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Bosnia: The Great Betrayal

By Mark Danner
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Books discussed in this article:

ENDGAME: THE BETRAYAL AND FALL OF SREBRENICA

Europe's Worst Massacre Since World War II

By David Rohde

440 pages, \$24.00 (hardcover)

published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux

480 pages, \$15.00 (paperback)

published by Westview

BLOOD AND VENGEANCE: ONE FAMILY'S STORY OF THE WAR IN BOSNIA

By Chuck Sudetic

393 pages, \$26.95 (hardcover)

published by Norton

THE RELUCTANT SUPERPOWER: UNITED STATES' POLICY IN BOSNIA, 1991-1995

By Wayne Bert

296 pages, \$35.00 (hardcover)

published by St. Martin's

SREBRENICA: RECORD OF A WAR CRIME

By Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both

204 pages, \$11.95 (paperback)

published by Penguin

LOGAVINA STREET: LIFE AND DEATH IN A SARAJEVO NEIGHBORHOOD

By Barbara Demick

182 pages, \$19.95 (hardcover)

published by Andrews and McMeel

THE SERBS: HISTORY, MYTH AND THE DESTRUCTION OF YUGOSLAVIA

By Tim Judah

350 pages, \$30.00 (hardcover)

published by Yale University Press

Plunging forward into pitch-black night, their faces lashed by unseen branches, Srebrenica's fleeing Muslims stumbled forward one against another. Fearing that the fifteen thousand men would disperse and scatter in the darkness, their commanders had linked many together with white string, one man's belt loop to the belt loop of the next, and then the next, until they formed an endless column snaking for mile after mile over eastern Bosnia's darkened mountains and through her wooded, mist-shrouded valleys. Fleeing fallen Srebrenica—which Serb soldiers had at last overwhelmed the day before, on July 11, 1995, after the enclave, its houses and buildings windowless and burned and pocked with shell-holes, its cratered streets teeming with homeless refugees, had endured more than three years of misery, the last two as a United Nations-protected "safe area"—these Muslims shuffled blindly up and over Bosnia's black hills.

For though they had fled the fallen city, leaving their wives and daughters and fathers to the mercy of Serb conquerors—who even now were drunkenly celebrating their triumph, surveying the twenty-five thousand refugees huddled around the Dutch United Nations base at Potocari, picking out young

women and raping them, singling out old men and boys and executing them^[1] —Srebrenica's fifteen thousand men well knew that they had not escaped. If Serb troops did not bother to follow, they did not need to: they knew the Muslims had undertaken a desperate attempt to reach Bosnian government-held territory forty miles away, knew the trails they must take, the roads they must cross. Gazing up at the hills above the city in the early morning gloom of July 12, the Serbs had watched the ten-mile-long column wend its way slowly out of the far reaches of the enclave and, after taking a few shots and picking off one or two, had taken up bullhorns. "We know you are going to try and pass through with your column!" they shouted. "Better for you to go to Potocari and leave with the buses!"^[2]

However much they might have wanted, in their hunger and exhaustion, to believe these sweet words, however much they might have wanted to trust the Serbs to send them peacefully back to government-controlled land, the Muslims knew, as Bosnian Prime Minister Hasan Muratovic later put it, "what Serbs did before."

Wherever they captured people, they either detained or killed all males from 18 to 55 [years old]. It has never happened that the men of that age arrived across the front-line.^[3]

Srebrenica's men understood as well that they were "special cases," that years of massacre and retribution meant that they could expect no quarter after the countless raids their fearless commander Naser Oric had led against nearby Serb villages, raids in which Srebrenica's famished refugees would storm Serb lines, picking houses clean of food before setting them afire. And so Srebrenica's fifteen thousand ignored the Serbs' siren song and set out in their long column, with fewer than one in three bearing some kind of weapon, and those, Srebrenica's soldiers, concentrated near the column's head.

The sun rose and with it July's baking heat as, two by two, they crossed a mine field and then trudged single file into a silent forest; and there, just after noon, machine-gun bullets ripped the silence, sending down on the screaming, bolting men a green blizzard of leaves and branches and scattering about the rough trail scores of bloodied bodies. The firing might have gone on for minutes but probably only seconds, and when the unseen Serb gunners halted their fusillade as abruptly as they had begun, surviving Muslims rose from the earth one by one and came together to gather on their coats the softly moaning wounded, and stagger on through the green woods.

1.

Two days before, the Serbs' beloved commander, General Ratko Mladic, had swaggered into Srebrenica, stalked past the ruined post office (from which, in March 1993, French General Morillon had dramatically promised Muslims that the UN "will never abandon you"), then turned to the camera:

Here we are in Srebrenica on July 11, 1995. On the eve of yet another great Serbian holiday, we present this city to the Serbian people as a gift. Finally, after the rebellion of the Dahijas, the time has come to take revenge on the Turks of this region.

As David Rohde tells us in *Endgame*, his meticulous and fascinating account of the Srebrenica affair, the "rebellion of the Dahijas" was a Serb uprising that the Turks had indeed suppressed with great brutality—in 1804.

In his talk of revenge General Mladic might better have reminded his audience of the great Muslim counter-offensive of May 1992, when Naser Oric, a charismatic young weight lifter who had served as one of Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's bodyguards, led a daring attack to recapture Srebrenica from Serb paramilitaries who had seized and "cleansed" it. The general could have

described how the next day, in nearby Bratunac, Serb soldiers with megaphones had summoned Muslim men from their houses and marched them down the main street to a school gymnasium where, during the next three days, they beat more than three hundred and fifty to death.

He might also have recalled Oric's audacious raids on Serb villages and towns: his murderous attack on Podravanja, for example, during which his *torbari*—the "bag people," emaciated Muslim refugees from Bratunac and other "cleansed" towns who followed the assaulting soldiers—dispatched the wounded with clubs and axes and then sacked and torched the village; or the infamous assault on Kravica, on Orthodox Christmas in January 1993, when Oric's men swept down out of the swirling snow, killed at least thirty Serbs, and drove off the entire population before seizing a great booty of Christmas food and drink and then burning Kravica's houses to the ground.^[4]

For General Mladic this Christmas attack was too much, and his troops, armed with tanks and heavy artillery, began pushing Naser's lightly armed fighters back until, in April 1993, they had retreated, along with a flood of refugees, into Srebrenica itself. Only the United Nations and the Western powers that stood behind it had stopped General Mladic from seizing the town. Instead, Srebrenica would become a "safe area," demilitarized—the Muslims in the town were ordered to hand over to the UN what few heavy weapons they had—and "protected" by a handful of Canadian, and later Dutch, United Nations "blue helmets." On the hills around the town, meantime, more than a thousand of General Mladic's Serbs manned their guns, watching and waiting.

Within the enclave, Nasir Oric, heavily muscled, dark-bearded, clothed head to foot in camouflage fatigues, still ruled. Oric's men controlled the black market that kept alive Srebrenica's slowly starving people; they smuggled cigarettes and fuel from the Ukrainian "blue helmets" in Zepa, a day-long trek away, and profited from the huge food and fuel price increases brought on by the periodic embargoes imposed by Serbs encircling the enclave and by the influx of perhaps 35,000 refugees into what had once been a prosperous little town of 8,000 souls. In February 1994, Naser Oric, the twenty-seven-year-old uncrowned king of now-ravaged Srebrenica, entertained a *Washington Post* reporter:

Naser Oric's war trophies don't line the wall of his comfortable apartment—one of the few with electricity in this besieged Muslim enclave stuck in the forbidding mountains of eastern Bosnia. They're on a videocassette tape: burned Serb houses and headless Serb men, their bodies crumpled in a pathetic heap.

"We had to use cold weapons that night," Oric explains as scenes of dead men sliced by knives roll over his 21-inch Sony.^[5]

Though UN "blue helmets" had set up their "observation posts" between Muslim and Serb lines nearly a year before, Oric still managed to lead his men on occasional nighttime raids, creeping past the UN posts, through gaps in the Serb encirclement, and then attacking and plundering Serb villages and farms. This not only infuriated the Serbs, who blamed the UN troops for not containing Oric and his men—and who retaliated by blocking fuel and equipment deliveries to the "blue helmets"—it angered the UN as well. Oric's Muslims, on the other hand, distrusted the UN soldiers—could they really depend upon these few hundred lightly armed foreigners to defend them from Mladic's Serbs and their cannons and tanks? And the Muslims deeply resented it when in January 1995, as a second Dutch battalion was relieving the first, the Dutch allowed the Serbs to take advantage by moving their guns forward.

Naser Oric was furious, for he had warned the Dutch that the Serbs would try to advance, and at just this point. The Muslim commander of the sector forbade UN troops to set foot in his zone; when the Dutch came anyway, he seized a hundred as hostages and held them for four days.

The Serbs, meantime, had cut off the Srebrenica enclave, blocking all supply convoys. As the town's food reserves ran out, tension between Oric's Muslims and the Dutch officers meant to protect them

grew. According to Chuck Sudetic, "Dutch troops with night-vision goggles reported seeing Muslim soldiers sneak through the perimeter around Srebrenica and open fire on Dutch observation posts ...to make it seem that the Serbs were attacking them."

Such incidents, if they happened, would not be surprising. The Muslims believed their survival depended on forcing UN troops to abandon their treasured "neutrality" and support them against the Serbs. UN officials, however, saw Srebrenica's Muslim leaders as corrupt and dangerous provocateurs. "From Yasushi Akashi on down," Sudetic writes,

UN military and refugee-relief personnel had by now had enough of Naser Oric. Akashi personally viewed the senior Muslim commanders in Srebrenica as criminal gang leaders, pimps and black marketeers.

However accurate this appraisal, and however much it was shared by Muslim political and military leaders in Sarajevo—many of whom resented Naser Oric's independence and his arrogance—it was nonetheless true that he was a leader and that he had made his men into fighters who had managed, with virtually no outside help, during the first overwhelming Serb assault in the spring of 1992, to take back and then defend their town. "I am a man of action," Oric had declared to the *Washington Post* reporter in February 1994. "I like adventure. As long as I am in Srebrenica, it will never be Serb. We will protect the hearths of our people. We will never be Palestinians."

On March 21, 1995, Muslim military commanders sent an order to Oric and his lieutenants: they were to proceed to a mountain known as Orlov Kamen, or "Eagle Rock," and wait; and wait they did, for almost two weeks before a helicopter dropped out of the sky, plucked them off the frozen mountainside, and flew them off to Tuzla for "consultations and training." Naser Oric, the celebrated leader of Srebrenica, would not return.

2.

In the wake of Naser Oric's mysterious and ominous departure, Srebrenica's people, malnourished and mistrustful, subsisted on little more than rumors: Sarajevo's commanders, it was said, had summoned Oric to help them plan a new offensive, a great attack that would at last liberate Srebrenica. No, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic and Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic had finally fashioned a secret deal, whereby the Muslims would trade away Srebrenica, Zepa, and Gorazde, the three eastern enclaves, in exchange for the Serb suburbs of divided Sarajevo. Yes, that must be it: Oric's military skills would no longer be needed; soon luxurious cars and buses would come for Srebrenica's bedraggled defenders and carry them to glittering Sarajevo, in whose suburbs each man would now be offered for his family a choice of fine apartments or houses...

