

# Review article

## Perceptions of the war in Bosnia

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**Hearts grown brutal: sagas of Sarajevo.** By Roger Cohen. New York: Random House. 1998. 506pp. \$26.95. ISBN 0 679 45243 5.

**Blood and vengeance: one family's story of the war in Bosnia.** By Chuck Sudetic. London: Norton. 1998. 393pp. Index. £19.95. ISBN 0 393 04651 6.

**To end a war.** By Richard Holbrooke. New York: Random House. 1998. 408pp. Index. £20.00. ISBN 0 375 50057 x.

**Fighting for peace: Bosnia 1994.** By General Sir Michael Rose. London: Harvill. 1998. 268pp. Index. £18.00. ISBN 1 86046 512 9.

These are four very different studies of the Bosnian war united only in reflecting the personal experiences of the authors—two journalists, a British general, Sir Michael Rose and the architect of the Dayton peace accords, Richard Holbrooke. Roger Cohen and Chuck Sudetic, both correspondents of the *New York Times*, have done an excellent job in relating the meaning of the war at different levels, never losing sight of the dreadful human experience that was its essence and that was at the heart of Europe's most ferocious conflict since 1945. By contrast, this gets all too easily lost in the highly personalized memoirs of their Bosnian experiences by Rose and Holbrooke. Srebrenica, the single worst massacre since the Second World War on the European continent, takes on an altogether different and terrifying meaning when we have to confront this horror through the tragic history of the Celik family, distantly related to Sudetic's own wife.

Equally, Roger Cohen's moving saga of four Sarajevo families caught up in the maelstrom of war underlines the fact that this was above all 'a war of intimate betrayals' (p. xvi). Through their extensive contacts and interviews with innumerable ordinary Bosnians, Cohen and Sudetic can see that this conflict, despite its past history, was essentially a product of modern political history and that for most people lethal hatred was the consequence of war, not its cause.

Combining first-class reportage with extensive oral history, these two books are likely to become classics of the Bosnian war. The families whose tragic histories are chronicled at length in these two outstanding books mirror the fate of their communities. Family and community are now scattered and broken.

More than one-third of Cohen's book is taken up with a scathing indictment of Western policies towards Bosnia before Dayton. He is rightly dismissive of those attitudes and of the idea of 'ancient ethnic hatreds', or as one senior British Foreign Office official said to this reviewer in 1993, 'you have to remember they are all cannibals'. Nevertheless, such attitudes lent a thin air of justification to a policy approach marked by hesitancy, inaction and denial, typified above all, despite his talk of a strategic plan, by Michael Rose's tenure as UNPROFOR commander in Bosnia. As Carl Bildt, subsequently the High Representative to Bosnia has noted, '1995 was the worst year of the war since 1992'.<sup>1</sup> And yet to read Rose the year began as a highpoint of success. Not, of course, that Rose was responsible for a policy which stressed containing the conflict and delivering humanitarian aid, and even that only where the Bosnian Serbs allowed. But he nevertheless embraced the idea of peacekeeping which had evolved in an altogether different context. He daily denied the war that Boutros-Ghali had correctly predicted in the spring of 1992 and had for that reason advised the Security Council against the despatch of a UN force. Against the Secretary-General's advice, the EU, having failed in its own endeavours, despite Jacques Poos's unforgettable remark that 'the moment of Europe has come', opted for the 'peacekeeping' course. But with the failure of diplomatic initiatives such as the 1993 Vance-Owen Plan and the 1994 Contact Group Plan, of which Rose was very critical, there was never a political agreement to police. In the circumstances, peacekeeping other than as a short-term measure was doomed to failure. Its death agonies in Bosnia, however, were prolonged for three and a half years before the Dayton Peace Accords of December 1995. It might have been otherwise if military commanders had been more assertive and plainly confronted their political masters with the harsh realities of the situation, as General Rupert Smith was eventually to do in the spring and summer of 1995. As a result, key countries such as the UK and France became prisoners of their own strategy denying to a UN member state the right of self-defence enshrined in the Charter, seeking at all costs to downplay Bosnian Serb violations and atrocities in case this lead to American pressure for an air campaign. As Holbrooke has noted in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*,<sup>2</sup> it was the greatest collective security failure of the West since the 1930s. It was left to Rose's successor, General Rupert Smith, whose own memoirs are eagerly awaited, to show that there was another way forward.

