area and thus provoked the

---

<sup>9</sup> International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, [icty.org/](http://icty.org/).

<sup>10</sup> Carl Bildt, *Peace Journey*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Tim Ripley, *Operation Deliberate Force*. Lancaster, UK: Centre for Defence and International Security Studies, 1999, p. 145. Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> Ripley, *Operation Deliberate Force*, pp. 32-33.

later Serb assault on the town in 1995. In making these claims, Serbs are seeking to deflect attention from the atrocious behavior of their own forces. But the claims nevertheless contain a kernel of truth, according to General Philippe Morillon, who commanded UN peacekeepers in Bosnia: “Orić engaged in attacks during Orthodox holidays and destroyed [Serb] villages, massacring all the inhabitants. This created a degree of hatred that was quite extraordinary in the [Srebrenica] region... [Orić] reigned by terror... he could not allow himself to take prisoners. According to my recollections he didn’t even look for an excuse. It was simply a statement: One can’t be bothered with prisoners.”<sup>13</sup> Morillon’s statements cannot be lightly dismissed, given his high profile background and also given that he made these statements as a Prosecution witness at the ICTY’s Milošević trial. The court readily accepted his allegations, without dispute.

While the Serb forces behaved worse than any other group in Bosnia, none of the armies displayed any special nobility. Retrospective efforts to elevate the Muslim government, and President Izetbegović in particular, are misleading whitewash. The whitewash played an important role in establishing the Srebrenica massacre as a morally simple affair, with villains and heroes; this moral simplicity helped justify military intervention in Bosnia, and also to portray military intervention more generally as benevolent.

### **Srebrenica and the Redefinition of Genocide**

These perpetual references to the Holocaust [with regard to the Yugoslav wars] are a way of muzzling all discussion. Talking forbidden! Argument over!

-Claude Lanzmann, director of the documentary film, *Shoah*<sup>14</sup>

The Srebrenica massacre was surely a horrific act, but did it constitute genocide? In 2003, the ICTY concluded that the massacre did qualify as a case of genocide, and General Krstić was later convicted of supporting genocide. US and NATO officials enthusiastically endorsed the idea of a Srebrenica genocide. Thus British diplomat Peter Wilson stated “Genocide occurred at Srebrenica. This is a legal fact,” while US Ambassador Samantha Power tweeted “Genocide is proven fact in Srebrenica.”<sup>15</sup> The implication is that no reasonable person could possibly disagree.

In reality, the idea of a Srebrenica genocide has elicited substantial disagreement among academic authorities; there is no consensus. William Schabas, past president of the International Association of Genocide Scholars criticized the ICTY ruling on Srebrenica: “it would have been more consistent and coherent to conclude that Srebrenica too was not an act of genocide.”<sup>16</sup> The “genocide” characterization of Srebrenica and the Balkan wars more generally has been criticized in extended analyses in the *Slavic Review* and *Yale Human Rights & Development Law*

---

<sup>13</sup> General Philippe Morillon, Prosecution witness, Milošević trial, ICTY, February 12, 2004, pp. 31965, 31966, icty.org.

<sup>14</sup> Claude Lanzmann quoted in Tariq Ali, “Introduction: After the War,” in Ali, ed., *Masters of the Universe? NATO’s Balkan Crusade*. London: Verso, 2000, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Wilson quoted in “Russia Vetoes UN Genocide Resolution on Srebrenica,” Aljazeera, July 9, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/russia-vetoes-genocide-resolution-srebrenica-150708150057291.html>; Samantha Power, Twitter account, July 8, 2015, <https://twitter.com/ambassadorpower/status/618807874656051200>.

<sup>16</sup> In stating this, Schabas also emphasizes “the horror of the Srebrenica massacre.” Quotes from William A. Schabas, *War Crimes and Human Rights: Essays on the Death Penalty, Justice, and Accountability*. London: Cameron May, 2008, pp. 847-48.

*Journal*, and also in public statements by Ian Buruma and Claude Lanzmann.<sup>17</sup> Note that none of these critiques challenge the horrific facts of the Srebrenica massacre, which are well established. The question is whether this massacre constituted genocide.