Many, of course, had long speculated about such a deal; Srebrenica's people, after all, could read a map as well as anyone. They knew that Srebrenica—heroic Srebrenica, whose men had fought off the "cleansing" of the notorious paramilitary leader Arkan and his Tigers, and had pinned down for three years more than a thousand Serb troops—simply made no sense in the logic of peace, in the logic of settlement, in the logic of the map. The town stood ten miles from the Serbian border, dominating the Drina Valley, the "soft underbelly" of Serbia. Cyrus Vance and David Owen's diplomatic plan of 1993, which called for an integrated Bosnia divided into ten carefully drawn provinces, protected Srebrenica by placing it in the Muslim-dominated canton of Tuzla. Though Vance-Owen offered the last hope for a Muslim Srebrenica, not only did the Bosnian Serbs reject it, infuriating their sponsor, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, but officials of the incoming Clinton administration, for all their talk of reversing ethnic cleansing, undermined, by their casual lack of support, what was probably the last slender chance of achieving it.

The Contact Group map introduced in 1994—named for the "contact group" of diplomats from the United States, Great Britain, France, Germany, and Russia who were directly negotiating with the former Yugoslavs—also allotted Srebrenica to the Muslims. But since the plan set out what was in fact

an ethnic division of Bosnia (with 51 percent of the land going to the Bosnians and Croats, 49 percent to the Serbs), Srebrenica and the other enclaves would have remained isolated and no doubt heavily armed islands in a sea of hostile Serb territory. In this view, then, if Srebrenica were to remain Muslim, Serbia itself could never be fully secure. Until Srebrenica and the other eastern enclaves changed hands—courtesy either of the diplomats or the generals—Slobodan Milosevic's goal of securing "Greater Serbia" would elude him and the war would grind on.

Even as the Srebrenicans spent April and May of 1995 gossiping about a deal, President Milosevic sat in his hunting lodge near Belgrade working to negotiate it. At his side was Robert Frasure, a deputy assistant secretary of state, an experienced American diplomat, and now President Clinton's special envoy for Bosnia. For more than six months, the French, British, and Russians had been pushing to revise the Contact Group map, intending to pressure the Bosnians to exchange Srebrenica and the other enclaves for the predominantly Serb suburbs of Sarajevo and thereby add, to a plan that already envisaged the ethnic partition of Bosnia, provisions for wholesale "diplomatic" ethnic cleansing.^[6] But Clinton officials, who from the start had loudly supported the Bosnians and advocated air strikes and other "robust action" against the Serbs—while steadfastly declining, as the Europeans never tired of pointing out, to put "troops on the ground"—had only lately shown signs of going along.

For by May 1995, British leaders had told the Americans that a majority of John Major's cabinet favored a withdrawal of their troops—they now had about 5,500—before the following winter. The French, who had contributed about 5,000 troops, had let it be known that, failing a stronger commitment by the Americans, they would follow suit. For American officials, this came as a shock; withdrawing UN troops was certain to be difficult and bloody, and the Americans had pledged to support the operation with at least 20,000 soldiers. Thus far, at bottom, President Clinton's role in the war had been largely rhetorical: he had loudly supported the Bosnians, denounced the Serbs, demanded air strikes that the Europeans, with their troops on the ground, regularly blocked. But now, one way or another—and in the shadow of the 1996 presidential campaign—rhetoric would give way to commitment.

So in May 1995 the Americans sent Ambassador Frasure to Belgrade, where Slobodan Milosevic eagerly waited to deal. Not only had sanctions destroyed Serbia's economy, Milosevic could see that the Bosnian Serb leaders—men he had created, like Radovan Karadzic, but who now in their arrogance presumed to ignore his directives—had been blinded to the fact that they had reached the limits of their power. Thanks to American diplomacy, the Bosnians and Croats had formed a loose confederation. Iranian weapons flowed through Zagreb to the Bosnians (though the Croats kept for themselves much of the artillery and other heavy weapons the Bosnians most needed). Retired American generals advised the much strengthened Croatian army—which on May 1, in Operation Flash, had stormed Serb-occupied western Slavonia and expelled more than 12,000 Serbs. From the outset, the Bosnian Serbs, with many fewer men to draw on, had known they must win the war quickly; but thanks in part to the United Nations and its "humanitarian aid," the Muslims had managed to hold on. Now, with an angry Milosevic limiting the weapons and fuel that had once flowed freely across the Drina, each day that went by the Serbs grew weaker and their enemies stronger. And, as Milosevic made ominously clear by sitting on his hands while the Croats seized western Slavonia, whatever his pretensions to have fathered "Greater Serbia" he would not risk his power by moving to rescue his erstwhile protégés in Pale.

Ambassador Frasure was in Belgrade to work out what was meant to be, in outline, a simple deal: Milosevic would recognize Bosnia as an independent nation and in exchange the United Nations would suspend sanctions on Serbia. Implied in the arrangement were "territorial adjustments" that seemed to show how far the Americans had come in being willing to admit publicly a hard reality: since the Bosnians lacked the military strength to win and hold the territory that would be needed to build a permanent connection between central Bosnia and the enclaves, and since the Western

nations—and particularly the Americans—showed no willingness to take on such a task, any negotiated end to the war would have to include trading the eastern enclaves to the Serbs. As early as the summer of 1993, according to Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both in their book, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, Bosnian Prime Minister Haris Silajdzic indicated that if the Serbs traded the Serb-held suburbs of Sarajevo for the enclaves, "he would be prepared to go to Srebrenica and explain to the people that they had to leave." The following spring the Serbs agreed in principle to such an arrangement. In January 1995, according to Richard C. Holbrooke, then assistant secretary of state for European affairs, President Alija Izetbegovic told him that, "in the context of a larger settlement" and to achieve an undivided Sarajevo, he was ready to give the Serbs Srebrenica and the other enclaves. "He said they weren't his people," Holbrooke told me in an interview. "He didn't care about it."

Unfortunately, even if the Bosnians and the Serbs, as well as Western leaders, privately acknowledged that in any deal Srebrenica would go to the Serbs, no one was prepared to endorse openly such a territorial swap. "After all," as Honig and Both write,

would not such a move be perceived as a rewarding of ethnic cleansing and aggression?...

The Clinton administration in particular did not want to be publicly associated with any diplomatic proposal that ceded the enclaves to the Serbs.

As long as President Clinton was unwilling to endorse such a proposal, the Bosnians could be expected to hold out for a better deal. For as far back as the presidential campaign of 1992, a pattern had emerged: Clinton would speak out strongly for a "principled" course in Bosnia, according to which "ethnic cleansing will not stand"; the Bosnians would stiffen their resolve and their diplomatic position, anticipating substantial US help; and the Americans, having given vent to a blast of strong idealistic rhetoric, would do little or nothing at all. "Among the Contact Group countries," Richard Holbrooke told me,

the US had the strongest moral position but the least involvement, which made our moral position hypocritical. In May 1995, when I suggested bombing the Serbs after they had taken UN troops hostage, a British official looked at me calmly for a moment and said "Well, that's all very well, but they aren't your men, are they?"

Two and a half years after coming to power, Clinton officials were still vacillating between, on the one hand, relying on diplomacy fashioned largely out of rhetoric and, on the other, taking action. In April 1993, administration officials had pressed the United Nations, for example, to declare five besieged towns and cities "safe areas" but had stood by while the Secretary General begged the world for, and ultimately failed to secure, adequate troops to defend them; on the other hand, in March 1994 Clinton diplomats had brokered a critical détente between the Bosnian Muslims and the Croats that significantly strengthened both parties. Now, when they finally set out determined to make progress in settling the war through diplomacy, Clinton officials still found themselves confined within a rhetorical prison of their own making. As Honig and Both write, quoting an official's description of the American representative's position within the Contact Group negotiations,

In discussion, [Ambassador Charles] Redman accepted the possibility of the Zepa and Srebrenica enclaves being swapped for territory elsewhere, such as around Sarajevo. However, he was adamant that the Group could not put forward such a proposal, as they would be faced with public outcry.

As the authors note, in what remained a bitterly divided administration Redman belonged to the so-called "pragmatic group" while Vice President Al Gore and Ambassador Madeleine Albright led the

"hard-liners," vigorously opposing, Honig and Both write, "any move that appeased, as they saw it, Serb aggression."

Having publicly made a clear distinction between aggressors (the Serbs) and victims (the Bosnians) from the moment they took office, they had stuck to this line ever since. Their credibility would be in doubt and their reputations damaged if they were now to give public approval to a territorial swap involving the eastern enclaves.

To put the matter rather less cynically, and considerably more accurately, one might say that however much Gore, Albright, and the Clinton administration's other "hard-liners" may have detested "appeasement" of the Serbs—and there is little reason to doubt their sincerity—they failed the Bosnians miserably because they were unable, or unwilling, to persuade the President to put forward a workable policy based upon their views.

Such a policy, in the end, could not have had as its foundation—as Clinton's did—the refusal to employ American troops or otherwise to commit vital American resources. It would not do simply to point to polls suggesting Americans' wariness of deep involvement in the Balkans; if Clinton was truly determined to achieve "justice" in Bosnia, to somehow reverse the ethnic cleansing that had dramatically altered the country, he would have to provide some means to achieve it, rather than simply block peace proposals as "unjust" and unacceptable to his own proudly proclaimed ideals. "Hard choices needed to be made on Bosnia policy" from the time Clinton took office, as Wayne Bert writes in *The Reluctant Superpower*, "but Clinton was not willing to choose. His instincts were to intervene and help stymie the Serb military actions in Bosnia, but there was a price to be paid for that and the President was not convinced that the intervention was worth the price." The "hard-liners" burden was to persuade the President that he should pay the price; their sin was not, as Honig and Both claim, that they were unwilling to compromise their "hard-line" reputations by appeasing the Serbs. It was that they were unable when it mattered to accomplish what was necessary to help the Bosnians.

As for the Europeans, early on they had found themselves forced to respond to the war—partly because of President Bush's abnegation of responsibility. For all their talk of "humanitarian missions" and "troops on the ground," they had acted in a way that they hoped would not prevent the Serbs from quickly attaining what seemed an inevitable victory but that, in the end, had done much to prolong the war: and if their "neutral" role accompanying deliveries of food and other supplies had helped the Bosnians stave off defeat and avoid surrender, it had also prolonged their own reluctant involvement. From the beginning, as Bert writes, the "European allies had fundamentally misconstrued the war and what should be done about it."

Limited intervention may help end a war if the intervenor takes sides and tilts the balance in a way that allows one side to win. Impartial intervention may end a war if the outside power takes complete control of the situation and imposes a peace settlement that all respect. The first type of intervention is limited but not impartial, the second is impartial but not limited. The Europeans tried to carry out both a limited and an impartial intervention, and it did not work.

Now the suddenly material prospect of French and British troops carrying out a fighting retreat, with thousands of American troops supporting them—images of bodybags sent back to the United States, containing Americans killed for no other reason than to cover a humiliating failure—had begun to concentrate the Americans' minds. As Honig and Both put it, the Americans' decision to negotiate seriously with Milosevic, "the traditional villain of the Balkan piece, indicated that in the Clinton administration the wish to end the war was gaining the upper hand over the wish to punish the Serb aggressors."

