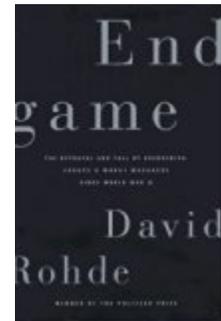


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Rohde. *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica: Europe's Worst Massacre Since World War II*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997. xvi + 440 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-25342-4.

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## Justice for Srebrenica?

The fall of the U.N.-designated safe area of Srebrenica to Serb troops on July 11, 1995 marked a low point for Western humanitarian operations in Bosnia. It resulted in the worst act of genocide in a war that had a genocidal character all along. Of the town's 40,000 inhabitants, more than 7,000 are still missing. Horrific accounts by survivors leave little doubt as to their fate. Srebrenica and neighboring Zepa continue to be ethnically pure as NATO peacekeepers refuse to implement key provisions of the Dayton accords, signed only a few months after the fall of the enclaves. Under the uneasy peace, no refugees have returned to Srebrenica, and the results of last year's municipal elections, reflecting prewar Srebrenica's Muslim majority, are being ignored. It is unlikely that any of the military leaders responsible for the final assault on Srebrenica and the subsequent massacres will defend their actions before the International War Crimes Tribunal any time soon. Political responsibility is even more difficult to prosecute. Indeed, *The Economist* recently noted that peace, if it ever comes to Bosnia, will come last to Srebrenica.[1] This single most egregious act of genocide is unlikely to have any direct consequences except for upon those unfortunates who survived and those who did not.

The complete disregard by Serb troops for U.N. authority, for the threat of NATO air strikes, and for the life of Srebrenica's inhabitants exposed the dark secret at the center of Western engagement in the Balkans. The West was not prepared to risk the lives of its troops (deceptively named U.N. Protection Force) for the defense

of the deceptively named safe areas, even if that meant wholesale slaughter of civilians. This Western failure has already been described and analyzed by astute observers.[2]

David Rohde's *Endgame* takes another route. *Endgame* tells the story of Srebrenica as seen through the eyes of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims. Through the eyes of those present, we see the fall of Srebrenica in all its confusion, chaos, and horrific violence. Rohde, covering the war for the *Christian Science Monitor*, spoke to all relevant eyewitnesses, sought out mass graves in Serb-held areas only months after the fall, was detained by the Bosnian Serbs and was released only after intervention by the U.S. government at the Dayton talks. He wrote the book to present the record of a horrific war crime and has done an admirable job in meticulously piecing together survivors accounts. *Endgame* tells its story in a straightforward chronological manner, beginning with July 6, 1995 and ending on July 16 of the same year, with a further chapter titled "Aftermath" and an epilogue.

Rohde's aim is to record, not to interpret; to narrate individual events, not analyze their place in the broader drama that was unfolding around Srebrenica. *Endgame* tells the story of large-scale massacre in horrific detail and is a powerful indictment of the Serb campaign of genocide. It also exposes the absurd incompetence of many of the Dutch U.N. troops involved, as well as the almost criminal negligence of some in the higher eche-

lons of the U.N. bureaucracy. It is finally a memorial to those who died, a moving reminder of how vital for the future of the country it is to bring to justice those who were responsible.

Rohde's discussion of the wider implications of Srebrenica is somewhat underdeveloped, but his account exposes many general characteristics of Western policy toward the Balkan conflicts. The story surrounding NATO Close Air Support, for example, is one of the darkest aspects of Srebrenica's fall and a truly engaging part of the book. Commanders on the ground and in Zagreb failed to grasp the urgency of the situation and rejected five requests from Srebrenica's U.N. commander before approving the sixth after the enclave had effectively fallen. One request was turned down because the Dutch had made it on the wrong form—an Air Strikes Request form instead of a Close Air Support form. The commanding officer in Zagreb did not inform the Dutch of their mistake and the subsequent negative decision; the Dutch found out when they called to check why no planes were arriving. Rohde's account is chilling because so much incompetence and negligence in one place is hard to imagine, a fact that has given rise to many conspiracy theories. His discussion of such theories in the epilogue is concise and convincing. But it is unfortunate that Rohde, after discussing different conspiracy scenarios, devotes just a single paragraph to the most plausible one—that Srebrenica and neighboring Zepa were tacitly sacrificed rather than sacrificed in an explicit deal.