The evocation of genocide inevitably draws comparisons between Serb atrocities in the 1990s and Nazi atrocities against Jews during World War II. But such a comparison elides the fundamental differences between the two cases: The number of Jews killed in the Holocaust was 6,000,000, while the total killed in World War II was upwards of 50,000,000; in Bosnia the total number killed on all sides – civilian and military – was 100,000. In most countries under Axis control during the Holocaust, the majority of Jews were killed; in Bosnia, the Muslim deaths constituted a relatively small percentage of their overall population. In the Nazi-run concentration camps, men, women, and children were murdered indiscriminately; in the Srebrenica massacre, the vast majority of victims were males sixteen or older.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the ICTY ruling on Srebrenica has led to a fundamental redefinition of genocide. Up until 1990, the word was used almost exclusively to describe deliberate mass killings of exceptional size and scale, generally in the range of the hundreds of thousands or millions. Genocide – the “crime of crimes” – was separated out from more common forms of atrocities. The term was rarely applied: Millions died in the Korean and Vietnamese wars, for example, with huge loss of civilian life, but without the word genocide being invoked to any significant extent. Hundreds of thousands were killed in civil conflicts in Algeria, Indonesia, and Nigeria, but again with no widespread claims of genocide.

Recent discussions of the Srebrenica massacre and the Yugoslav wars more generally risk trivializing the concept of genocide. Thus Mirsad Tokača of the Sarajevo Research and Documentation Centre has proposed that “genocide is not a matter of numbers,”<sup>19</sup> with the implication that any number of deliberate killings could potentially constitute genocide. Some have proposed that even nonfatal crimes, such as ethnic cleansing, should be classed as genocide: An article in *Human Rights Review* states that ethnic cleansing had become a “1990s synonym for genocide.”<sup>20</sup> The problem here is simple: If we take these claims seriously, then we must reclassify virtually all ethnic wars as genocidal, since they almost always entail ethnically motivated killings and cleansings.

And the extraordinary focus given to the Srebrenica massacre and the Bosnian war seems odd, given the plethora of conflicts that occurred during the same period. If we accept the Bosnia case as constituting genocide, then should we reclassify recent conflicts in Angola, Congo, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Libya, Iraq, Colombia, and numerous others as genocides too? Should we reclassify all wars as genocides? There is a real danger that the word is being stretched, and will gradually lose meaning. It was in Bosnia and Srebrenica that this gradual loss of meaning

---

<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Hayden, “‘Genocide Denial’ Laws as Secular Heresy: A Critical Analysis with Reference to Bosnia,” *Slavic Review* 67, no. 2, 2008; Katherine G. Southwick, “Srebrenica as Genocide? The *Krstić* Decision and the Language of the Unspeakable,” *Yale Human Rights & Development Law Journal* 8, 2005; Ian Buruma, “Muddying the Meaning of Genocide,” *Globe and Mail*, May 31, 2011. The Lanzmann quote is cited above.

<sup>18</sup> Some 90 percent of the victims at Srebrenica were males sixteen or older, according to demographic researchers associated with the Prosecution at the Hague criminal tribunal, as cited in Robert M. Hayden, “Mass Killings and Images of Genocide in Bosnia, 1941-5 and 1992-5,” in Dan Stone, ed., *The Historiography of Genocide*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2008, pp. 502-03.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Mirsad Tokača in “Genocide is not a Matter of Numbers,” *Bosnia Report*, December-March 2006, [www.bosnia.org.uk/bosrep/report\\_format.cfm?articleid=3055&reportid=170](http://www.bosnia.org.uk/bosrep/report_format.cfm?articleid=3055&reportid=170).

<sup>20</sup> Peter Ronayne, “Genocide in Kosovo,” *Human Rights Review* 5, no. 4, 2004, p. 61.

began. These complexities aside, the redefinition of genocide was certainly useful to US policymakers, who possessed a new justification for intervention.

## The Role of Public Relations

Public relations played a key role in conditioning world opinion about the issue of genocide, and this conditioning began from the very beginning of the Bosnian war. At the outset, it should be emphasized that public relations was unnecessary: If one wished to condemn Serb-led armies, all one needed was to show what the Serbs were actually doing in Bosnia, which was indeed atrocious. The reality was damning and there was no need to exaggerate anything. Despite this fact, there was plenty of exaggeration – and it was used to propagate the idea that Serb atrocities were not merely horrific, but that these atrocities were on the same moral level as the Holocaust; and that the overall Bosnian war amounted to a localized replay of World War II.