On May 18, 1995, Ambassador Frasure placed some documents in his briefcase, shook Slobodan Milosevic's hand, and flew back to Washington. The Serbian dictator and the American diplomat had reached a deal.

It would be short-lived. It is true that in return for lifting sanctions and promising to adopt a constitution that went some way toward recognizing the Bosnian Serbs' "autonomy," Milosevic had agreed to recognize Bosnia and cut off military supplies and fuel shipments to the Bosnian Serbs until they accepted the Contact Group map. But "hard-line" Clinton officials feared that by suspending sanctions (which only UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali could reimpose) they had left themselves no leverage over the Serb leader. As Honig and Both write,

The President needed an agreement that included a clearly distinguishable punitive element if it was to be sold to the American public. The deal as it stood lacked such an element, which meant that Secretary of State Christopher could not support it. Ambassador Albright reportedly threatened to resign over what she called the "softly-softly pact" with Milosevic.

Again, the political strictures were real and, for Clinton, self-generated; having long spoken eloquently of the legitimacy of the Muslim cause, having chosen to support justice for the "ethnically cleansed" Bosnians rather than peace "at any price," it is not surprising that the President now found it difficult to adopt wholesale a policy of *Realpolitik*. But the practical problem was real as well: having "dealt with the devil" and come to an arrangement with Milosevic, how would the Americans enforce it if the Serb leader proved unwilling, or unable, to deliver—if, for example, Dr. Karadzic, Milosevic's own Frankenstein monster, were to defy his creator on this as he and his self-appointed "representatives" did earlier on the Vance-Owen plan?

The Clinton administration sent Frasure back to Belgrade with a proposal that would in effect allow the Americans to reimpose sanctions at their own discretion. Such a proposal had little chance of being accepted; in retrospect, with the sounds of shelling growing louder from Sarajevo to Srebrenica, Frasure's agreement doubtless had been the last hope for a diplomatic solution to the "problem" of the enclaves.

By the end of May, though he and Frasure went on talking, Slobodan Milosevic had concluded that the Americans would sign no deal. Having failed in his attempt to secure his increasingly precarious military gains by political means, Milosevic now "unleashed" General Ratko Mladic and his Bosnian Serbs.

3.

During the last week of May 1995 Mladic's soldiers helped themselves to the tanks and cannons and mortars that had been handed over to United Nations troops to store in UN "Weapons Collections Points" and began bombarding Sarajevo. General Rupert Smith of Great Britain, the commander of the UN Protection Force in Sarajevo, responded on May 25 and 26 by ordering NATO planes to bomb an arms depot near Pale, the Serb capital. A rather shocked General Mladic retaliated by ordering his troops to seize more than 300 UN soldiers as hostages. On June 1, Serb troops staged an ambush within Srebrenica, killing thirteen civilians. On June 2, Serb rocket forces tracked and launched a surface-to-air missile at an American F-16 fighter, destroying it and stranding its pilot, Scott O'Grady, behind Serb lines (a Marine commando force rescued him six days later). On June 3, in Srebrenica, seventy-five Serb paramilitaries stormed and seized the United Nations' southernmost observation post, OPEcho, and shelled an armored personnel carrier, injuring two "blue helmets." The Dutch commander's frantic pleas to UN headquarters to send NATO fighter planes to bomb and strafe the Serb attackers were denied.

Six days later, with UN hostages still in Serb hands, General Bernard Janvier of France, the UN Force Commander in Bosnia, sat in a meeting room in the Croatian coastal city of Split opposite General Smith and Yasushi Akashi, Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's Special Representative, and delivered a grim appraisal. "We are no longer able to use air power," he declared, "because of the obvious reason that our soldiers are on the ground. Whether we want it or not, the Serbs are controlling the situation."

It was June 9, five days after Janvier had traveled, hat in hand, to Zvornik in order to see General Ratko Mladic, the man who held 324 of his troops prisoner. "We were the supplicants," a close aide later said. "Janvier proposed the meeting. Janvier proposed the deal." The Frenchman signed no paper but instead pocketed the blunt document Mladic had prepared for his inspection^[7] and brought it back to UN headquarters. Of course, the lack of a signature proves nothing, as Richard Holbrooke points out:

There's no documentary evidence but [a deal] makes perfect sense. However it's simply not provable. Beyond the question of whether or not Janvier came to an understanding with Mladic is whether he did so at the direction of the Elysée.... It could well be that rather than Chirac someone within the Elysée bureaucracy instructed him to make the arrangement. Whatever actually happened between Janvier and Mladic, and between Janvier and the Elysée, you can only say there is a strong circumstantial chain.

To that chain Akashi's announcement, made on June 9 after the critical meeting with Generals Janvier and Smith, that henceforth the United Nations forces would abide by "strict peacekeeping principles," would seem to add the final link: the hostages would be released, the fighter planes would likely not return.^[8] Whatever means were henceforth to be employed to protect Srebrenica from a Serb attack—to keep it a "safe area"—they were very unlikely to involve NATO warplanes.

And General Smith, at least, according to the minutes of the meeting, was certain the Serbs would soon attack. "I remain convinced that the Serbs want to conclude [the war] this year and will take every risk to accomplish this," he told Janvier and Akashi at the June 9 meeting. "As long as [Milosevic's] sanctions remain on the Drina," he said, the Serbs "risk getting weaker every week relative to their enemy." The Serbs' determination to conclude the war would lead, Smith said, "to a further squeezing of Sarajevo or an attack in the eastern enclaves, creating a crisis that short of air attacks we will have great difficulty responding to."

General Janvier's analysis was quite different. "The Serbs need two things," he explained to Smith and Akashi,

international recognition, and a softening of the blockade on the Drina. I hope that these conditions will be met quickly, given the urgent situation. I think the Serbs are aware of how favorable the [political] situation is to them—I don't think they want to go to an extreme crisis. On the contrary, they want to modify their behavior, be good interlocutors. It is for this that we must speak to them—not negotiate, but to show them how important it is to have a normal attitude.

"I agree that they do not want a crisis," General Smith replied sarcastically. "They want to neutralize the UN and NATO...as they fight the Muslims." General Smith asked about the coming Rapid Reaction Force, an armored French-British contingent then being assembled to support UNPROFOR—or to assist in its withdrawal. "Are we going to use them to fight? If not I am not sure I want them—they will just be more mouths to feed, and create expectations that I cannot meet." And then, he said,

If we are not prepared to fight, we will always be stared down by the [Bosnian Serb Army]. We are already over the Mogadishu line; the Serbs do not view us as

peacekeepers.

It was no use; General Janvier, Smith's commander, would have none of it. "I insist," he declared, "that we will never have the possibility of combat, of imposing our will on the Serbs." When Smith persisted, noting that he could "easily see a situation arising where we will be forced to request air power," Janvier was dismissive:

It is just for this that we must establish contact with the Serbs, to show, explain to them that there are just some things that they cannot do.... Once again, the Serbs are in a very favorable political position and that is something they will not want to compromise. The external political situation is such that the Serbs will come to understand the benefits of cooperation. Unless there is a major provocation by the [Bosnian Army], the Serbs will not act.

Within days of General Janvier's assertion, American intelligence officers at the National Security Agency had begun listening to an interesting series of telephone conversations between General Ratko Mladic and General Momcilo Perisic, chief of staff of the Yugoslav Army. The two generals were planning a large offensive that would involve more than 10,000 troops, some 3,000 of them from the Yugoslav Army, thirty or so tanks, and many artillery pieces. From June 17, the two men spoke almost daily; and the transcripts of their conversations, according to one writer who claims to have seen them, show clearly "that the initiative for this military operation came from Belgrade."^[9] In coming days General Mladic traveled frequently to the Serbian capital, for that is where he and General Perisic planned the conquest of the "safe area" of Srebrenica.^[10]

During the nights of late June and early July, Serb soldiers drove truckloads of fuel, weapons, and ammunition, as well as armored vehicles and tanks, across the Drina River bridges into Bosnia. Mithad Salihovic, at the time a scout for the Bosnian Army's 28th Division, told a television interviewer,

On June 21, from the direction of Belgrade via Sabac, Loznica, and Ljubovija, a paramilitary force run by Zeljko Raznjatovic, nicknamed Arkan, crossed into the territory. About 4,000 of them assembled in Bratunac and they were then sent to different areas around the enclave.^[11]

General Cees Nicolai, a Dutch brigadier who served as General Smith's deputy in Sarajevo, also remembers seeing reports that Arkan's Tigers had been sighted around the enclave. "Srebrenica was on their wish list," General Nicolai told *Newsday*, noting that the Tigers "always showed up at places where something was about to happen."^[12]

From the first days of the war, the ardent followers of Arkan—Raznjatovic was a legendary criminal, a bankrobber, jailbreaker, and hit man with longtime connections to Serbian intelligence—had established themselves as the most brutal and sadistic of all the paramilitaries operating in Bosnia. Storming a city or town after regular army gunners had "softened it up" with artillery fire, the Tigers would murder, rape, and torture in order to spread terror enough to "cleanse" the town thoroughly of Muslims, and then carry off all the plunder they could. (Many grew wildly rich during the war, none more so than Arkan himself, who was elected to the Serb parliament.) They were the motor of the "ethnic cleansing" machine. As one NATO officer wrote in his daily report, he and other military observers well understood what the Tigers' sudden appearance around Srebrenica—swollen as it was with refugees—might portend:

Any attempt to clear the enclave would probably be manpower intensive and require commitment as well as other less salubrious qualities. The Bosnian Serb Army soldiers are not showing these qualities so a unit like the Arkan Brigade would be necessary.^[13]

All the signs were there. But who had an eye, or an interest, to see them? General Smith did, but Yasushi Akashi had told him clearly that he must defer to General Janvier, and the Frenchman believed fervently that the Serbs, if unchallenged, would "come to understand the benefits of cooperation." As for the Americans, having failed to come to terms with Milosevic, they had begun fashioning a new diplomatic approach—Pentagon officials, who had always opposed any policy they feared could lead to intervention, were major players—which, according to a White House aide, "emphasized the need for defensibility of federal territory. It had to be compact, coherent and defensible"—a priority that would not encourage American officials to comb intelligence intercepts looking for threats to Srebrenica or, for that matter, to regret the disappearance altogether, one way or another, of "the eastern enclaves problem."

So even as American intelligence officers listened to Generals Mladic and Perisic plan their next move, American diplomats had decided, according to Sandy Vershbow, who was in charge of Bosnia policy at the National Security Council, that Srebrenica's future "seemed pretty gloomy. We were already then considering that some kind of swap for at least the smaller of the eastern enclaves for more territory would be wise." In fact the Americans had gone beyond "considering," as Tim Judah notes in *The Serbs*, and "were discreetly suggesting that [Srebrenica] should be exchanged for territory elsewhere," which told the players involved that in the American government "far from reversing ethnic cleansing a decision had been made that more was needed."

Finally, the Bosnians themselves, in the frank words of army commander General Rasim Delic, tended to see Srebrenica and the other enclaves as "an additional burden for the Bosnian army and government."^[14] The Bosnians of Sarajevo had a good many more important things to worry about.

4.

