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CANADIAN FORCES COLLEGE / COLLÈGE DES FORCES CANADIENNES  
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EXERCISE/EXERCICE NEW HORIZONS

**A FLAWED POLICY: SAFE AREAS IN BOSNIA**

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*This paper examines the United Nations policy of establishing safe areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the tragic conflict of the early 1990s. It starts from a premise that the post Cold War world brought challenges for which the Western world and the United Nations were ill-prepared. The central argument of the paper is that the policy of safe areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina was flawed in both conception and execution. The undeniable proof of this argument is the tragedy that befell the safe area of Srebrenica whereby the Bosnian Serb Army overran a Dutch United Nations Battalion and proceeded to ethnically cleanse the Muslim enclave with virtually no resistance from the United Nations. The paper first looks at the evolution of the safe area policy arguing that its final iteration owes more to accident than to design. Next, the mechanisms available to the United Nations for the enforcement of the policy are examined with the conclusion that no real means or will existed to truly ensure the safety of the designated areas. A brief look at the fall of Srebrenica follows in order to highlight the central argument of the paper.*

The final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century started with a promise of a ‘New World Order’ wherein the conflicts of the previous nine decades would be left behind. The Cold War had ended and the United States had emerged as the sole global superpower. Standing for basic human rights and democracy, the United States had started the decade by leading a coalition to liberate Kuwait from an invasion by Iraq. Subsequently, the United Nations passed an unprecedented resolution whereby intervention would be authorized into the internal affairs of a sovereign state against its wishes by deploying forces into Northern Iraq to protect the Kurds. International peace and security appeared certain in this new order.

Events conspired quickly against this new sense of optimism. Somalia, Rwanda and Yugoslavia erupted in savage internal disintegration leaving the Western governments and the United Nations frantically searching for the correct response. Images of butchery were flashed routinely into the living rooms of Europe and North America thereby increasing the pressure for governments to act. The disastrous result in Somalia for the United States in 1993 left their administration reluctant to similarly commit with the same resolve to similar conflicts elsewhere. Europe, trying to come to terms with a reunified Germany and the Maastricht process, vacillated internally sending mixed signals through respective foreign policies.<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop, Yugoslavia, perched in Europe’s backyard, edged toward disaster after the fall of communism. Failing to heed the revival of nationalistic sentiment in the Balkans, Germany stoked the fire by recognizing Slovenia and Croatia as independent from the central government of Federal

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<sup>1</sup> Metta Spencer, ed, *The Lessons of Yugoslavia*, (New York: Elsevier Science Inc, 2000), p. 148.

Yugoslavia. Bosnia-Herzegovina (Bosnia), a predominantly Muslim state with a Muslim government, faced the dilemma of Serbian rule from Belgrade and felt it had no other choice but to also declare its independence. The fate of Bosnia was thus sealed as it found itself in 1992 caught between Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic's designs for a 'Greater Serbia' and, to a lesser extent, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman's desire for a 'Greater Croatia'.<sup>2</sup>

What ensued was a brutal four years of civil war that left hundreds of thousands dead and missing, millions displaced, and where ethnic cleansing, rape and torture were the weapons of choice. "In 1992, a fairly healthy and relatively functional society was viciously attacked and sadistically abused. Bosnia seemed to digress into what Thomas Hobbes calls a natural state of war. The only cardinal virtues were force and fraud. Might was right. The world watched, and, the world abetted this process."<sup>3</sup> The United Nations Security Council felt the need to respond to this humanitarian crisis but rarely came to consensus in terms of the appropriate response. The result was inevitably compromise, indecisiveness, and the dogmatic application of inappropriate peacekeeping principles in anything but a typical peacekeeping environment. Out of this fell the Security Council policy of 'safe areas', envisioned initially by humanitarian agencies as a place where civilians would be free from the horrors of the warring parties. The result of this policy was potentially the single greatest blow to the credibility of the United Nations: the fall of Srebrenica.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Doubt, *Sociology After Bosnia and Kosovo*, (Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), p. 2.