The idea that genocide was occurring seems to have originated with the issue of Serb-run detention centers in Bosnia, which housed Muslim and Croat prisoners, where major atrocities and abuses undoubtedly occurred. Beginning in 1992, the Bosnian government promoted the idea that these detention centers were Nazi-style extermination camps, similar to Auschwitz or Treblinka. New York's *Newsday* helped publicize the idea of Serb extermination camps. In reality, the detention camp atrocities had been deliberately exaggerated by the Bosnian government, and President Izetbegović confessed this exaggeration shortly before his death, in a 2003 interview with former French official Bernard Kouchner. This confession was later reported in Kouchner's memoirs:

Kouchner: You claimed the existence in Bosnia of “extermination camps.” You repeated this journalists. . . [Kouchner then notes he visited one of the main camps.] Conditions there were terrible but there was no systematic extermination. Did you know this?  
Izetbegović: Yes, I thought the claims would help trigger a bombing campaign by the Western powers. . . I tried but *my claims were false. There were no extermination camps in Bosnia*, even though conditions were terrible.<sup>21</sup>

This confession by Izetbegović raises a disturbing possibility: The whole idea that Serb atrocities constituted genocide may well have resulted from a cynical public relations campaign.

The Bosnian government claims were magnified by professional lobbyists, who worked as agents of Bosnia, as described in the *National Journal*: “The Croatians and the Bosnians who have hired the high powered Ruder-Finn Inc PR firm have out-organized and out-gunned the Serbs, who are making do with a small nonprofit PR operation in Chicago. The Croats and Bosnians have not only won this round, but they have also apparently acquired a powerful lobbying ally by winning the support of major Jewish organizations.”<sup>22</sup> Three major Jewish organizations, no doubt with the best of intentions, organized rallies for Bosnia.

Journalists and intellectuals found the Bosnia issue irresistible, and they openly campaigned for NATO military intervention, in favor of the Muslims and against the Serbs. In doing so, they dispensed with traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality. Thus Ed Vulliamy, who covered Bosnia for the *Guardian*, declared that journalistic neutrality was “both dangerous

---

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Kouchner, *Guerriers de la Paix* (Paris: Grasset, 2004), pp. 374-75. Translated from the French, emphasis added. Note that Kouchner was a supporter of Izetbegović, and also of humanitarian intervention.

<sup>22</sup> Rochelle Stanfield, “Balkan Wars on K Street,” *National Journal*, August 15, 1992.



and morally reprehensible.” Similarly, Christianne Amanpour stated that with Bosnia, “it was not possible for a human being to be neutral.”<sup>23</sup> Some writers disparaged logical assessment and insisted instead on emotionalism, a stance that was nicely distilled in Samantha Power’s best-selling “*A Problem from Hell*”, which focused heavily on Bosnia. Power celebrated the “screamers” and those who “turned the daily press accounts into vibrant cries.”<sup>24</sup> Journalists thus politicized their reporting. In this context, it became difficult to view the Bosnia case for what it was: a medium-sized civil war, not fundamentally different from numerous other conflicts of the post-1945 period.

There was a campaign of denunciation against writers who opposed such tendentious accounts, and some of these were highly charged. This denunciation campaign began during the Bosnia war and has continued to the present day, now playing out in the unaccountable arena of the Internet. Readers who search the Balkan conflict will encounter a series of attacks, with an unpleasant tone, against a large number of academics and public figures who have commented on the Balkan conflict – including this author.<sup>25</sup> With regard to Professor Schabas, noted above, one Internet posting is entitled: “Professor William Schabas is a Racist Denier of Genocide.”<sup>26</sup> While most of the attacks are anonymous, they often appear in mainstream newspapers<sup>27</sup> and academic publications.<sup>28</sup> In normal situations one might expect robust debate on the merits of NATO intervention or the ICTY’s use (possibly misuse) of the concept of genocide. But such debates have been artificially stifled by the pervasive use of *ad hominem* attacks and the resulting climate of fear generated by such attacks.

The idea that genocide was occurring in Bosnia was thus established early on, well before the Srebrenica massacre. Once it was implanted in the public mind that the Serbs were committing not just mass murder and ethnic cleansing – which the Serbs were doing – but *genocide*, it became difficult to oppose intervention. The campaign for intervention became a moral crusade, immune to criticism. After the Srebrenica massacre occurred in 1995, it quickly resolved into a galvanizing event, which seemed to validate previous claims that genocide had been occurring all along.