By early June 1995, Sarajevo, the once-beautiful city nestled in its bowl of pine-covered mountains, was suffering once more under a ferocious siege. From their bunkers on the mountainsides Serb gunners had been shelling Butimir airport, effectively prevent-ing, for more than two months, food and other humanitarian aid from reaching Sarajevo's people and sending prices soaring for what little food could still be found in the markets. The Serbs then cut off water mains, forcing people to subsist on intermittent deliveries of water by Bosnian Army tanker trucks. They severed electric lines, even managing to destroy a cable Muslims had laid in a tunnel running under Butimir airport. Finally, Serb gunners poured shells down onto the ruined buildings, and when people ventured out onto the debris-littered streets Serb snipers—including the paramilitary leader Vojislav Seselj's new sixty-man team—shot them down.

As General Smith prophesied, General Mladic, in his eagerness to conclude the war that summer, was moving first to "squeeze" Sarajevo and pressure its leaders. And though the Bosnian government forces had grown considerably stronger than they had been a year before, when Iranian planes had begun landing at Zagreb airport with shipments of weapons meant for the Bosnians, the soldiers in Sarajevo still found themselves outgunned. Encircling the capital were seven brigades of well-trained, well-equipped soldiers—perhaps twelve thousand men—dug into more than two hundred reinforced bunkers and armed with at least three hundred large cannons and other artillery pieces. Facing them, the Bosnians could put in the field only their First Corps—consisting of twenty-five thousand men of whom perhaps fourteen thousand were available and only half of those properly armed—which had at its disposal a mere thirty artillery pieces and five tanks, three of them obsolescent. "In the face of such superiority," General Jovan Divjak, number two commander in the Bosnian army, explained to an interviewer on June 2,

the Bosnian government army has no chance of an equal playing field. ... To break out, we would need considerably greater resources and sophisticated armaments.... The balance of force is today such that the Army in the Sarajevo zone cannot advance without considerable reinforcements, but then nor can the Karadjic forces. So we're in a stalemate situation for the time being.^[15]

By June, however, the stalemate had become untenable. Sarajevo had literally begun to starve. And, as Divjak and other Bosnian commanders well knew, worse was to come. The NATO air strikes General Smith had ordered May 25 and 26 on an ammunition depot near Pale had hurt the Serbs and, according to Divjak, "set back all plans for fifteen to thirty days until they can get new supplies from the Serbian military"—which in effect would mean "a breathing space for the Bosnian Army."

On June 15, the Bosnians launched a full-scale attack north of Sarajevo. The ostensible objective was to "break out" of the siege, as President Alija Izetbegovic explained to his people in a blunt televised statement:

There is nothing left in the city, no electricity, no water, no gas, no food, no medicines.... The world hasn't done anything to prevent it.... In a situation like this, our army has been given orders to prevent the further strangulation of the city.

Given the realities on the ground, the Bosnians' goals were equally likely to have been political, namely to push Western leaders, by escalating the fighting, to intervene and force the Serbs at least to open the airport so vital food shipments could be delivered.

For the residents of Sarajevo, the first days of the fighting were terrifying, as Barbara Demick describes in *Logavina Street*, her beautiful study of how residents of one Sarajevo neighborhood endured the years of war:

Sarajevo rocked and heaved with explosions. Air raid sirens wailed incessantly. Quite literally, the entire city was smack in the middle of warring armies—cowering underneath a furious volley of mortar shells, rocket-propelled grenades flying across the hills. For three days, the noise was appalling. Then it stopped suddenly.... The offensive had failed.

As always, the revenge was pitiless. The Bosnian Serbs let loose immediately on the water lines, the hospitals. In Kosevo, a hepatitis patient was decapitated in his hospital bed by a mortar shell. The man's headless corpse lay undisturbed for hours because the doctors were too busy with the injured to move him. In the last two weeks of June, 66 civilians were killed in Sarajevo and more than 300 were wounded.

At the height of the fighting, on June 17, Yasushi Akashi, the UN Special Representative, traveled to Belgrade to pay a call on Slobodan Milosevic. The diplomat, as he cabled in his report to New York, found Milosevic "somewhat tense and less self-confident than usual" and showing

considerable concern about the strength of the Bosnian government offensive.... [He] expressed doubt that the Bosnian government would respond, in the absence of aid deliveries, to my appeal for a ceasefire.... He stressed that both sides were weary of war and must stop fighting. I replied that the government would not have had an excuse for the offensive if Serbs had allowed aid to enter Sarajevo.

That the Bosnians, besieged in their capital, needed "an excuse" to try to break the siege exemplifies the thinking of the United Nations envoy: in the eyes of the "peacekeeper," any move to initiate hostilities, even if only an attempt to return to the status quo ante, must be wrong, for it violates "peace." Thus the aggressor, who is often closest to achieving victory—and thus in the peacekeeper's view to attaining "peace"—in many cases tends perversely to be the favored party.

As he tells Milosevic, Akashi believes Serb moves to seize back the weapons that had been collected by the UN resulted from "stupidity" rather than from a quite predictable determination to force the Bosnians to conclude the war:

The stupidity of the Serbs in refusing to return heavy weapons to weapon collection points, and their attack on a populated part of Tuzla, had also contributed to the need for two air strikes on Pale. I emphasized that the Bosnian government was very confident now, somewhat disdainful of the UN, and very skilled at exploiting any Serb overreaction. It was therefore essential that the Serbs cooperate in supplying our forces and delivering aid. "Absolutely," replied Milosevic.

Just as General Mladic was at this very moment assuring General Janvier, who was calling on him in Pale, that his soldiers would let convoys pass through their lines to resupply UN troops in Srebrenica and the other enclaves, so now Milosevic made a similar, and similarly baseless, promise. In fact, Srebrenica would remain cut off, its Dutch troops subsisting on combat rations, running their armored personnel carriers only hours a day to save fuel; Sarajevo would go on enduring its slow and agonizing strangulation.

Having blithely assured him that aid deliveries would be resumed, the Serb president had another point to impress on the UN envoy:

Milosevic stated that the most important initial step was to stop the government offensive and to avoid further air strikes.... Both Milosevic and [Serbian Foreign Minister Vladislav] Jovanovic referred to Bosnian abuse of safe areas, and reminded us that NATO aircraft had only attacked Serbs. Milosevic stated that, "if it is impossible for NATO to react against the Muslims due to US pressure, then that is a good reason not to use air strikes against the Serbs, as the air strikes are ruining the position of the United Nations."

Milosevic not only knew that Akashi personally objected to air strikes, he also knew what was to come in Srebrenica. Speaking man-to-man, Milosevic showed himself willing to be understanding of Akashi's predicament: of course, properly speaking, the UN official's "neutrality" would compel him to send NATO planes to strike against the Muslims in Srebrenica, as General Smith had struck against the Serbs in Pale, but politics—no?—prevented Akashi from taking such a step.

Nonetheless, if political realities meant that Akashi couldn't send NATO planes to "punish" the Muslims, then the least he could do was to refrain from striking at the Serbs—particularly, Milosevic seemed to be implying, when the time came for Serbs to move against the safe areas. And Milosevic casually let it slip that "he had been advised by President Chirac of President Clinton's agreement that air strikes should not occur if unacceptable to Chirac."

Akashi records this revelation without comment and thus it is hard not to think that he already knows of, or in any event, has heard about, such an understanding—one, it should be noted, that White House spokesmen later vigorously denied existed. What the truth of the statement might be, particularly given Milosevic's fame as a liar, is harder to know. According to some reports, attributed to sources in the French government, President Chirac had "lengthy telephone conversations" with

Milosevic—on June 3 (the day Serbs seized a southern observation post in Srebrenica); June 9 (the day Janvier met with Akashi and Smith in Split); and June 11—after which the Serbs released their (mostly French) hostages.

Sometime around the middle of June, even as the Americans were listening in on Generals Mladic and Perisic discussing Srebrenica, French intelligence officers also learned of the coming offensive. "This information was given to General Janvier...only in his capacity as a French military officer, *not* in his role as Supreme Commander of the UN forces."^[16] According to this reconstruction, Janvier knew to expect an attack, and knew his government did not believe NATO should act forcefully to prevent its succeeding.

By his casual comment to Akashi, Milosevic seems to be saying that the Americans are effectively neutralized—and that I, President Milosevic, know it. American belligerence will no longer serve as an excuse. Air strikes, when it comes to protecting Srebrenica's Muslims, are in fact out of the question. And the following day after the Serbs released the last hostages, a high Serb official claimed publicly, in a statement from Pale, that the UN soldiers were freed because the Serbs had reached a deal with the UN not to undertake air strikes; in Moscow, meantime, Boris Yeltsin announced that President Chirac had told him NATO would undertake no further air strikes in Bosnia.

Within a day Serb military jets were violating the "no-fly zone" over Bosnia and Serb anti-aircraft radar was "locking on" NATO fighters. NATO officers requested permission to attack the Serb airfield at Banja Luka and some surface-to-air missiles. Akashi, declaring that "such disproportionate action would immediately affect any ongoing diplomatic process and precipitate reprisal attacks against United Nations personnel," rejected the request. NATO officers demanded to know if the UN envoy had made a deal with the Serbs. Akashi denied it, insisting the hostages' release was "unconditional."

NATO commanders, however, were not stupid; they resented what they saw as the diplomat's irresponsible risking of their pilots by making use of sophisticated warplanes as "noisemakers in the skies." The officers reduced the number of patrols over Bosnia. In future, if United Nations troops needed support from the air it was unlikely to be immediately available; the Dutch "blue helmets" in Srebrenica, for example, might be forced to wait four hours or more for NATO fighter planes.

Just before Bosnian troops had launched their Sarajevo offensive in mid-June, the Bosnian officers in Srebrenica, like commanders throughout the country, had received secret orders to support the capital by staging attacks from the enclave and pinning down as many Serb troops as possible.^[17] Nine days after Akashi and Milosevic met in Belgrade, on the morning of June 26, Muslim soldiers set out from Srebrenica before dawn, crept by the United Nations observation posts and through Serb lines, then marched about three miles to Visnjica. Villagers, awakened by the sound of automatic-weapons fire, fled their homes in terror and disappeared into the forest. From there they watched Muslim soldiers plunder their houses, drive off the livestock, carry off the crops and anything else of value before setting fire to the houses. When a handful of Serbs launched a counterattack the Muslims killed one soldier and wounded three civilians before retreating to Srebrenica. Within the space of a few minutes at least thirteen of Visnjica's families had become refugees.

By now Arkan's paramilitaries had been in the area for nearly a week; Serb soldiers had been driving tanks and artillery pieces in increasing numbers over the Drina bridges; General Mladic and General Perisic and their aides had been meeting and planning in Belgrade. Two days before, Mladic had written to United Nations officials and warned bluntly that

These attacks against the territories controlled by [the Bosnian Serb] Army...brutally violate the status of [the] Safe Area of Srebrenica.... I strongly protest and warn you that we will not tolerate such cases in future.

Two days later, with Visnjica's burned houses still smoldering, the Serbs immediately summoned foreign journalists. Stephen Kinzer of *The New York Times* interviewed a man who had just watched his house burn down. "We lived so well here," Savo Madzarevic lamented to the American. "We had two beds and a table. Now we will have to become refugees somewhere." When Kinzer asked him why the Muslims had attacked his village, the man paused and considered the question. "I suppose," he said, "it is because we are Serbs."