This paper intends to examine the United Nations policy of ‘safe areas’ in Bosnia. While mention will be made of the other five safe areas created in Bosnia, Srebrenica, as the origin and demise of the safe area policy, will be the focus. This paper will begin with an examination of how the safe area policy originated and evolved. This analysis will follow the evolution of the initial Security Council safe area resolutions in order to highlight their inherent inconsistencies and the associated dissenting views among Western leaders for their implementation. This paper will then examine the way in which the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) enforced the safe areas in order to highlight the lack of clear Security Council direction and international will for the protection of these areas. Finally, this paper will briefly discuss the end result of this policy and the associated ramifications for future peacekeeping missions. The central argument of this paper is that the United Nations policy of establishing safe areas in Bosnia was fundamentally flawed in both conception and execution.

The Western world was split in terms of how best to deal with the crisis in Bosnia, teetering between passive delivery of humanitarian aid and robust intervention to stop the perpetrators of the atrocities. A common opinion regarding the West’s inability to resolve the conflict earlier is their lack of vital interests in Bosnia. Susan Woodward, in her book *Balkan Tragedy*, argues:

The absence of vital interest for major powers meant that they would not become engaged militarily in the war, but the pressure from the media and the public acted as a moral campaign, reminding the world that international conventions and moral law were being violated and demanding that the major powers take decisive military action. This dilemma made concrete the proverbial identification of Yugoslavia – and particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina – as a “crossroads.” It was, but it also was not, a part of Europe. The compromise was to send UN peacekeeping forces to deliver humanitarian assistance to civilians in

the midst of a multi-sided war. The predictable effect of such a policy was to satisfy no one, to build in constant pressure for more assertive action, and to endanger seriously the credibility of the United Nations and peace keeping in general.<sup>4</sup>

Woodward further asserts that the different views toward appropriate response among the major powers stem from fundamentally different opinions regarding the cause of the war:

One view held that the war was an act of aggression by Serbs against the legitimate government of a sovereign member of the United Nations ... This view came to be identified most consistently with the U.S. government and portions of its political and intellectual elite, although it originated with leaders in Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, and, somewhat later, Germany, when the issue at stake was sovereignty in Slovenia and Croatia ... A Second view, more common in Europe and Canada, though not without its adherents in the United States, was that the Yugoslav and Bosnian conflicts constituted a civil war based on the revival of ethnic conflict after the fall of communism. The argument was that communist regimes had kept their populations in a deep freeze for forty years, repressing ethnic identities and freedoms.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, Woodward argues that those who supported the theory that the conflict was a civil war leaned toward the UN mandate to monitor and negotiate cease-fires, based on the consent of parties on the ground. Conversely, those who considered the war a result of Serb aggression were inclined toward the mandate of providing humanitarian assistance to alleviate the suffering of civilian victims, including the policy of safe areas and the imposition of rules on the conduct of war by its monitoring and reporting activities.<sup>6</sup> In the final analysis, however, Woodward contends that:

One does not need to understand the Yugoslav conflict to feel the agony and the sadness of the deliberate destruction of precious cultural and religious monuments more than four centuries old – mosques, churches, bridges, libraries, medieval towns; the generation of children left homeless, orphaned, and exposed to the traumas of hatred and the rape, dismemberment, or murder of their parents; the thousands of women sexually assaulted; and the deep psychological toll on

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<sup>4</sup> Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institute, 1995), p. 273.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

soldiers and their supporters who are simultaneously perpetrators and victims. One does not need to understand the conflict to have prevented its violent course and to bring it to a resolution.<sup>7</sup>

Implicit in this sentiment is that action should have been taken to resolve the conflict before it was allowed to run its course. The split in assessed causes for the conflict were ultimately manifested in the Security Council safe area resolutions, which were rife with compromise.