Added to this equation was the US foreign policy establishment, which was seeking some function for itself after the end of the Cold War, and the collapse of the familiar Soviet enemy. An especially important objective was to find a new role for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which was the major instrument of US power in Europe.<sup>29</sup> Longstanding members of the establishment, including such Cold Warriors as Max Kampelman, Paul Nitze, and Jeanne

---

<sup>23</sup> Ed Vulliamy, “‘Neutrality’ and the Absence of Reckoning: A Journalist’s Account,” *Journal of International Affairs* 52, no. 2, 1999, p. 604; Amanpour quoted in Sherry Ricchiardi, “Over the Line? Journalists as Advocates in the Bosnian war,” *American Journalism Review*, September 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Samantha Power, “*A Problem from Hell*”: *America in the Age of Genocide*. Harper-Collins, 2003, p. 515.

<sup>25</sup> See David N. Gibbs, “Welcome to the Balkan Propaganda Machine,” *Antiwar.com*, June 11, 2012, <http://original.antiwar.com/david-gibbs/2012/06/10/welcome-to-the-balkan-propaganda-machine/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Professor William Schabas is a Racist Denier of Genocide,” anonymous posting, no date, <https://professorwilliamschabas.wordpress.com/>. The Internet contains numerous attack postings just like this one.

<sup>27</sup> An attack on Noam Chomsky’s Bosnia views in the *Guardian* contained so much false information that the newspaper editors were forced to retract the story and apologize. See “Corrections and Clarifications: The Guardian and Chomsky,” *Guardian* online, November 17, 2005, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2005/nov/17/pressandpublishing.corrections>.

<sup>28</sup> Regarding the use of *ad hominem* attacks by academic writers, see the useful discussion in Robert M. Hayden, “Moralizing about Scholarship about Yugoslavia,” *East European Politics & Societies* 21, no. 1, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> US-European tensions during this period are well described in James Petras and Steven Vieux, “Bosnia and the Revival of US Hegemony,” *New Left Review*, no. 218, 1996.

Kirkpatrick, advocated military action in the Balkans, against the Serbs.<sup>30</sup> The US Air Force, eager to prove its capabilities and to justify its post-Cold War budget, advocated air strikes.<sup>31</sup> In the private sector, the weapons producing companies too needed justification for their continued procurements, and they stood to benefit from any interventions that took place. Within the Clinton administration, however, there was initially some trepidation about military action, which presented the possibility of a Vietnam-style quagmire. This trepidation was gradually overcome, and the administration began preparing for military intervention in 1994.<sup>32</sup> The details of this intervention we will discuss shortly. For now I will note that the full weight of US power and prestige entered the fray, and publicized the idea of a Serb-directed genocide, which helped to justify the overall policy of intervention. Consistent with this strategy, the United States and its NATO allies played key roles in supporting the ICTY tribunal in The Hague. In 1999, a NATO spokesman stated that “Without NATO countries, there would be no... International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.” The spokesman added that NATO states funded the tribunal and supported “on a daily basis their activities.”<sup>33</sup>

The ICTY is often viewed as an independent judicial body, free from external political influences. The longtime president of the court, Theodor Meron (who presided over the ICTY decision that defined the Srebrenica massacre as an act of genocide) has been viewed with special admiration. Recent releases from the WikiLeaks organization cast doubt on these sanguine views. A State Department document refers to Meron as “the preeminent supporter of USG [US government] efforts” – hardly the characterization of an impartial judge.<sup>34</sup> At one point, Meron contacted US embassy personnel in the Netherlands and lobbied them to help block renewal of a prosecutor that Meron did not favor – which constitutes questionable conduct for a judicial figure.<sup>35</sup> To be clear: There is no doubt that horrific crimes had been committed during the Balkan wars, and the perpetrators of these crimes deserved trial before an impartial court. However, the WikiLeaks documents raise doubts about the actual conduct of the ICTY, and whether its personnel acted as agents of impartial justice or *realpolitik*.