The Bosnian Serb Army spokesman gathered the journalists together to issue an angry statement:

The Muslim soldiers who carried out this attack crossed lines patrolled by Dutch UN troops whose job it is to prevent just this kind of action. We therefore conclude that the UN forces are aligning themselves with the Muslim army.^[18]

General Mladic had his men and equipment in place; he had "neutralized" the United Nations as a combative force; and now he had his *casus belli*. A Serb soldier, one of those who had driven off the Srebrenica raiders, listened to Kinzer's question about the United Nations forces and then gave the American a stark answer:

It doesn't do any good to obey the rules of the UN.... Maybe it's time for the peacekeepers to go home.... There's a war going on here, and each side has to do what it has to do.

5.

Just after three o'clock in the morning of July 6, Dutch peacekeepers in the UN base at Potocari, a couple of miles north of Srebrenica town, were awakened by the distinctive whistle, shriek, and explosion of rockets: six passed directly over the UN base. Two hours later, just before dawn, a flash lit the sky and then an explosion rocked observation post Foxtrot in the southeast of the safe area; two young Dutch soldiers manning the tower threw themselves to the plywood floor, felt the soil shower over their backs. Seconds later, another mortar shell landed, making their ears ring. One soldier fumbled for the radio. Then they clambered down the ladder behind the sandbags of the bunker.

In the pre-dawn gloom, the two young Dutchmen were half-asleep and disoriented; but they knew the shells had come from the Serb side. They had no idea what this meant, for from the start the peacekeepers had found themselves in an anomalous, confusing position, one that reflected all the ambiguity of the "safe areas" policy itself. As David Rohde writes in *Endgame*:

On the one hand,...the Dutch were supposed to be neutral UN peacekeepers. They wore bright blue UN helmets, berets or baseball caps. Nearly every inch of the observation post's fifty-by-thirty-yard compound of prefabricated containers, canvas tents and sandbag bunkers was UN white. OP Foxtrot could be spotted—and shelled—from miles away. As far as...[the] Dutch were concerned, OP Foxtrot was a great white albatross, not a defensive position.

But [the Dutch] peacekeepers were also expected to take sides if necessary and "deter" attacks by the Bosnian Serbs. Muslim soldiers had grudgingly turned over this and a half dozen other strategic hills to the UN when Srebrenica became a safe area.... But with few weapons, blue helmets and white vehicles, the Dutch were a meager fighting force. Both confused and discouraged by their contradictory mission,...Srebrenica's Dutch peacekeepers had spent most of the last five months hoping nothing would happen.

Confusion predated the Dutch; indeed, from the day in April 1993 that the United Nations declared Srebrenica and the other enclaves "safe areas," contradictions dominated: General Mladic had demanded that the Bosnians surrender unconditionally and hand over all their weapons. When they refused, the general ordered his men to maintain the siege, and though the Bosnians had relinquished two old tanks and some mortars and other artillery to the UN, the "blue helmets" found themselves manning a front line between two armies still at war.

Though Secretary General Boutros-Ghali had determined that the safe areas would require at least 34,000 peacekeepers, he could manage to persuade the nations of the world to contribute no more than 7,600, of which a mere few hundred—first 150 Canadians, then just under 600 Dutchmen—had been stationed in Srebrenica. Like the Canadians, the Dutch were forced to depend on the Serbs to let their supply convoys pass, and this, for more than two months, the Serbs had largely refused to do. By July, the Dutch had run very low on fuel and ammunition, and had exhausted their supplies of fresh food; they were carrying equipment by mule, and living on wretched combat rations. And since the Serbs had not permitted a number of soldiers who had departed on leave to return, the battalion, at 429 members, of whom scarcely half were actually soldiers, was seriously under strength.

Now the Serbs let it be known that they would not permit the Ukrainians, who were scheduled to relieve the weary and frustrated Dutch, into the enclave. The Dutch thus felt themselves condemned to remain imprisoned in the isolated city—which in July's heat stank almost unbearably of piled-up excrement and the body odor of thirty-five thousand unwashed refugees while the emaciated and vaguely repellent Srebrenicans combed through the Dutch garbage. So they spent their days staring back at the Serb gunners on the hills before them, recording the number of firing "incidents" in their notebooks, and trying to ignore the contemptuous gazes of the Muslim infantrymen, dug into the network of trenches just behind the observation posts and determined to force the Dutch to stay right where they were.

Now, in the midst of this meaningless and increasingly disagreeable assignment, the Serbs had suddenly turned their artillery on them. The two Dutch soldiers knew full well that a direct hit, which had to come sooner or later, would kill everyone in the observation post. Supposedly in such a situation their commander could call in NATO fighter planes to provide "close air support"—to strike at "smoking guns," which meant only those artillery and tanks that had been firing at them—but after the fiasco in May, when the Serbs had retaliated by seizing hundreds of peacekeepers as hostages, the soldiers knew the UN commanders were reluctant to use air power again. The Dutch were in a precarious position.

And yet why were the Serbs shelling them? The day before, on July 5, a long-range cannon had suddenly appeared on a hill a mile off; a pickup had sped by pulling a Serb anti-aircraft gun, heading south; a hundred Serb soldiers passed in the distance, walking east. Apprised of these bewildering movements, the Dutch commanders told their troops not to worry—which meant, the soldiers knew, that the officers themselves had no idea what the movements were about.

Reading signs lay at the war's heart. What did it mean, the movement of a tank, a mortar, a battalion of troops? What story did these signs tell? Had the story been unwittingly disclosed? Or was it a tale *meant* to deceive? During the five-day conquest of Srebrenica, the Serbs moved their tanks and guns and troops according to a delicate and bewildering choreography that, while seemingly without pattern, had been meticulously planned in Belgrade. The Serbs played on the divisions between Dutch and Bosnian and exploited the UN commander's deep aversion to ordering NATO planes to attack. By carefully designing a series of movements that would allow Muslims and United Nations officers and Western diplomats to convince themselves, at least for a time, that whatever the Serbs were up to, they could have no intention of conquering the safe area, Generals Mladic and Perisic made it possible for their enemies to believe what they desired to believe—and by the time they could no longer avoid accepting what was truly happening the Serbs had seized Srebrenica without a fight.

"The attack was typical of Serb military operations," write Honig and Both.

They unfolded as if in slow-motion. In their opening phases, attacks were marked by periods of intense shelling. Often these artillery barrages would not lead to anything more. They would just stop. Or, sometimes, there would be a pause, before another hail of artillery was released. The Serb military worked hard at making their bombardments appear random, so it was difficult to predict whether a particular bout of shelling was the prelude to a full offensive....

Throughout the morning of July 6, Serb gunners pummeled Muslim trenches just behind the Dutch observation post; the Muslims fired back with their AK-47 assault rifles and launched a few mortar rounds.

At one o'clock, the Dutch soldiers were rocked by a tremendous explosion; the watchtower above shook; sand poured down on their heads from the sandbags that formed the bunker's walls. A Serb tank—a World War II-era T-34—was firing directly at the UN post. The commander of the OP's seven-man crew radioed headquarters demanding NATO planes be called in to protect them. Four hours later, the local commander informed the seven men that he had asked for the planes. Hours passed, shells kept coming, and when night fell the fighters still had not arrived.

The request for "close air support," like four similar requests that week, had been denied. When Lieutenant Colonel Ton Karremans, the Dutch "blue helmet" commander, reached Brigadier General Cees Nicolai in Sarajevo, the chief of staff for UNPROFOR, who was also Dutch, Nicolai explained that the new European envoy, Carl Bildt, would soon arrive in Belgrade to take up negotiations where Frasure had left off; a "military incident" could destroy that effort. Nicolai also reminded Karremans of General Smith's May air strikes, out of which arose the explicit directive 2/95: "The execution of the mandate [was] secondary to the security of UN personnel." Since air strikes clearly risked the Serbs' taking UN personnel hostage, General Janvier simply could not permit them.

And how serious could this attack on a single observation post be? If Americans and perhaps Germans had listened in on Generals Mladic and Perisic discussing a Srebrenica operation; if General Nicolai himself had seen dispatches reporting that Arkan and his Tigers had entered the area; if the Bosnians and doubtless the Americans knew that arms had been passing over the Drina bridges in great numbers—if all this was known, how could the UN officers and the Bosnians as well not have concluded that General Mladic was set on conquering Srebrenica?

Perhaps they failed to see what was happening—because, as a truism of intelligence has it, "background noise" sometimes obscures the "real" signals. Because the Americans, now at work on a new policy emphasizing "the defensibility of federal territory"—that is, a simplified map, which hardly could have provided for a Muslim Srebrenica—had no particular interest in ferreting out from their intelligence the conclusion that the Serbs had determined to seize Srebrenica. Because General Janvier had no interest in reaching such a conclusion either—had he not at the very least strongly implied to the Serbs that there would be no air strikes? Had he not insisted to Akashi and Smith that the Serbs would launch no attack that summer?—and an assault on Srebrenica would thus leave the French general not only unarmed and impotent but exposed to the world as a gullible fool. Finally, because the Bosnians, hunkered down in their trenches, also did not want to believe that Mladic was finally sending his soldiers in to seize their town, for if this was true they knew that—in the absence of their great leader Naser Oric—they would be forced to place their lives in the hands of a few lightly armed and vaguely hostile United Nations troops, and nothing they had seen convinced them that the "blue helmets" were worthy of such trust.

The Serbs' genius was to recognize these fears and self-deceptions and to play upon them. Though they had the military strength to overwhelm the town with a sudden attack—after all, they had artillery positions virtually encircling it for more than two years—such a strategy would have

conveyed unmistakably to the Muslims, the UN leaders, and the world the Serbs' true intent, and possibly provoked a strong response. In any case this would have been contrary to the Serbs' accustomed methods, as Honig and Both observe:

After gaining new ground the Serbs would invariably pause. With so many UN troops and observers present, they had to be wary of a possible international armed response. A pause enabled them to gauge the world's reaction. Also, it tended to make the attack appear like a limited or isolated incident—a moment of pique that would not continue. This usually succeeded in taking the sting out of any intended tough response.

At Srebrenica, then, the Serbs brought forward their tanks and artillery, slowly, cautiously, and only from the south. They thereby telegraphed what seemed a plausible explanation for their actions to those on the other side; for running through the southern part of the enclave was an important supply road upon which sat a bauxite mine that happened to belong to Rasko Dukic, an intimate of Radovan Karadzic who gave a great deal of money to the Serb leader's political party. By advancing slowly on that road, the Serbs offered UN and Muslim officers an explanation for their movements: the Serbs would seize the road and finally act to get President Karadzic's well-to-do friend his mine back. With this obvious explanation available, all those who desired to avoid concluding the worst were free to do so.

On Saturday, July 8, the Serbs began shelling the observation post again, placing several rounds within the compound itself and destroying at least one of its walls. The young Dutch soldiers, crouching within the cramped bunker, tracking the deafening impact of each shell, and waiting for the one they would never hear, begged their commander once more for fighter planes; once more none came. After one shell, they smelled the observation post burning; in a panic, they radioed their commander and demanded that they be allowed to evacuate the post.

As the Dutch loaded their equipment into their armored personnel carrier, the soldier in the watchtower spotted a Serb tank; scarcely one hundred yards away, its turret was slowly turning, its gun barrel swinging toward them. The Dutch fled back into the bunker. No shell came, however; instead, a party of twenty heavily armed Serb soldiers strode up to the observation post. Some of the men, according to Rohde, wore the black uniforms of Arkan's Tigers; others the camouflage of the Drina Wolves.