The safe area concept originated in late August 1992 during the peak of ethnic cleansing and at a time when Sarajevo and the eastern Muslim enclaves, particularly Srebrenica, were under intense pressure from the besieging Bosnian Serb Army. The President of the International Red Cross, Cornelio Sommaruga, introduced the notion when he asked delegates at the London Conference whether or not they would consider establishing 'protected zones' as one of the several options for addressing the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia.<sup>8</sup> The concept of a safe haven had worked in Northern Iraq with the Kurds but the situation there was very different. "First, a victorious coalition had just crushingly defeated the Iraqi army in Kuwait. The guarantors of the safe haven thus did not need to be seen as impartial, nor did they require the consent of the Iraqi government. Second, the safe haven covered a relatively large and contiguous piece of land that bordered on allied Turkey. Forces could thus be deployed and withdrawn. Third, the relatively open terrain allowed for effective air cover of the haven."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to General Assembly Resolution 53/55, *The Fall of Srebrenica*, (United Nations: General Assembly, 1999), p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Jan W. Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 100.



Attempting to implement a similar concept in Bosnia would prove problematic and very few smaller countries initially supported the concept. Austria and some members of the non-aligned movement such as Morocco and Venezuela supported the proposal. The United States and the main troop contributors to UNPROFOR – Britain, France, and Spain – all rejected Sommaruga’s suggestion. Jan Honig and Norbert Both, in their book *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, presciently ask the question “if the United States, France and Britain dismissed safe areas as an ‘unreal exercise’, who was going to establish and protect them? Which countries with troops on the ground would be willing to abandon the UN’s impartiality and risk a war with the Serbs?”<sup>10</sup> Fatefully, one of the supporters was Dutch Joris Voorhoeve, who later became Minister of Defense and, as such, was the person politically responsible for the presence of Dutch troops in Srebrenica in 1995.<sup>11</sup>

The concern with respect to the adoption of safe areas in Bosnia was four fold. First, if they were to function effectively, the safe areas would have to be established with the consent of the parties; that consent, however, might not be forthcoming. Second, the concept advanced by the humanitarian agencies was of zones occupied entirely by civilians, open to all ethnic groups and free of any military activity. Such zones would by definition have to be demilitarized, but no demilitarized zones of this nature existed in the country. Third, whether or not the safe areas were demilitarized, UNPROFOR would likely have to protect them, requiring substantial new troop contributions, which might

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 102.

also not be forthcoming. Fourth, the establishment of safe areas implied that other areas would not be safe, and not be protected, inviting Serb attacks on them. Lord Owen, co-chairman for the International Conference of the Former Yugoslavia later stated that the proposals for the establishment of safe areas were “flawed in concept”.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of these significant concerns, Security Council Resolution 787 of 16 November ‘invited’ the UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Mrs Sadako Ogata, to ‘study the possibility of and the requirements for the promotion of safe areas for humanitarian purposes’.<sup>13</sup> On 11 December, Manfred Woerner, the NATO Secretary-General, received a letter from Boutros-Ghali requesting access to NATO contingency plans on safe areas which until then did not exist. Although NATO ambassadors, with the exception of the Dutch, remained unenthusiastic they felt bound to take the UN’s request seriously, and the decision was made for NATO to start contingency planning for safe areas.<sup>14</sup> The UNHCR had in the meantime finished its own study of the safe area concept concluding that safe areas should remain a last option. According to Mrs Ogata, both the Croats and the Serbs had made it clear to her that they would regard the boundary of secure zones as the front line. The Muslims were unenthusiastic, because they feared it would freeze the situation on the ground.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Secretary-General, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> Honig and Both, p. 100.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 103.