Reading Rose one would scarcely recognize that in late 1994 NATO had drawn up Operation Plan 40104 for the extradition of UN forces from Bosnia,

<sup>1</sup> 'Holbrooke's history', *Survival*, 40:3, Autumn 1998, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Holbrooke, 'America, a European power', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 1995, p. 40.

such was the general recognition outside General Rose's headquarters that the mission was, to all intents, on the ropes. Indeed, it is characteristic of Rose that nowhere does he make mention of 40104. As Holbrooke notes in his masterly study of contemporary diplomatic negotiation, *To end a war*, this plan was to play a significant role in eventually shifting the Clinton administration towards a more assertive and interventionist policy. It hardly took the greatest political minds in Washington to realize that it would not be the smartest thing if NATO's first operation in history was to cover a withdrawal of Saigon proportions. Far better to intervene to secure peace as Holbrooke managed to convince first Secretary of State Christopher and then President Clinton of the necessity, finally, for forceful action (p. 66).

The shocking aspect is that it took the Srebrenica massacre of July 1995 finally to shake the Europeans out of their moral torpor and tilt the United States into decisive action. It was a disaster waiting to happen and might have occurred in Gorazde in April 1994 or Bihac in October 1994 were it not for last minute NATO ultimatums. That this watershed came over three years after the outbreak of war in Bosnia will for ever stain European history in the late twentieth century. The question as to why diplomacy backed by force worked in 1995, but was not even tried in 1992 or in the intervening years, is now best left unanswered.

The tragedy at Srebrenica is the calamitous denouement of Sudetic's *Blood and vengeance*. In at times gut-wrenching detail he narrates the intimacy of killing at close quarter. But, as he rightly points out, 'the beginning of the end for Bosnia's "safe areas" occurred much earlier'. Some would argue, as I have elsewhere, on the very origin of the policy in May 1993.<sup>3</sup> Sudetic, however, traces it to the Sarajevo market-place bombing of 5 February 1994, arguing that the subsequent NATO ultimatum led to the neutralization of UNPROFOR through Rose's short-sighted decision to place UN troops in the so-called 'weapons collection points' (sic) thus handing General Mladic hand-picked hostages. For General Smith, on the other hand, as Sudetic argues, to be neutral was one thing, but to be a supplicant another. He saw, as Sudetic argues, 'that the policy of acting only with the daily approval of General Mladic and his men had sucked the life out of the UN military force in Bosnia' (p. 255). Before Smith there was in effect no foundation upon which to build a durable peace, except on terms dictated by the Bosnian Serb leadership responsible for the war in the first place. Had it not been for Smith's actions in forcing Western governments to decide on withdrawal or imposing a settlement on the parties, then Richard Holbrooke's diplomatic *tour de force* culminating in the three weeks of negotiations at an obscure mid-West air base in November 1995, would not have been possible.

*To end a war* will for a long time be a classic of its kind. Reading at times like a political thriller, it offers a fascinating insight into the extraordinary diplomatic marathon that finally led to the Dayton Accords. Indeed, it is an indication of the

<sup>3</sup> Michael C. Williams, *Civil-military relations and peacekeeping, Adelphi Paper 321* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for IISS, 1998), pp. 23-9.

success of those arrangements that since their signature in December 1995 not a single life has been lost in hostile action in Bosnia, a remarkable and it is to be hoped, enduring achievement. Contrary to Rose's prediction, cited by Holbrooke (p. 218), that the casualties would be higher than in the Gulf War (sic), no one has been killed in action since November 1995. But to achieve this peace Holbrooke had to ride roughshod over the United Nations, the Contact Group and European susceptibilities.

Bosnians do not figure large in Michael Rose's account of 12 months in the country. It is difficult to find one for whom he has a good word, certainly among the politicians. Strikingly, of the four authors reviewed, his acknowledgements recognize not a single Bosnian. Indeed, most of those mentioned are his own staff officers and even here there are some significant omissions. Some civil and military officials are neatly airbrushed out. For Rose, 'the tragedy of the Balkans is that the cycle of violence goes on repeating itself...and the culture of the Serbs stems from a dangerous mix of raw passion and religious mysticism' (p. 5). This gets us nowhere in understanding the Bosnian conflict and characteristically it got Rose nowhere. For his own shortcomings he rails therefore at other foreign contingents, 'chaotic Belgians' (p. 20), the 'media circus... (who) promote images of war and suffering' (p. 9) and, most disturbing of all for a British general, at 'the Jewish influence on current events' in the United States and the 'powerful Jewish lobby behind the Bosnian state' (p. 5). The media are constantly blamed for misrepresenting the situation on the ground. But it was not the media who underestimated the severity of the Serb attack on Gorazde beginning in March 1994. It was after all the media who alerted the world to the existence of the Omarska and Trnopolje concentration camps in August 1992. Moreover, it was hardly the fault of the media that they were shamelessly denied access (by the Bosnian Serbs) to the UN declared 'safe areas' of Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde but they did manage to report from Sarajevo on what it was like to endure siege conditions in a European state at the end of the twentieth century.