In his classic study, E. H. Carr argued that what passes for morality in international relations is often defined by the hegemonic powers of the era, consistent with their perceived national interests.<sup>36</sup> In the 1990s, a hegemonic United States helped redefine the concept of genocide, and did so in a manner that clearly served American interests. Ultimately US power

---

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Williams, “Ex-Statesman Urge Strikes against Serbs,” *Washington Post*, September 2, 1993; and Jeanne Kirkpatrick, “Failure of Collective Security,” *Baltimore Sun*, November 30, 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Regarding the US Air Force role in policy debates, see David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002, pp. 40-41; and George Kenney and Michael J. Dugan, “Operation Balkan Storm: Here’s a Plan,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1992.

<sup>32</sup> Cees Wiebes, *Intelligence and the War in Bosnia*. Münster: Lit, 2002, chap. 4.

<sup>33</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Press Conference Given by NATO Spokesman, Jamie Shea and SHAPE Spokesman, Major General Walter Jertz,” May 17, 1999, <http://www.nato.int/kosovo/press/p990517b.htm>. Note that the quoted spokesman was speaking of both the ICTY and the International Court of Justice.

<sup>34</sup> US Department of State, “ICTY: Ambassador Prosper’s Meeting ICTY President and Registrar,” Message from US Embassy, The Hague, July 11, 2003, WikiLeaks Archive, <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/>. For additional evidence of ICTY deference to US interests, see Timothy William Waters, “Unexploded Bomb: Voice, Silence, and Consequence at the Hague Tribunals – A Legal and Rhetorical Critique,” *NYU Journal of International Law and Politics* 35, no. 4, 2003.

<sup>35</sup> US Department of State, “ICTY: President Meron Urges USG to Oppose Del Ponte Renewal,” Message from US Embassy, The Hague, July 17, 2003, WikiLeaks Archive, <https://wikileaks.org/plusd/>. The document gives no indication as to whether US officials took action to block renewal of the disliked prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte.

<sup>36</sup> E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

was probably more influential in the redefinition of genocide than all the activism by the various lobbyists, journalists, and humanitarians, who created the idea in the first place. The ICTY's 2003 determination that genocide occurred in the *Krstić* case was certainly helpful to US hegemony: The ICTY verdict served to recast recent US military actions – in the Balkans and elsewhere – as benevolent acts of genocide prevention. The new emphasis on genocide silenced potential critics of intervention, which was beneficial to policymakers, who were protected from criticism.<sup>37</sup> More than any other factor, it was the Bosnian conflict that established this pro-interventionist climate – really a pro-war climate – that persists to the present.

Amidst all the sanctimony, it was forgotten that Bosnia was one of many post-Cold War conflicts, and it was very far from being the most deadly (the Congo probably has that unfortunate distinction<sup>38</sup>). Nevertheless, the widespread belief that the Serbs had committed genocide played a critical role in legitimating the idea of humanitarian intervention.

### **Could the Massacre Have been Prevented?**

The anti-Nazi narrative that emerged from the Srebrenica episode has another implication, which is to denigrate diplomatic means of resolving crises. Thus, it is frequently claimed that international efforts at mediating the Bosnia conflict amounted to appeasement of Serb aggression, similar to the earlier appeasement of Nazi aggression, which enabled the Serbs' genocidal campaign and ultimately the Srebrenica massacre. Diplomats who participated in the mediation efforts were widely denounced as modern day incarnations of Neville Chamberlain. In 1993, Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times* condemned "a policy of appeasement, a wheedling diplomacy that rewarded Serbian aggression."<sup>39</sup> Clearly, this "wheedling diplomacy" was not viewed positively.

In reality, the conventional wisdom is wrong, as diplomatic efforts probably could have prevented the conflict from occurring in the first place, which would have made the later intervention unnecessary. Diplomatic efforts to resolve the Bosnia conflict began in early 1992, shortly before the war actually began. This effort was directed by Portuguese diplomat José Cutileiro, who represented the European Community. Cutileiro successfully brought together the leaders of all three ethnic groups from Bosnia, the Muslims, the Serbs, and the Croats, where he sought to establish an agreement to defuse ethnic tensions and thus preclude civil war. The peace talks established a plan to divide Bosnia into three semi-autonomous regions, as parts of what was to become an ethnic confederation, though still an integral state. All three ethnic groups agreed to a preliminary version of the peace plan on March 17, since the plan, whatever its flaws, was presumed better than the alternative, which was war. Crucially, Serb leaders also supported