A curious event transpired in Srebrenica on 12 March 1993 which sealed the decision on the safe area concept despite concerns from major powers and international agencies. General Phillippe Morillon, then UN commander in Bosnia, traveled personally to Srebrenica in an attempt to negotiate the passage of an aid convoy blocked by the Bosnian Serb Army. Once there, he not only saw first hand the consequences of the ethnic cleansing which had occurred but was blocked from leaving by the angry Muslim mob demanding that UNPROFOR do something to assist. His impromptu proclamation from a post office window that “You are now under the protection of the United Nations” and “I will never abandon you,” did not please his superiors.<sup>16</sup> “In New York, Morillon’s superiors were angry that he had not consulted them before going into the enclave. They feared they were losing control and that Morillon was pushing the UN into the role of a ‘safe area’ protector: a responsibility that the UN Secretariat was anxious to avoid.”<sup>17</sup>

UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 819 was, out of face-saving necessity, adopted on 16 April 1993 declaring Srebrenica a safe area. Labeled as dangerously inconsistent by Honig and Both, they claim that the “Council agreed on creating a safe area without specifying what the ‘area’ was and how its safety could be achieved. The resolution masked, but did not resolve any of the fundamental differences of opinion regarding the establishment of safe areas.”<sup>18</sup> According to the resolution, the onus was actually on the Muslims and the Serbs to make the area safe with UNPROFOR responsible for monitoring the humanitarian situation.

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<sup>16</sup> David Rhode, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica, Europe’s Worst Massacre Since World War II*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), p. xv.

<sup>17</sup> Honig and Both, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

Following the creation of the Srebrenica safe area, the Bosnian government asked the UN to turn other towns in Bosnia into safe areas. The Netherlands led the support for this proposal which, fortuitously for them, met with greater support owing to a change of governments in both France and the United States. “With France beginning to alter its position on safe areas, the international support for the safe-area concept became considerably stronger than it had been in November 1992.”<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, the now United States Ambassador to the UN, Madeleine Albright, voted in favour of UNSCR 824 despite the fact that her boss, Secretary of State Warren Christopher, opposed safe areas as an unworkable idea. He insisted that air power would not protect the safe areas and that very large ground forces were needed.<sup>20</sup> UNSCR 824 was adopted on 6 May 1993 with Sarajevo, Zepa, Tuzla, Bihac and Gorazde now declared safe areas along with Srebrenica. Through the unpredictable and dramatic actions of General Morillon and despite serious concerns regarding the viability of safe areas in Bosnia, the United Nations now found itself with a safe area policy spanning six Bosnian cities. This policy was created more by accident than by design and reflected the Security Council’s inability to achieve a consensus. Left unresolved, however, was how the policy of the safe areas was to be enforced by UNPROFOR.

A myriad of factors including direction and interpretation regarding the use of force; the limited resources available to UNPROFOR; and the use of NATO airpower affected the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 110.

issue of UNPROFOR enforcing the safe area policy. As will be shown, UNPROFOR suffered from a discrepancy in mandates and resources:

It suffered from “mission creep”, starting with a peacekeeping mandate, to which was added a humanitarian mandate, and then further mandates under Chapter VII which required the use of force, all without the provision being made for the necessary material capability. In particular, the mandate regarding the safe areas in Bosnia-Herzegovina outran the available financial and human resources ... The ultimate discrepancy was between words and deeds. The Security Council made demands of the parties without the means to enforce them. It issued threats without any follow-up, and when its bluff was called, it had to back down. The cumulative effect was to erode the UN’s credibility.<sup>21</sup>

The question remained of how the ‘wider safe area’ policy of UNSCR 824 was to be implemented. A Joint Action Programme consisting of the United States, Russia, Britain, France and Spain formed to address this issue but did not intend to give the areas any ‘teeth’.<sup>22</sup> The result was UNSCR 836 adopted on 4 June 1993 with wording sufficiently weakened that it “exempted (sic) ground troops from the obligation to enforce the safety of the safe areas.”<sup>23</sup>