Surprisingly, Rose's volume is disappointing from a military viewpoint. Thus we are led to believe 'Bosnia was the stuff from which world wars are made' (p. 17 and p. 142). 'I began to wonder whether the gradual slide into war...in the summer of 1994 might not also end in a world war' (against whom?). 'Nobody wanted a Third World War' (p. 218). That Rose actually believed this a possibility, however remote, is disturbing to say the least. When Nato finally bombed the Bosnian Serbs in the autumn of 1995 it was without any reaction from Yugoslavia, let alone the rest of the world. Then again, we are told, 'most of the officers in the Yugoslav Army had been well educated by their Soviet masters' (p. 198) Rose seems never to have heard of the Stalin/Tito break of 1948 or to know that Yugoslav defence strategy had basically been devised to thwart a Soviet invasion. One hundred cruise missiles are said to have been launched by NATO against the Bosnian Serb stronghold of Banja Luka in September 1995 (p. 238); in fact the total was 13. In apparent blind ignorance of the Second World War, the shelling of Vukovar is said to be the most intensive since the Somme.

His attitude to NATO, here revealed publicly for the first time, is barely believable: 'nor, given NATO's apparent wish to find an excuse to bomb the Serbs, did I altogether trust the organization' (p. 123). Rose seems oblivious that NATO has been the bedrock of UK and Western defence policy for half a century and that without critical NATO assistance the whole UNPROFOR operation would not have been possible. Most importantly, there would not be peace in Bosnia now without the NATO intervention of 1995. Where one can surely fault NATO is that it allowed the UN to try to cope with Europe's worst war since 1945 and intervened only when peace had arrived.

Journalists, Muslims and Jews, NATO and UN officials, were all it seems against Rose. Dinner guests who disagree with him are regularly banned from his Sarajevo *Faulty Towers*; in some cases even manhandled to boot. What this reveals is a complete inability to handle criticism or differing views. In his attitude to local politicians he regards the Bosnian Vice-President Ganic, certainly not the easiest man to get on with, as without a 'shred of human decency'. For all his faults, Ejup Ganic, unlike the Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic or Ratko Mladic, was not an indicted war criminal. Throughout, Rose scarcely maintains a sliver of impartiality referring on one occasion 'to the sheer venality and inhumanity of the Bosnian Moslems' (p. 227). The responsibility for the ethnic cleansing of 1992 and after, Srebrenica, and what the International War Crimes Hague Tribunal tell us of the nature of the Bosnian conflict are, unhappily, all questions that pass Rose by.

There are few who would agree with Michael Rose that UNPROFOR was a success. How is success to be judged when UNPROFOR's ultimate tragic conclusion was the slaughter in Srebrenica in July 1995 and an effective end to peacekeeping as a brave experiment of the 1990s? Today there is no hope of the Security Council establishing a peacekeeping mission, at least of the UN itself, anywhere in the world. In none of the sixteen existing peace missions is the UN central to the resolution of the conflict as it was, or at least tried to be, in Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, Somalia, Haiti, El Salvador and Bosnia in the early 1990s. The number of UN peacekeepers, close to 80,000 at one point, has now plunged to little more than 10,000 and is set to fall even further. Even when 'verification' missions are established, as in Kosovo since October 1998, they are delegated to the relevant regional organization, in this case the OSCE. There is little doubt that the ultimate failure of UNPROFOR has been a major contributory factor in the decline of UN peacekeeping, now at a level where it was in 1990. Nevertheless, Rose's defence is spirited if flawed.

But like Holbrooke's admittedly gripping account of one of the most successful peace negotiations in recent years, Rose's account is unable to rise above the purely subjective. By contrast, Cohen and Sudetic, unlike the general and the diplomat, spent many years in Bosnia and have produced rounded studies of the war. Supplementing their wartime reportage with wide historical reading and hundreds of interviews, these are two of the best books on the Bosnian war to appear to date.