Outnumbered, lightly armed, placed squarely in the sights of the tank's cannon, the Dutch had no choice but to allow the Serbs inside. Many of the Serb soldiers were not unfriendly, but they methodically rifled through every bit of UN equipment and stole everything of use or value. They even demanded that the Dutch relinquish their personal weapons, which they readily did, and give up their helmets and uniforms, which the Dutch officer managed to persuade the Serbs to let them keep.

Finally, the Serb commander, admitting *sotto voce* that he was beginning to have difficulty controlling his men, advised the Dutch to depart. Did the "blue helmets" wish to go to Bratunac? This was the Serb town north of Srebrenica—in effect he was inviting the Dutch to become hostages. No, replied the Dutch officer. Given the choice, he and his men would return to Srebrenica.

Between the observation post and UN headquarters, however, the Muslims crouched in their trenches, and they watched in growing fury what they saw as a cowardly retreat. By retreating—from land the Muslims had won with their blood—the Dutch would force them to fall back from their trench line or risk being flanked and crushed by the advancing Serbs—which was why, since the Serbs had seized an earlier observation post in the same area on June 3, Muslim officers had repeatedly vowed to kill any "blue helmet" who fled an observation post. As Rohde says, "Many of the Dutch were already more frightened of the Muslims they were supposed to be protecting than of the Serbs

who surrounded the enclave."

As the white armored personnel carrier of the Dutch contingent rumbled slowly down the dirt road, the driver saw a number of Muslims, led by a middle-aged man with a rifle, building a barricade of trees and branches. The Dutch radioed for instructions. Their commander, fearing the Muslims would take his soldiers hostage, ordered them to advance through the barrier. As the big white vehicle ground slowly over the tree trunks the Dutch huddled inside heard the dull explosion of a grenade; the soldier in the top hatch collapsed on top of them, blood pouring from his temple. He died before they could get him back to base.

Later that day, when Serb soldiers took over a second observation post in the south, the "blue helmets" elected to go with the Serbs to Bratunac—to become, that is, Serb hostages. The Muslims had developed a clear strategy that meant forcing the "blue helmets" to defend them—they wanted to imprison the Dutch in their observation posts, if necessary, so that they would be forced to become involved in any Serb assault on the enclave and thus would have no choice but to call in air strikes to defend themselves, if not the Muslims. But one of their men had now killed a popular soldier. The strategy had backfired.

That evening, Lieutenant Colonel Ton Karremans, the Dutch commander, reported to his superiors in Sarajevo and Zagreb that the Serb attacks on his observation posts "must be regarded as part of an attempt to take possession of the Jadar valley"—the southern edge of the safe area. "The fact that there are no attacks on the rest of the enclave perimeter reinforces this view." Only the night before, however, Karremans had written that he did not anticipate the "seizure" of the observation posts. Only "in the long term" did the Serbs stand a chance of "neutralizing" the Muslims. In the short term, he had predicted, "due to a shortage of infantry, the [Serbs] will not be able to seize the enclave."

Although he had sent thousands more men over the Bajina Basta Bridge, General Mladic had held them back from Srebrenica, both to disguise his immediate intentions and to keep them in reserve for the operation's "second phase." So far perhaps two thousand fresh troops had gathered around Srebrenica; Arkan's Tigers, Drina Wolves, mercenaries and irregulars from Greece, Germany, and Russia, as well as members of Milosevic's deeply feared paramilitary police, who had had a central part in the brutal "cleansing" of Zvornik in the first weeks of the war. By now a total of perhaps three to four thousand Serbs had mustered close around Srebrenica—which was, as Chuck Sudetic points out, "far fewer than the number a prudent commander would throw into a battle against five thousand men, the number of Muslims estimated to have guns in the 'safe area.'" Mladic's aims were clearly limited; certainly he could not be planning to take Srebrenica itself.

Still, the Muslims were worried. Friday night, July 7, the Serbs had bombarded Srebrenica with 275 shells, forcing the people to spend the night in basements or any other shelter they could find. The day before, Ramiz Becirovic, the Muslim military commander—a cautious middle-aged man with none of Naser Oric's bravado or charisma—had demanded that the United Nations commander allow the Muslims to take back their two tanks and few other heavy weapons; Karremans, judging such a step premature, had refused. Now Karremans offered to let the Muslims have the arms, and Becirovic refused: he wanted to make it clear that it was the responsibility of the "blue helmets" to defend Srebrenica. "We don't want to take the weapons," he said. "Why don't you call for air strikes?"

When the Muslims had asked the same question after the attack on July 6, a Dutch liaison officer had lied, claiming that "no NATO aircraft were available." Repeating this hardly believable rationale would not do, particularly after Sunday, July 9, when the Serbs seized three more observation posts in the south.

Serb gunners also shelled an enormous refugee center built by the Swedes, and set afire a number of

houses in Puzulici, a village two miles south of Srebrenica. Muslim refugees were flooding north into Srebrenica. Serb tanks were slowly moving north. Muslim military leaders were beginning to panic.

Becirovic ordered his men to show restraint in the face of the Serb attack; he feared if the Muslims fired back, particularly with one or two of the artillery pieces they had hidden from the "blue helmets," they would in effect be providing the United Nations troops an excuse to abandon them. Militarily the Bosnians had grown weaker during their years languishing in the safe area. They lacked fuel and shells for their two old tanks, they were low on ammunition, and many of their fighters had no working weapons. Some carried only a pistol or a single grenade, others knives or clubs. Becirovic believed that if Mladic had launched a cleverly camouflaged but all-out attempt to seize the enclave the Muslims' only hope was to force United Nations officials—and Western leaders—to protect Srebrenica, as they had pledged to do. After making such a pledge, how could they let Srebrenica fall?

So the Muslim commander buttonholed the Dutch liaison officer and told him angrily that the UN troops' response to the Serbs had been "shameful." Once again, he demanded to know where the NATO fighters were. What, he asked, were the "blue helmets" planning to do to prevent "a total massacre"? The liaison officer drew himself up. The Dutch, he said coldly, would "do the job their way." By Sunday evening, July 9, Mladic's soldiers were within a mile and a half of Srebrenica.

Karremans himself worried that NATO air strikes might put his men in danger. The Serbs had made sure that their Dutch hostages had telephoned their senior officers from Bratunac: the Serbs had put them up in a hotel, were treating them well. Karremans knew, however, that after the first NATO plane dropped the first bomb, in Mladic's eyes the Dutch would become allies of the Muslims and his "guests" prisoners of war, to be made use of as he liked. For the Dutch still in the field, meanwhile, Mladic had already employed less subtle arguments. Rohde, who skillfully untangles the intricate relations between the Dutch, Muslims, and Serbs, offers a pointed analysis:

The six rockets fired over the main Dutch compound when the attack began at 3 a.m. Thursday [July 6] appear to have made an impression on Karremans. The Soviet-made rockets make an ear-shattering noise before they pulverize whatever they hit. Between six and forty-two rockets can be fired in a volley, which means an acre of territory—the size of one of the Dutch compounds—can be incinerated in fifteen seconds. Since the attack began on July 6, whenever a Dutch vehicle left the UN compounds in Srebrenica and Potocari, shells would follow. Houses outside the main UN base at Potocari had also been pummeled by Serb gunners. The attempt to intimidate the Dutch was working.

Because of the contradictions of UN policies in Srebrenica—which were a direct result of the ambiguous goals of Western leaders in establishing the safe areas—Karremans was burdened with a seemingly insoluble practical problem: although the United Nations was supposed to protect its "blue helmets" with NATO fighters providing "close air support"—which meant striking only guns and tanks that had themselves shelled the Dutch—the Serbs might well respond to air strikes by unleashing an enormous barrage on UN headquarters, killing scores, perhaps hundreds, of his men. Unless NATO warplanes destroyed much of the Serb artillery in one huge strike, then, Karremans clearly risked Dutch lives. Although NATO commanders were entirely willing to send their planes on such large-scale air strikes—the Americans had been pushing for them for months—General Janvier deeply opposed them. General Smith, who was ready to support them, was away on vacation; in any event, he was Janvier's subordinate and, as Akashi had made clear when the three men met in Split, would be treated as such.

Back in The Hague, meantime, Dutch government officials were deeply worried. According to Honig and Both, on Sunday, July 9, Defense Minister Joris Voorhoeve complained to Terry Dornbush, the American ambassador, that his men were "outnumbered" and "surrounded" and that Srebrenica was

"indefensible." When an American representative at NATO headquarters in Brussels demanded that the alliance's planes be sent to strike the Serbs, the Dutch ambassador denounced the proposal as "counterproductive" and "dangerous."

By Sunday night, July 9, Dutch officers in Srebrenica and Potocari and UNPROFOR commanders in Sarajevo and Zagreb could no longer deny that General Mladic might well intend to seize Srebrenica. Some still found it impossible to believe. One of those not yet convinced happened to be General Janvier. To General Janvier, who had insisted a month before that the Serbs wanted to "modify their behavior" and to "be good interlocutors," it seemed incomprehensible that Mladic would take the enclave at the very time negotiations were beginning in Belgrade.

General Janvier and Yasushi Akashi now sent to General Mladic what they called "a warning": they informed the Serb commander that the next morning Dutch soldiers would arrange their white armored personnel carriers in "blocking positions" on the road south of town. If General Mladic's men dared fire on them, General Janvier would have no choice but to order NATO planes in to conduct "close air support" against the offending tank or cannon. Though General Janvier had mentioned certain (unspecified) "grave consequences" of flouting this warning, when General Nicolai began to read the letter over the telephone to Mladic's deputy, General Zdravko Tolimir, his Serb interlocutor angrily interrupted:

What are you talking about? There are no Serbs in the enclave. General, you should not blindly trust Muslim propaganda.

The Dutch soldiers, for their part, did not much care for the idea of creating "a blocking force." When these orders were handed down, one sergeant recalled,

Everybody got a fright. You could easily get killed in such an operation. As far as I knew, we had not been sent to Srebrenica to defend the enclave, but rather as some kind of spruced-up observers.^[19]

These strikingly blithe attitudes—"you could easily get killed in such an operation"—reflect perfectly the ambivalence and moral cowardice Western leaders had for four years displayed in their dealings with Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia. With the refugees fleeing wildly all around them and the Serb shells raining down on the town they were charged to protect, the Dutch officers and soldiers found themselves enacting a sort of *mise-en-abîme*, a precise internal duplication and repetition of that larger plot. If the Dutch did in fact behave less like soldiers than "some kind of spruced-up observers," then this role had been set down for them at least two years before, when the empty "safe areas" idea—a policy without the means to support it—had been proclaimed to the world.

Very early on Monday, July 10, the Serb gunners began a ferocious artillery attack on Srebrenica; driving to take up their "blocking positions," one Dutch squad in a white armored personnel carrier was nearly hit by a mortar round and driven off the road. By nine the Dutch radioed once more for close air support; they were told their target list needed to be updated. When the planes finally arrived, at 10:30 AM, they circled, patrolled, did nothing. Back in Zagreb, General Janvier had withheld permission to attack.