Key highlights from the resolution include the ‘use of force in self-defence or in deterring attacks’; ‘take all necessary measures through the use of air power, to support UNPROFOR’; and ‘promote the withdrawal of military and paramilitary units other than those of the Government of Bosnia’.<sup>24</sup> This was the first resolution that referred to Chapter VII of the UN Charter without any qualification, which meant that, in the

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<sup>21</sup> S. Neil MacFarlane and Hans-Georg Ehrhart, eds, *Peacekeeping at a Crossroads*, (Clementsport: The Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1997), p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Honig and Both, p. 113.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>24</sup> Woodward, p. 414.

implementation of the safe area policy, UNPROFOR was acting under a peace-enforcing mandate. The Joint Action Programme insisted that the term ‘deter’ rather than ‘defend’ and the qualification of ‘self-defence’ be inserted into the resolution. In effect, “this ensured that there was no obligation for the UN troops involved in implementing the safe area policy to use force against the Serbs unless and until UNPROFOR itself was under direct threat.”<sup>25</sup> Further, the non-aligned countries had wanted the term ‘defend’ vice ‘deter’ but were given the concession of allowing Bosnian government troops to remain in the safe areas as a concession. “By allowing the Bosnian forces to remain, the UN Security Council was symbolically siding with the Bosnian government.”<sup>26</sup> Further, the Bosnian troops were repeatedly accused of launching raids from the sanctity of the safe areas which compromised the impartiality of UNPROFOR. Shashi Tharoor, Special Assistant to the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, commented dryly that “the Security Council resolutions on the safe areas required the parties to treat them as ‘safe’, imposed no obligations on their inhabitants and defenders, deployed United Nations troops to them but expected their mere presence to ‘deter attacks’, carefully avoided asking peacekeepers to ‘defend’ or ‘protect’ these areas, but authorized them to call in air power ‘in self-defence’ – a masterpiece of diplomatic drafting, but largely unimplementable as an operational directive.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Honig and Both, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> Shashi Tharoor, “Should the UN Peacekeepers Go “Back to Basics”?”, *Survival*, Vol. 37, No. 4, (Winter 1995-6), p. 60.

Implementing the safe area policy from on the ground required additional troops and led to UNSCR 844 on 18 June 1993 authorizing additional reinforcements. The Commander of UNPROFOR, Lieutenant-General Wahlgren, had conducted the estimate on behalf of the Secretary-General and concluded that an additional 34,000 troops would be required in order to effectively deter attacks against the safe areas. UNSCR 844 opted for a basic level of deterrence and authorized 7,600 additional troops. Yet by the time UNSCR 844 was adopted it had already become clear that assembling even 7,600 troops was not going to be possible:

A long line of nations refused to contribute any forces at all, beginning with the Spanish. The French made it clear that they wanted to concentrate their troops in Bihac and Sarajevo ‘for their own security’ and that they would not take on a third safe area. (Later the French withdrew from Bihac altogether.) The Americans stuck to the position they had already staked out in May, when President Clinton indicated that the US would provide air support for the safe areas but ruled out sending ground troops into a ‘shooting gallery’. The British government politely informed the UN Secretariat that they wanted British troops to remain within their current areas of operation in central Bosnia. Russia, noting the lack of enthusiasm among its joint action partners, also refused to take part. Subsequently the Scandinavians, who had initially been positive, also decided not to contribute troops. The UN Secretariat was in danger of exhausting its lists. Though the Canadians were still in Srebrenica, the French were in Bihac and Sarajevo and some British troops were in Tuzla, no country seemed willing to replace the Canadians or take on either of the two remaining enclaves.<sup>28</sup>

Apparently driven by the need to do something, only the Netherlands stepped forward to contribute troops in support of UNSCR 844 and provided a battalion to the Srebrenica enclave.