---

<sup>37</sup> During the run-up to the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, personalized attacks were widely used. Juan Cole for instance wrote of the "Woolly thinking, outrageous lies, moon-eyed Gaddafi-worship" and other sins, which he attributed to the antiwar movement. Previously, in 2002, Michael Walzer proposed a "decent left," which would support US intervention in Afghanistan and elsewhere, in contrast to a presumably indecent left, which was opposed to intervention. The article associated anti-interventionism with indecency. Such attacks on the moral characters of anti-interventionists were useful in deflecting attention from substantive issues regarding the actual merits of military action. See Cole, "Berubé on Libya and the Left," Informed Comment, November 5, 2011, <http://www.juancole.com/2011/11/berube-on-libya-and-the-left.html>; Walzer, "Can There Be a Decent Left?" *Dissent*, Summer, 2002.

<sup>38</sup> The Congolese war of 1998-2004 caused some 4 million deaths, vastly more than Bosnia, but with surprisingly little attention. See Benjamin Coghlan et al, "Mortality in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: A Nationwide Survey," *The Lancet* 367, no. 9504, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Anthony Lewis, "When You Appease Fascism," *New York Times*, December 17, 1993.

the Cutileiro plan. Though many details remained to be worked out, the Cutileiro plan presented the possibility of a peaceful resolution for Bosnia.<sup>40</sup>

The problem emerged when the United States asserted its influence. American officials expressed jealousy at the idea that European states might resolve the conflict, which would weaken US prestige and raise questions about the value of the Atlantic Alliance. There was a special fear that the European Community might emerge as a distinct power bloc in the post-Soviet world, acting independently of the United States and NATO. Any EC success in Bosnia would increase the likelihood of an independent Europe – and this prospect was viewed dimly in Washington.<sup>41</sup>

US officials thus acted to wreck the Cutileiro plan. The US ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmermann, encouraged President Izetbegović to reject the peace plan. A *New York Times* article noted, “Immediately after Mr. Izetbegović returned from Lisbon, Mr. Zimmermann called on him... ‘[Izetbegović] said he didn’t like [the Cutileiro plan],’ Mr. Zimmermann recalled. ‘I told him if he didn’t like it, why sign it?’”<sup>42</sup> According to former State Department official George Kenney, “Zimmermann told Izetbegović ... [the United States will] recognize you and help you out. So don’t go ahead with the [Cutileiro plan].”<sup>43</sup>

Ambassador Zimmermann publicly denied blocking the Cutileiro plan, but there is considerable evidence that he *did* block it. That Zimmermann and the US government more generally sought to undermine the plan has been confirmed by James Bissett, the Canadian Ambassador to Yugoslavia; Peter Carrington, a former UK foreign minister; and the official Dutch investigation of the Bosnian war; as well as Kenney of the State Department (cited above).<sup>44</sup> With regard to the failed peace deal, Cutileiro later claimed: “Izetbegović and his aides were encouraged to scupper that deal by well meaning outsiders”<sup>45</sup> – very likely a diplomatically-worded reference to Zimmermann’s meddling. In light of this US pressure, the Croats and Muslims both withdrew from the agreement – effectively reneging on their previous commitments – during March 25-26, 1992. The stage was set for war.

There is a widespread view that international mediation efforts never had a chance to succeed, given the Serbs’ aggressiveness. What this ignores is that all three ethnic groups initially endorsed the peace plan; the Serbs enthusiastically supported it (Serb leader Radovan Karadžić called the agreement on the Cutileiro plan “a great day for Bosnia and Herzegovina”<sup>46</sup>). The interventionists also ignore the US role in sabotaging the peace negotiations.<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> For a description of this plan see Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, *Srebrenica – A ‘Safe’ Area*, 2003, Part I, Chapter 5, Section 3, [niod.knaw.nl/en/srebrenica-report/report](http://niod.knaw.nl/en/srebrenica-report/report).

<sup>41</sup> Discussed in Petras and Vieux, “Bosnia and the Revival of US Hegemony.”

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in David Binder, “US Policymakers on Bosnia Admit Errors in Opposing Partition in 1992,” *New York Times*, August 29, 1993.

<sup>43</sup> George Kenney interviewed in the documentary film “Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War,” 2002, directed by George Bogdanich.