This is the most plausible speculation since powerful arguments speak against an explicit conspiracy to let the towns fall, namely Bosnia not being important enough for a politically dangerous conspiracy to be launched and the West's inability to agree on what to do there (p. 373). Rohde rightly emphasizes Western disagreement over the Yugoslav wars and the role of U.N. peacekeepers, who were mostly European. It is in the end very likely that both the U.N. hierarchy and some European governments had made matters unnecessarily complicated after their experience with Serb hostage-taking. Having come to the conclusion that the eastern enclaves were indefensible, they exposed their soldiers to disproportionate risks. Indeed, General Janvier, the commander of all U.N. troops in former Yugoslavia, had argued for withdrawal only weeks before Srebrenica fell.[3]

The strengths of Rohde's approach are also evident in his "what if" discussion concerning the absence of Srebrenica's legendary military commander, Naser Oric.[4] It is possible that Oric, whose status in the enclave was

of almost mythical proportions, could have succeeded in organizing stronger resistance against the Serbs. It was the absence of leadership that decided the fate of Srebrenica on the Muslim side, for the town's commanders had to make a crucial decision: to trust the U.N. that air strikes would in fact be forthcoming if the government forces did not resist, as mandated by Srebrenica's status as a demilitarized safe area; or to take matters into their own hands, thereby foregoing the protection they were expecting from the U.N. and NATO.

For the Muslim defenders, the absence of Oric made an already tough decision almost impossible. In the end, they did not militarily defend Srebrenica, counting instead on air support that was promised them by the Dutch U.N. commander. Had Oric been in the enclave, he might have organized resistance, and resistance had good chances of succeeding since the attacking Serbs were rather careful not to incur casualties on their side. Contrary to Laura Silber and Allan Little's *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, the attack was not carried out by thousands of Serb soldiers approaching from the town's southern perimeter[5] but by a few hundred troops that could have been stopped by committed defenders. Rohde is right to draw attention to this point since it places an even heavier responsibility on the U.N.

Rohde is also right to discuss Oric's absence in detail, since it had an important effect on the town's defense and, thus, is crucial to any thorough discussion of Srebrenica's fall. Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, in their otherwise excellent *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*[6], discuss Oric's absence in a brief footnote, saying that it made only a marginal difference anyway, which is not convincing. By contrast, Rohde's record of what individuals thought and decided, and the information on the basis of which they did so, helps our understanding of the larger politics surrounding Srebrenica's fall.

That this cannot be said for all of the book only reflects the limitations of the journalistic method. *Endgame* is a work of reportage, not interpretation, and it should be judged accordingly—as no more than an initial account of the fall of Srebrenica, not the final word, as Rohde puts it. Indeed, it is unlikely that the final word on the fall of the eastern Bosnian enclaves will be spoken anytime soon. This is partly due to the double character of this episode as both the culmination of the Serb campaign of ethnic cleansing and a turning point in the war that led to the Dayton settlement.

The fall of Srebrenica and Zepa marked the culmina-

tion of the Serb nationalist campaign in Bosnia. The patterns of ethnic cleansing are well known as it was part of the Serb state-building project to systematically rid conquered territories of non-Serbs. Srebrenica and Zepa, together with Gorazde, were the last government holdouts in eastern Bosnia, and their fall in the summer of 1995 greatly simplified the strategic situation in Bosnia, a result that was not unwelcome to the U.N. troops and their political masters in London, Paris, and New York. The Serbs had succeeded in creating a contiguous and ethnically homogeneous territory for their future state, an achievement largely preserved by the Dayton accords. *Endgame* describes how the Serb state-building project worked in practice and what it meant for those whose existence was seen as an obstacle to Serb nationalist plans. It is a powerful if often confusing and clumsy account of the genocidal intent and practice of the Bosnian Serb Army and its culmination in the Srebrenica massacres.

The fall of Srebrenica was, however, also a turning point in the Bosnian war. It set in motion an astounding string of events that rolled back Serb control from 70 to 50 percent of Bosnian territory and forced all parties into peace negotiations. The fall of Srebrenica and Zepa and the withdrawal of U.N. peacekeepers from the surviving enclave of Gorazde denied the Serbs their most successful instrument in dealing with Western threats: the taking of hostages. It also greatly facilitated the negotiation of a peace agreement since Srebrenica “simply made no sense in the logic of peace, in the logic of settlement, in the logic of the map.”[7]

The fate of the eastern enclaves—their fall and the subsequent massacres—made the traditional Western policy toward the Yugoslav conflict untenable, leading to unprecedented Western assertiveness and a large-scale NATO bombing campaign in Bosnia. After Srebrenica, only two options were open to Western decisionmakers: military intervention in Bosnia or complete withdrawal of the U.N. troops. But while both would have involved the deployment of U.S. ground troops to Bosnia for the first time, withdrawal and acknowledgment of failure were politically unacceptable. As Mark Danner observed, if one had to identify a point where the half-hearted diplomatic initiatives and hollow threats and straddling of options finally coalesced into a purposeful American policy toward Bosnia, it would be here, after the fall of Srebrenica and the bloodbath that followed.[8]

Thus, the fall of Srebrenica marks a decisive point not only for the Yugoslav wars but also for the postwar settlement negotiated at Dayton. It is this double character

that makes Srebrenica unique. It is also where the problems with *Endgame* start. While its immediacy often clarifies specific points, it also tends to obscure some bigger issues.