The use of NATO air power, although potentially a decisive means of protecting the safe areas, was misemployed and therefore ineffectual. Two reasons for this were the convoluted “dual key” means of employing air power and the reluctance of the UN

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<sup>28</sup> Honig and Both, p. 117.

leadership to risk any form of escalation through its use. The “dual key” involved approval through the UN chain of command, from Bosnia to the Commander of UNPROFOR in Zagreb to the UN Secretary General’s Special Representative in New York. Further, NATO headquarters in Naples had to agree to the request. Approval from Naples was not an issue but approvals from New York and Zagreb were much less likely. According to Yasushi Akashi, the Special Representative:

We have to be aware of the danger of escalation. In such a tight confrontation, how can you use air power? It sends the wrong signal on impartiality. The use of force in peacekeeping is a fascinating subject, and there are real and genuine differences of view. But what I see is that with force we may pass one checkpoint, but what happens at the next one? And we have to feed close to two million people.”<sup>29</sup>

The issue of the use of NATO air power culminated in May 1995. Then Commander of UNPROFOR in Bosnia, General Rupert Smith, issued an ultimatum on 24 May to the Bosnian Serb Army as result of their intense shelling of Sarajevo. If the Serbs did not begin withdrawing their heavy weapons from around Sarajevo within twenty-four hours, they would face air strikes. NATO planes struck an ammunition dump just outside Pale, the Bosnian Serb capital, on 25 May. The Bosnian Serb Army response was to immediately begin shelling the six safe areas resulting in seventy-one dead and 250 wounded in Tuzla. Smith ordered a second strike the next day and this time the Serbs took more than 350 UN peacekeepers hostage and used them as human shields until they received assurances of no further air strikes. “Images of a Canadian peacekeeper handcuffed to a Bosnian Serb ammunition dump and French soldiers surrendering with

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<sup>29</sup> Roger Cohen, *Hearts Grown Brutal*, (New York: Random House, 1998), p. 258.



white flags were broadcast worldwide.”<sup>30</sup> Air power had effectively become a paper tiger and the Serbs knew it. This important factor combined with an unclear mandate; a lack of resources; the unwillingness to use force in order to avoid escalation; and a compromised impartiality due to the presence of Bosnian government troops in the safe areas conspired against UNPROFOR’s ability to enforce the safe area policy. Unfortunately for the Dutch, the proof of this assertion was to have come at their expense in July 1995.

For months leading up to the attack on Srebrenica, General Smith had anticipated that General Mladic would attempt a new offensive. The Bosnian Serbs, weakened by embargos and stretched by Muslim/Croat successes in other parts of Bosnia, “wanted a quick end to the war with a cohesive stretch of territory on both sides of the Drina as its fruit. Territorial cohesion, for the Serbs, meant the elimination of the Muslim enclaves at Srebrenica, Zepa, and Gorazde.”<sup>31</sup> Smith was also aware that Lieutenant-Colonel Karremans, the Dutch battalion Commanding Officer, believed they could not be expected to put up any meaningful defence of the enclave. The Dutch were convinced that air power was the only weapon available to compensate for the weakness on the ground.<sup>32</sup> Of the 429 Dutch soldiers left in the enclave, only half were infantry with the remainder support trades. Further, the Dutch were low on fuel and ammunition as the Serbs had severely restricted the freedom of movement for resupply and humanitarian convoys.

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<sup>30</sup> Rhode, p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> Cohen, p. 417.

<sup>32</sup> Honig and Both, p. 12.

The attack commenced on 6 July 1995. Concerned about his Observation Posts, Karremans phoned a Dutch Brigadier-General at the UNPROFOR headquarters in Sarajevo inquiring about the possibility of air strikes. He was informed the use of air strikes could jeopardize ongoing diplomatic talks and reminded that UNPROFOR did not want a repeat of UN hostages. He was also reminded that UNPROFOR Directive 2/95 was still in effect. The Directive stated that “the execution of the mandate was secondary to the security of UN personnel and that force could only be used as a last resort.”<sup>33</sup> Adding to the inevitability of the Serb victory was this sentiment expressed by a Dutch Sergeant when the battalion was ordered to occupy blocking positions some days later: “Everybody got a fright. You could easily get killed in such an operation. As far as I know, we had not been sent to Srebrenica to defend the enclave, but rather as some kind of spruced-up observers.”<sup>34</sup>