<sup>44</sup> Peter Carrington interviewed in “Yugoslavia: The Avoidable War”; James Bissett, “Balkan War,” section on Bosnia, no date, [www.deltax.net/bissett/western/bosnia.htm](http://www.deltax.net/bissett/western/bosnia.htm); Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, *Srebrenica – A ‘Safe’ Area*, Part I, Chapter 5, Section 3, [niod.knaw.nl/en/srebrenica-report/report](http://niod.knaw.nl/en/srebrenica-report/report). Regarding Zimmermann’s denial, see his letter to the editor, “Bosnian About-Face,” *New York Times*, September 30, 1993.

<sup>45</sup> José Cutileiro, “Pre-War Bosnia,” letter to the editor, *Economist*, December 9, 1995. He made these comments with regard to both the initial agreement and also subsequent efforts to revive the agreement.

<sup>46</sup> Quote from Binder, “US Policymakers on Bosnia Admit Errors.”

<sup>47</sup> There is a tendency to whitewash these events. Thus Robert Donia provides extended discussion of Cutileiro’s mediation efforts, but he omits any mention of the US efforts to sabotage the mediation. Similarly, Josip Glaurdic’s principal reference to the US sabotage is the following: “Whether Izetbegović made his decision [to withdraw from

The Cutileiro plan was never implemented, and war commenced almost immediately. During the following three years, the European Community/Union often worked together with the United Nations to revive the idea of an ethnic confederation, somewhat similar to the one previously presented at by Cutileiro, as a basis for ending the war. Most of these efforts were directed by David Owen, a former British foreign minister who became the EC/EU appointed mediator for the Balkans. In his memoirs, Owen emphasized the US role in impeding his negotiation efforts, and thus prolonging the Bosnian war.<sup>48</sup>

The idea that international diplomacy proved ineffectual is a myth; it is one of the most dangerous myths that has emerged from the Bosnian war – and also one that has helped to justify later efforts to scuttle diplomatic settlements in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya.<sup>49</sup> With regard to the ongoing civil war in Syria, new evidence has come to light that the United States was instrumental in scuttling a proposed settlement for that conflict too<sup>50</sup> – with horrible consequences. One of the main legacies of the Srebrenica massacre is the widespread notion that military force rather than negotiation must be the principal means of resolving ethnic conflicts.

### **Humanitarian Intervention after the Srebrenica Massacre**

The United States and its allies opted for a military strategy, beginning in August 1995. A key component of the offensive plans involved the Republic of Croatia, which was expected to assist the Bosnian government in defeating the Serbs. The operation commenced with a Croatian attack against separatist Serbs within the Republic of Croatia, in the Krajina region, near the border with Bosnia. The Croatian military quickly defeated the Serbs and crossed into western Bosnia, where they linked up with Bosnian government forces for a joint offensive against ethnic Serbs within Bosnia. During the period August through October 1995, the combined Bosnian-Croatian thrust was highly successful in defeating Serb forces, and rolling back their gains from earlier phases of the war. These offensives were strongly supported by the US government,<sup>51</sup> which had been assisting both the Croatian and Bosnian government forces in their military preparations since 1994. In addition, the US and other NATO states undertook a two-week bombing campaign against the Bosnian Serbs to assist the ground offensive. Following the combined military actions, the United States organized peace talks in Dayton, Ohio, which produced the Dayton Accords of December 1995, ending the war in Bosnia (and also in Croatia).

---

the agreement] under the influence of the Americans remains unclear,” as if this were a minor matter; Glaurdic omits most evidence to the contrary. Donia, *Radovan Karadžić: Architect of the Bosnian Genocide*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015, pp. 150-56, 175-76; Glaurdic, *The Hour of Europe: Western Powers and the Breakup of Yugoslavia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012, p. 295. In fairness, I note that Donia and Glaurdic have been critical of my work on Yugoslavia.

<sup>48</sup> David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt-Brace, 1995, pp. 400-01.

<sup>49</sup> Regarding the scuttling of diplomatic efforts to resolve the Kosovo crisis, see Gibbs, “The Principle of ‘First Do No Harm,’” in Roger MacGinty and Jenny H. Peterson, eds., *Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action*. London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 112-114. On Libya, see Hugh Roberts, “Who Said Gaddafi Had to Go?” *London Review of Books*, November 17, 2011; and Alan J. Kuperman, “A Model Humanitarian Intervention? Reassessing NATO’s Libya Campaign,” *International Security* 38, no. 1, 2013, p. 115. The Bush administration’s efforts to undermine diplomatic efforts with regard to Iraq have been widely reported.