Aware of the firepower circling in the sky overhead, the Serbs now ignored the UN vehicles, concentrating their fire elsewhere. As the weather deteriorated, the shelling died down. The NATO planes returned to their Italian bases. In the Hague, Honig and Both write, Defense Minister Voorhoeve "told the Americans...that he believed that the situation was 'stabilizing' and he would only favor close air support if the Serbs resumed their attack. He opposed 'retaliation for retaliation's sake.'"

By now Srebrenica's market square was packed with thousands of refugees, many of them sitting on their bundles and bags, watching the smoke from their burning houses fill the southern sky. At noon General Mladic's gunners began lobbing shells into the square, killing at least six instantly and sending the panicked crowd running in every direction. At dusk, coming around the sharp, high turn at the southern entrance of the safe area of Srebrenica, about eighty heavily armed soldiers appeared. The Muslims, they knew, could see them perfectly, and they let themselves be seen. The Serbs stood at the gates of Srebrenica. "Looking down from the hairpin turn," Sudetic writes, the Serbs "could see the bedlam in the streets below."

Families had fled their houses.... They carried with them suitcases, duffel bags, rucksacks, and their children. They pushed the lame and the aged in wheelbarrows. Some had cattle and horses and sheep. The wave of refugees burst through the gates of Camp Bravo and people poured in seeking protection from the shelling.

The Dutch, horrified, urged the refugees to head north, to Potocari—precisely what the Serbs wanted, for they wanted to concentrate all civilians; but as Srebrenica's people ran up the street in terror, armed Muslims blocked their path. Becirovic knew—as Naser Oric had known in 1993, when Mladic offered the Muslims "free passage" out of the besieged town—that if the people of Srebrenica were evacuated the United Nations would have no incentive to take action. His soldiers would not permit Srebrenica's people—four in five of whom were refugees who had fled here from elsewhere—to abandon it.

The Dutch commander meantime had faxed Zagreb an updated list of forty targets for "pinprick" air strikes. In his operations conference room in Zagreb General Janvier gathered the officers of his Crisis Action Team. The Serbs had breached the Dutch "blocking line" and all officers present now agreed that "pinprick" air attacks must be launched—all, that is, except one: General Janvier himself. Though Serb troops had entered the southern part of the town, and had attempted, by shelling crowds of refugees, to herd the civilian population north, Janvier still refused to believe General Mladic intended to take Srebrenica. Even now, he observed, the Serbs seemed to be slowing their advance.

Janvier wanted more opinions. He directed his officers to telephone The Hague, Sarajevo, and the NATO base in Italy. At 8:15 PM, according to unnamed Dutch officers, Janvier received a call from Paris, which he reportedly took "in another room, accompanied only by French officers," and after which he argued even more vehemently that Mladic could not be intending to seize Srebrenica.

^[20]Less than an hour later Janvier spoke to Akashi and then made an attempt to get through to General Mladic himself. When he returned he announced to his aides that though Mladic had not been available, he had just now spoken to Mladic's deputy, General Tolimir—the man who the day before had denied that Serbs had entered the enclave—and that Tolimir had confessed to him in some embarrassment that "renegade militias" were mounting the attack on Srebrenica. The Serbs, he said, would need time to get these renegades under control. (In fact Janvier was forced to talk to Mladic's deputy because the Serb commander happened to be at the Yugoslav Army's Tara command center, just across the Drina in Serbia, with General Perisic at his side, personally directing the "renegade" operation. ^[21]) By now, night was falling. The targets would be too difficult to pick out. The planes returned to Italy.

At nine o'clock in the evening a Dutch hostage in Bratunac radioed his fellows in Srebrenica and conveyed an ultimatum from his Serb captors: the Dutch had forty-eight hours to evacuate the enclave. The clock would start running at 6 AM. Three hours later Dutch commanders told their troops that the UN had countered that the *Serbs* had forty-eight hours to withdraw from the enclave and "failure to do so will result in large-scale air attacks."

It wasn't true. Someone in the tortuous UNPROFOR chain of command—Rodhe says it was Janvier's

deputy, General Nicolai—was confused. Janvier had approved only "close air support," "pinprick" strikes, on any tank or gun that opened fire on United Nations troops. To Nicolai's inaccurate message Colonel Karremans added a twist of his own: he announced to a midnight gathering of angry and skeptical Muslim military and political leaders that "between forty and fifty planes will be arriving over Srebrenica by 6 AM tomorrow. There will be a massive air strike." According to Rohde, the exhausted Dutch officer then approached a large map:

"This area," Karremans said, pointing at the wide swath of territory now held by the Serbs south of Srebrenica, "will be a zone of death in the morning. NATO planes will destroy everything that moves."

The Muslims, deeply mistrustful, had no choice but to accept this promise. Earlier that evening, Srebrenica's mayor had managed to contact Alija Izetbegovic by radio. He pleaded with his president for help. Izetbegovic told him he could do nothing for Srebrenica. Neither the Bosnian military commander nor the local commander in Tuzla would order an attack to support the town. Srebrenica's survival, President Izetbegovic told him bluntly, was now in the hands of the United Nations.

Before dawn, on the morning of Tuesday, July 11, Ramiz Becirovic shifted his forces westward, away from the front lines—away from any plausible defensive position—out of Karremans's "zone of death." Everyone watched the skies. Srebrenica had no other defense. All depended on the planes.

They did not come. While the Dutch and the Muslims strained their ears, desperate to hear the planes approach, Janvier and his officers sat in their control center, waiting to hear from the Dutch. Finally, Dutch officers radioed Tuzla, the sector headquarters:

At 08.00, Dutchbat queried the lack of air support. But Sector North East was unable to pass on the query quickly. The person responsible for air support was not present and the secure fax machine was not working properly.... The message got stuck.

The drama had become farce. At eleven the Serbs attacked, moving quickly forward and lobbing artillery shells into the crowd of several thousand terrified refugees who had gathered outside the Dutch compound. Honig and Both quote a Dutch private:

I do not know how many dead there were. It was a terrible sight. Most of us had never seen anything like it. While we were trying like mad to get the wounded to safety, we expected the next mortar attack. We should have been in the bunker.

About this time, in Zagreb, Yasushi Akashi, the UN envoy, spoke by telephone to Slobodan Milosevic in Belgrade. As the later "Chronology of Events" cable described it,

AKASHI DESCRIBED TO MILOSEVIC DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CLOSE-AIR SUPPORT AND BATTLEFIELD AIR INTERDICTION (AIR STRIKES); MILOSEVIC REPLIES THAT TO MLADIC THERE WILL BE NO PERCEIVED DIFFERENCE AND UN FORCES IN SREBRENICA AREA RISK BEING TARGETED BY [SERBS]

As the Dutch brought trucks around to carry the wounded to Potocari, terrified people mobbed the vehicles, hanging desperately from the roofs, the doors, even the mirrors.

Finally, just after noon, after refusing five official requests, General Bernard Janvier of France granted permission for NATO planes to strike at "any forces attacking the blocking UNPROFOR

position" and "heavy weapons...shelling UN positions." By now, however, the first "package" of warplanes had been forced to return to base to refuel.

On a hill overlooking the burning town a stocky, barrel-chested Serb officer in combat fatigues watched the planes depart. The officer, codenamed "Red," picked up a radio. "Down there," he told another officer as he looked over burning Srebrenica with its panicked crowds, "are our worst enemies. Are they fighting amongst themselves?"

"I don't think so," came the reply. "They're just scared to death."

Overhead the NATO planes had disappeared. Now "Red" was speaking to "Ruma." "Move ahead slowly and cautiously," he ordered the officer. "And good luck."

"Okay, see you down there."

The Serbs launched the final assault. They poured mortar rounds and artillery shells down on the town, herding the great mass of people toward the north. Muslim troops had already evacuated their lines, in the vain hope of a huge air strike. After more than three years there would be no great battle for Srebrenica. The Muslims were in full retreat.

It was 4:04 PM when Ruma radioed Red and asked him to mark his location. "Set a house on fire or a barn or some hay for them to see where you are."^[22] The Serb troops, ecstatic with their easy victory, demanded to see their legendary leader, General Ratko Mladic, conquerer of Srebrenica.

Now the desperate Muslim officers, forced finally to admit that the UN soldiers really were going to let the "safe area" fall to the Serbs, hastily met and made a decision. As the great crowds of refugees pushed northward along the road, paying no heed to the wounded and the dying, they could see the Muslim men of Srebrenica climbing the hillside beside the road, heading west. Everywhere husbands bade goodbye to wives, fathers to children, sons to mothers. Srebrenica's men would not wait for the Serbs; they would take their chances on the forest.

As they gathered in their thousands up on the hill near Susnjara they watched the Serbs methodically reduce and conquer Srebrenica. One Muslim observer said:

Tanks were firing.... We just sat and watched while houses were pummeled one by one. Then we saw a column of tanks, armored personnel carriers and different kinds of vehicles...about one mile from Srebrenica.... We could see the Cetniks shelling all the villages in the vicinity. They used the kind of shells that explode into fire.... The Cetniks were shelling exactly where the most people were concentrated. When I was sitting and looking at what they were doing to us, I started to cry and I said to myself that we would never survive this....

As he watched the smoke rise over Srebrenica this man—the Human Rights Watch interviewers identify him only as J.N.—found himself gazing up at a wondrous and grotesque sight:

These NATO planes circled two or three times around Srebrenica and then they dropped a couple of bombs.... I am sure none of them hit their targets. Even while the planes were dropping the bombs, [the Serbs] were still firing their tanks at the towns and villages.... After [the airplanes] left, the Cetniks began to bombard us harder than ever.^[23]

The belated air strike did apparently destroy one tank. From Bratunac one of the captured Dutch officers telephoned a message to his fellows: If air strikes were not halted immediately the Serbs

would not only shell the refugees and the Dutch compound directly—they would kill their Dutch hostages.

Without delay, or consultation with anyone in the NATO or United Nations chain of command, Defense Minister Voorhoeve telephoned the NATO base in Italy and ordered, "Stop, stop, stop!" Akashi and Janvier agreed. Flights over Srebrenica were suspended. Akashi, announcing the fall of Srebrenica at 4:30 PM on July 11, emphasized in the same cable that "any withdrawal of the Netherlands battalion must be carried out through negotiation as the members are in some areas already interspersed with Serb forces."

Already, the Dutch battalion's early evacuation was far and away the prime concern of the Dutch government and of United Nations officials. As the Serbs methodically and efficiently launched the second stage of the operation—as thousands of fresh Serb troops arrived in Potocari, many of them equipped with handcuffs and other police gear, or leading specially trained German shepherds; as all refugees were concentrated inside or around the Dutch compound at Potocari; as General Mladic announced to the crowd that "no one will be harmed" and then delivered sixty buses to begin evacuations; and then, as the Serbs, under the eyes of the Dutch, began separating all the remaining men from their families—throughout this entire, highly organized process, the officials of the United Nations would show once more that notwithstanding their duty to the forty-five thousand Muslims of Srebrenica, they in fact had only one real interest: the safety of the four hundred or so Dutch soldiers. As for the Dutch, unarmed, humiliated, they would serve in effect as the servants of the Serbs; they were outnumbered, powerless: What choice did they have?