On 7 July two of Karreman’s Observation Posts were overrun resulting in the death of a Dutch soldier and the crew of one of his Observation Posts captured. This effectively spelled the end of the Srebrenica safe area and it fell on 11 July to the Serbs with only one effective use of air power against a single Serb tank. The hilly, wooded terrain hampered the effectiveness of airpower which, combined with a dithering approving authority, virtually discounted its role in Srebrenica. The Dutch forces, by this time concerned more with survival than their mandate, apparently in accordance with Directive 2/95, were disarmed and much of their equipment confiscated by the Serbs.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 8.  
<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

What ensued was the rapid and systematic deportation of the 50,000 inhabitants of the enclave which included the segregation of men of military age, many of whom were never seen again. “As of January 1997, the fall of Srebrenica appeared to involve the largest single massacre in Europe since World War II. Barring secret labor camps and the Bosnian government massively inflating the ICRC missing figure, Bosnian Serb soldiers systematically slaughtered 7,079 mostly unarmed Muslim men in ambushes and mass executions between July 12 and July 16, 1995.”<sup>35</sup>

Mladic did not release the Dutch battalion until 21 July which effectively provided him with the human shields against air strikes that he required to seize the safe area Zepa.<sup>36</sup> The London Declaration of 21 July had promised that “substantial and decisive” airpower would be used to defend Gorazde but made no mention of Zepa.<sup>37</sup> The town of Zepa, although valiantly defended by Muslim forces, fell without UN or NATO intervention to Mladic on 27 July.<sup>38</sup>

At this stage, the course of the war in Bosnia was nearing a close. Croatia consolidated gains in the Krajina while NATO continued hitting Serb targets through the summer of 1995. By December, the Dayton Peace accord had been implemented and the military mission transferred from UNPROFOR to NATO’s Implementation Force. The UN was now free to analyze introspectively as to the reasons for their turbulent performance in Bosnia and hopefully learn from the lessons of the failed safe area policy.

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<sup>35</sup> Rhode, p. 349.

<sup>36</sup> Honig and Both, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> Rhode, p. 324.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 331.

Encouragingly, a report from the Secretary General released in 1999 entitled *The Fall of Srebrenica*, appears to have genuinely assessed the safe area policy. In the concluding remarks of the report, the Secretary General offers:

I have in mind addressing such issues as the gulf between mandate and means; the inadequacy of symbolic deterrence in the face of a systematic campaign of violence; the pervasive ambivalence within the United Nations regarding the role of force in the pursuit of peace; an institutional ideology of impartiality even when confronted with attempted genocide; and a range of doctrinal and institutional issues that go to the heart of the United Nations ability to keep the peace and help protect civilian populations from armed conflict.<sup>39</sup>

The fall of Srebrenica remains a defining failure for the UN and proof of the fallacy of its safe area policy in Bosnia. The haphazard evolution of the policy was matched by the ambivalence of the safe area resolutions. Even though accepted in theory by member states, none were prepared to provide troops except, unwittingly, the Dutch who do not appear to have had the means or the conviction to make Srebrenica safe. Air power was meant to have been the principle deterrent threat and means of self-defence for UNPROFOR troops. Terrain, the dual key and an aversion to risk, however, rendered this force virtually impotent. The UN peacekeeping mantra of impartiality, matched by the self-preservation directives of UNPROFOR, precluded any thought of decisive action by the UN. Perhaps most importantly, although concerned with the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia, the major powers failed to see any of their vital interests at stake there. In the absence of vital interest, as though the suffering of hundreds of thousands was insufficient, the international community failed to take early and decisive action in Bosnia, something that would have precluded the requirement for the ill-conceived and ill-executed safe area policy altogether.

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<sup>39</sup> Secretary-General, p. 110.



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