The shortcomings of Rohde’s book reflect the complexity of the story’s context—a complexity that cannot be captured well by a purely journalistic account. For example, Honig and Both note on the crucial question of timing of air strikes that the Serbs resumed their initial attack after air defense in Serbia proper notified them that NATO planes were returning to base. Such important details are beyond a purely journalistic approach relying on eyewitnesses on the ground, as the soldiers interviewed by Rohde would probably not know about such matters anyway.

The immediacy of *Endgame* almost forces the reader to live through the horror of Srebrenica’s fall, but it also makes it much more confusing than necessary. *Endgame* begins with the shelling of the Dutch U.N. Observation Post “Foxtrot” in the southeast corner of the enclave. We are told in detail about the thoughts of an individual peacekeeper and his communications with the Dutch operations room back in Srebrenica. This soldier’s musings are no doubt interesting and illustrative of some more general points concerning, for example, the Dutch attitude toward the people they were supposed to protect. But the book manages to tell the story through the eyes of several Dutch peacekeepers without ever informing us of the chain of command in the enclave: it is never quite clear who decides what and who is responsible for which specific action.

But ultimately the problems lie deeper. The question is what can a journalistic account do that analysis cannot? A straightforward report, it seems, should be a reliable source of information that is useful to the analyst. The main story of *Endgame* might, for example, be an important source material to establish the personal responsibility of Serb commander Ratko Mladic, who is placed at different execution sites by several witnesses. But, beyond that, the book’s many confusing details serve no clear purpose.

Even more importantly, *Endgame* does not in its essence go beyond other, earlier accounts such as an October 1995 Human Rights Watch report or a BBC television documentary produced for *Panorama*, both of which extensively quoted eyewitnesses. These accounts are aptly used by Honig and Both in their book, published within a month of Rohde’s; they manage to tell much the same basic story in seventy pages against Rohde’s 420.

Furthermore, *Endgame* often repeats the same statements already made by the same witnesses to the authors of the *Panorama* documentary. While this duplication is inevitable when there are only so many witnesses, it is not entirely clear whether *Endgame*—its journalistic integrity notwithstanding—really tells a more complete story than these other accounts. And the questions that in this reviewer’s opinion are most pressing—Why were air strikes consistently turned down until it was too late? Why did the Dutch commander inform Srebrenica’s leaders that large-scale air strikes were certain to come when that was not the case? Why was Naser Oric not in Srebrenica?—are probably as much questions of interpretation as of fact since the facts presently lie well beyond any researcher’s reach.

*Endgame* is an invaluable document, a thoroughly researched piece of journalism, and a chilling factual account of Europe’s worst massacre since World War II. Moreover, it is a reminder of what the best sort of journalism can do, for it was courageous journalists such as David Rohde who prevented U.S. intelligence and its political masters from covering up the atrocities committed in and around Srebrenica. The media thus forced Western governments to finally face the hard truths in the Balkans and reassess their failed policies.

But in contrast to Rohde’s reporting from the field, the book’s purpose is not entirely clear to this reviewer. While it is reassuring to know that such an exhaustive document does exist, it is doubtful whether actually reading it adds much, apart from detail, to what we already knew. And what we already knew does not necessarily make Srebrenica more comprehensible.

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#### Notes

[1]. “Bosnia: Councils of Despair,” *The Economist* (April 11, 1998).

[2]. See Laura Silber and Allan Little, *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation* (New York: TV Books/Penguin USA, 1996), and James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), reviewed on HABSBERG at <http://h-net2.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?~path=6915881361802>.

[3]. For a concise discussion of the controversial question whether Srebrenica and Zepa were deliberately sacrificed, see Mark Danner, Bosnia: The Great Betrayal,“ *New York Review of Books* (March 26, 1998).

[4]. See pp. 354-357 and throughout the book.

[5]. Silber and Little, p. 357.

[6]. Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime* (New York: Penguin 1997).

[7]. Danner, p. 41.

[8]. Mark Danner, “The US and the Yugoslav Catastrophe,” *New York Review of Books* (November 20, 1997), p. 57.

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