"Everybody was afraid," said Hasan Nuhanovic, a Bosnian Muslim who had worked for the Dutch as an interpreter; though he had begged the Dutch to place his family—father, mother, brother—on the list of UN dependents, and though they could have done so, they refused.

Everyone was afraid. The Dutch were afraid. We were afraid, but ...I think we had much more reason to be afraid than the Dutch. As far as I know, the Dutch all returned home safely.

Nuhanovic has not seen his family again.

During the next several days, the Serbs staged an operation of great efficiency. Only days before the commander of Western military observers in Tuzla had concluded in a confidential report that the Serbs would never seize Srebrenica since "liquidation of a registered population of this size would be impossible."

General Mladic's Serbs were about to prove him wrong.

Around mid-afternoon on July 12—about the time, back in conquered Srebrenica, that Serb soldiers, drawing back on the reins of their rearing horses or grasping tightly the leashes of their barking German shepherds, were herding together Muslim women and children and older men, under the gaze of the Dutch United Nations "blue helmets," and preparing for the arrival of General Mladic and his entourage of officers—Bosnian Army intelligence officers monitoring Serb radio communications intercepted between an officer and his commander a stark exchange:

—We have found a place where civilians are concentrated...

—Please shell that place.^[24]

Suddenly the forest exploded in red and yellow flashes. Everywhere earth erupted from the forest floor, mortar rounds sending up great clods of soil along with red-hot shrapnel; bullets raked the

column of fleeing men; rocket-propelled grenades blasted bushes and trees so men thrown facedown hugging the earth were buried by leaves and branches and crushed beneath uprooted trunks.

The column broke into pieces; men became disoriented, fled into the forest in confusion:

Almost immediately we began to hear detonations up ahead.... [A]fter about 700 or 800 meters, we came to an area where there were a lot of dead and wounded. My wife's brother was among the dead....

As we approached a creek we were elated because we thought we would be able to drink some water. But then we saw all the dead bodies, and I couldn't even think about taking a drink.... The bodies were lying all over the place like little pieces of wood.^[25]

The men reached the heights of a ridge and from there they gazed down a long steep slope and saw the road they must cross—and on it green armored vehicles and antiaircraft guns and tanks, placed along the roadside at twenty-meter intervals. Among the camouflaged armor of the Serbs there stood as well two prizes of war: a jeep and an armored personnel carrier painted bright white and emblazoned with the black "UN" of the United Nations Protection Force.

Among the tanks and cars Serb soldiers stood about, some cradling their weapons and smoking, others gazing casually up at the heavily forested slope. A wizened man in a dirty T-shirt stepped forward, raised his emaciated arms, and cupped his hands about his mouth: "Come here! I am here!" he shouts, squinting up at the hillside, and from off-camera—for this moment is preserved, thanks to the Serb cameraman General Mladic could not resist bringing along to memorialize his victory^[26]—we hear a soldier order gruffly, "Tell them who you are with!"

"I am with Ramo!"

"Screw Ramo. Tell them you are with Serbs!"

"With the Serbs!"

"That's it, say with the Serbs... with Serbs, freely. 'Nermin, come down, I am here with the Serbs...."

We hear now a great explosion and see a column of smoke rising from the tree-covered hillside, and the camera returns to the skinny, sickly man shouting and we hear a second soldier's voice:

"Say: all of you!"

"All of you, come! Oo-oooh, Nermin. Come here freely, I am with the Serbs! Come all of you...."

Soldiers in camouflage now step forward and begin to shout: "Come on, guys, come out! Come out with your hands up!" "Come on, guys, come out freely, guys!" And then: "There they are, you see? Tape that." And the camera wheels and among the green trees one can just make out here and there fleeing men, some of them running through open meadows and melting into silhouettes before vanishing into clouds of bright midsummer green.

From up on that ridge exhausted Muslims leaning against tree trunks, or squatting next to the wounded, gaze back down the slope toward the road, where a soldier wearing a UN blue helmet raises a megaphone to his lips. A strange metallic voice reverberates through the hills and valleys:

"Surrender! Surrender! No one will touch you! The UN will provide security for you to leave freely! Surrender! Surrender!..."

As night was falling, thousands of Muslims, weakened by malnourishment and extreme thirst, deprived of sleep, and now beset by inescapable, bizarrely amplified voices incessantly luring them on—Surrender! Surrender!—succumbed to terror and paranoia.

The psyches of the men ruptured. Muslims mistook other Muslims for Serb infiltrators. They threw hand grenades and fired their automatics at one another.

...The soldiers' silhouettes huddled together and meandered through shadows.... The men here were strangers to one another.... Distrust spread like an infection. One Muslim soldier in a camouflage uniform let rip a spray of bullets and threw a hand grenade at a group of Muslim men; another man shot a bazooka and killed ten of his comrades.^[27]

Men shouted and screamed hysterically and had to be gagged and bound. One placed the muzzle of a pistol in his mouth and squeezed the trigger. Another pressed a hand grenade to his neck and pulled the pin, decapitating himself and badly wounding several men around him.

From the road below the Serbs listened. From their armored turrets a few gunners opened fire, peppering the tree line with anti-aircraft shells and mortar rounds that blanketed the dark treetops in a canopy of choking gray smoke. Most cradled their guns and leaned casually against their armored vehicles, gazing up at the dark ridgeline, smoking, waiting. Off-camera we hear voices—"Come on, surrender. Hurry up!"—and here and there Serb soldiers pass through the frame hustling the frightened men forward, prodding them with their rifles and making them stumble. "Come up, come. Come freely," a soldier says, pushing ahead of him four terrified men who are virtually dragging a wounded comrade. "Go, go, don't be afraid. We don't eat people."

A few miles away, meantime, in the "cleansed" Serb town of Bratunac, local men—many of them refugees from villages Srebrenica's Muslims had raided and burned years before—hurried from house to house, excitedly summoning their fellows. "Come on," they said, "Grab your gun and come down to the soccer field...."^[28]

Passing by on the tape of events near the road is a striking image, flickering into focus so briefly one can easily miss it. As a few Serb soldiers lie back in the grass, laughing, checking their pistols, the camera moves beyond them for a moment and there in the middle distance stands a circle of Serb troops, pointing their rifles downward; and for a second, through the spaces in between, we glimpse unarmed men kneeling on the grass, their hands clasped on their heads. There may be one hundred, or two; perhaps more. They are dirty, exhausted; their faces very pale. For that trembling instant one or two look directly at the man with the camera—directly at us. The Serb soldiers level their guns, loom up around them. The faces vanish. The tape goes black.

This is the sixth in a series of articles

Notes

^[1]For the fall of Srebrenica, see my earlier article in these pages, "The US and the Yugoslav Catastrophe," November 20, 1997, the first in the present series of articles, which was followed by "America and the Bosnian Genocide," December 4, 1997; "Clinton, the UN, and the Bosnian Disaster," December 18, 1997; "Bosnia: The Turning Point," February 5, 1998; and "Bosnia: Breaking the Machine," February 19, 1998.

^[2] The buses would this day begin evacuating women and children, and later—to a different destination—some thousand or more men who didn't undertake the trek through the forest, from the Dutch United Nations base at Potocari.

^[3] See "Srebrenica: A Bosnian Betrayal," *Dispatches*, Channel 4/BBC, May 29, 1996.

- [4] For an account of Naser Oric and the Muslim raids expanding the Srebrenica pocket, see "Clinton, the UN, and the Bosnian Disaster," pp. 71-72.
- [5] See John Pomfret, "Weapons, Cash and Chaos Lend Clout to Srebrenica's Tough Guy," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 1994.
- [6] See Andreas Zumach, "Western Policy in Bosnia," *Basic Reports: Newsletter on International Security Policy* (No. 46), July 20, 1995.
- [7] See my "Bosnia: Breaking the Machine" and Roy Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal: How troop-hostage talks led to slaughter of Srebrenica," *Newsday*, May 29, 1996.
- [8] Whether Janvier "proposed [a] deal" remains a matter of some controversy. Honig and Both say rather laconically that they "have found no evidence of such a deal" (*Srebrenica*, p. 159), and Rohde concludes a typically extensive and sensible discussion (*Endgame*, pp. 359-364) by observing that, whatever happened, "the very public halting of the...air strikes as soon as the hostages were taken made it clear to the Bosnian Serbs that they could stop NATO air attacks by threatening peacekeepers." Further, Janvier's new, restrictive guidelines on the use of air strikes, which the general issued five days before he met with Mladic, "may indicate that there was no secret deal on air strikes—only Akashi and Janvier's unwillingness to use them."
- [9] See Andreas Zumach, "US Intelligence Knew Serbs Were Planning An Assault on Srebrenica," *Basic Reports: Newsletter on International Security Policy* (No. 47), October 16, 1995. Zumach attributes his story to "sources in the [US] intelligence services"; in a later piece he writes that a German general had confirmed that he had received the same intelligence "through the bilateral information exchange between the USA and Germany"—exchanges which, as Zumach notes, were at the time particularly privileged since the Americans reduced cooperation with British and French intelligence services in September 1994. See "Intelligence Agencies Fail to Supply Information to War Crimes Tribunal," *Basic Reports* (No. 48), November 20, 1995. For a more nuanced discussion of the role of American intelligence leading up to the Srebrenica offensive, see Charles Lane and Thom Shanker, "Bosnia: What the CIA Didn't Tell Us," *The New York Review*, May 6, 1996, especially pp. 12-13.
- [10] See Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal."
- [11] See "Srebrenica: A Bosnian Betrayal," *Dispatches*.
- [12] See Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal."
- [13] See "Srebrenica: A Bosnian Betrayal," *Dispatches*.
- [14] For the quotation of the "White House aide," see Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal." For the Vershbow and Delic quotations, see Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (Penguin, 1997), pp. 352 and 346.
- [15] See Antun Masle, "Interview with Bosnian Government Army General Joyann Diviak, an ethnic Serb from Sarajevo, and Number Two in the military hierarchy," "GLOBUS" (Zagreb weekly, No. 234), June 2, 1995.
- [16] See Andreas Zumach, "New Evidence Further Implicates France in Fall of Srebrenica," *Basic Reports*, February 11, 1997.
- [17] See Rohde, *Endgame*, pp. 127-128.
- [18] See Stephen Kinzer, "Bosnian Muslim Troops Evade UN Force to Raid Serb Village," *The New York Times*, June 27, 1995.
- [19] Both quotations are drawn from Honig and Both, pp. 15 and 14.
- [20] See Andreas Zumach, "New Evidence Further Implicates France in Fall of Srebrenica."
- [21] See Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal."
- [22] These intercepts from Bosnian intelligence are drawn from Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal."
- [23] See "The Fall of Srebrenica and the Failure of UN Peacekeeping," *Human Rights Watch/Helsinki Report* (Vol. 7, No. 13), October 1995, pp. 13-14.
- [24] Gutman, "UN's Deadly Deal."
- [25] "The Fall of Srebrenica and the Failure of UN Peacekeeping," p. 30.
- [26] Quotations and descriptions following are drawn from the "Petrovic video," an hour or so of material photographed by Zoran Petrovic of Belgrade's "Studio B" shot in and around Srebrenica on July 11-14, 1995.
- [27] See Chuck Sudetic, "Don't Shoot the Piano Player," Part Six of *Blood and Vengeance*.

[28] See Sudetic, *Blood and Vengeance*, Part Six.

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