<sup>50</sup> Julian Borger and Bastien Inzaurre, “West ‘Ignored Russian Offer in 2012 to have Syria’s Assad Step Aside,” *Guardian*, September 15, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> On US support for the offensives, see Bill Clinton, *My Life*. New York: Knopf, 2004, p. 667; “Bill Clinton Cherche à Reprendre l’Initiative à propos de l’ex-Yougoslavie,” *Le Monde*, August 12, 1995; and Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War*. New York: Random House, 1998, pp. 86, 160.

These military operations produced a humanitarian disaster. The offensives in Croatia and Bosnia generated at least 250,000 refugees, many of whom were Serb civilians who had lived in the Krajina long before the war had begun. The expelled persons also included large numbers of ethnic Muslims from the Bihać region of Bosnia, who were opposed to the Izetbegović government and were therefore suspect. In addition to this mass expulsion, the combined offensives killed hundreds of civilians (or possibly thousands of civilians, according to *Jane's* correspondent Tim Ripley).<sup>52</sup>

These episodes of ethnic cleansing were substantially smaller than the cumulated rounds of cleansings that had been perpetrated by the Serbs during the years of war, in both Croatia and Bosnia. These facts notwithstanding, the anti-Serb atrocities that attended the August-October 1995 offensives were substantial all the same. In the Krajina alone, Croatian attacks generated “the largest single movement of refugees in Europe since the Soviet Union crushed the Hungarian uprising in 1956,” according to a Red Cross official, as paraphrased in the *New York Times*.<sup>53</sup> The cleansing of Serbs had been planned long in advance, at the highest level. As early as 1993, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman stated in an official meeting, “there is a growing understanding that Croatia must resolve the [Krajina] problem by war, contrary to international norms, meaning by *ethnically cleansing the Serbs from Croatia*.”<sup>54</sup>

It is true that the military offensives led to the Dayton Accords, which ended the war, but this achievement seems less impressive under scrutiny. In reality, the Dayton Accords were not a great deal different from the Cutileiro agreement of 1992, which the US helped to sabotage, and several other peace plans that were presented during the course of the war. And then in early 1996, shortly after the implementation of the Dayton Accords, there was another round of anti-Serb ethnic cleansing, which generated an additional 100,000 refugees.<sup>55</sup> The main effect of the NATO intervention was to escalate the ongoing atrocities against civilians, and to intensify the humanitarian catastrophe.

## Conclusion

Overall, the US policy response to the Srebrenica massacre was a failure, when viewed from a humanitarian standpoint. It worsened the crisis it was supposed to resolve, and helped pave the way for future interventionist failures as well. Facts aside, a mythology has emerged from the Srebrenica affair, which emphasizes the supposedly benign character of US intervention. In general, US policy was held to be the savior of the Bosnian people and the defender of oppressed peoples more generally. NATO interventions following Srebrenica established a post-Cold War relevance for both the Atlantic Alliance and US hegemony; while the new language of human rights and genocide prevention – closely associated with Srebrenica – helped legitimate later interventions, including the on-going Western strikes against ISIS. Srebrenica has truly redefined the character of US hegemony for the post-Cold War era. It helped

---

<sup>52</sup> Ripley, *Operation Deliberate Force*, p. 316.

<sup>53</sup> Jane Perlez, “Croatian Serbs Blame Belgrade for their Rout,” *New York Times*, August 11, 1995. Power provides very extensive discussion of the Balkan wars, but her only mention of the Krajina ethnic cleansing is a statement that Croatia’s army was “expelling members of its Serb minority” in 1995 – six words. Power, “*A Problem from Hell*”, p. 438.

<sup>54</sup> Transcript of Croatian government meeting reprinted verbatim in “Planning Croatia’s Final Solution,” *Harper’s*, December 2001. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Bildt, *Peace Journey*, p. 196.

forge a pro-interventionist alliance of both militarist liberals and neoconservatives, and this alliance remains a potent lobby for war to the present day.

---

David N. Gibbs is Professor of History at the University of Arizona and his most recent book is *First Do No Harm: Humanitarian Intervention and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*. Vanderbilt University Press, 2009. His articles have appeared in the London *Guardian*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Tikkun*, and *Le Monde Diplomatique*, as well as many academic publications. He is currently writing a history of American right-wing politics during the 1970s. An earlier (shorter) version of this article previously appeared in *Jacobin*.