

## Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing:

### An Analysis on the Role of the United Nations during the Bosnian War

#### Introduction

The United Nations (UN) was established in 1945 and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was subsequently founded in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly (Crisp 2001, 169). This investigation will evaluate the UN's structure and domestic limitations in Bosnia in the case of the Bosnian War (1992-1995) in order to determine the role of these factors in the outcome of the UN operation. This case of the UN peacekeeping mission will be considered a success if there was 1) strong leadership, 2) the situation was deescalated, and 3) the afflicted individuals' needs were satisfied. Similarly, this case of the UN peacekeeping mission will be considered a failure if there was 1) weak leadership, 2) the situation remained the same or escalated, and 3) the afflicted individuals' needs were not satisfied. The UNHCR will also be examined to assess its success or failure in managing worldwide refugee challenges and providing humanitarian aid. The UN's refugee agency exists to protect refugees and guarantee that every refugee has the right to search for asylum in another country (Loescher 2001, 42). This paper focuses on the extent to which the UN was successful or unsuccessful as a peacekeeping organization in the case of the Bosnian War. My argument is that the UN was ineffective as a peacekeeping organization during this conflict.

This paper will endeavor to argue that the UN failed in Bosnia, but that the UNHCR took suitable actions to support refugees. The UNHCR was able to provide the bare minimum of water, food, and shelter for numerous victims of the conflict in Bosnia. On the other hand, the

United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) faced many obstacles on the ground and was unable to stop the bloodshed. These arguments will be explored by analyzing the ineffectiveness and flaws of the UN in Bosnia and addressing those flaws by recommending reforms for the UN. This research will contribute to the field of international organizations by supplementing existing research on peacekeeping and proposing solutions to manage this escalating global concern and provide victims of conflict with protection and the prospect of a better future.

This paper will focus on peacekeeping because civil wars and ethnic conflicts have become increasingly prevalent in recent decades. Thus, it is necessary to identify flaws of UN peacekeeping operations in the past to prevent errors in the future. Successful peacekeeping missions and effective humanitarian aid are crucial now more than ever. Domestic conflicts are tremendously violent and increasing in frequency, but they can be brought to an end if appropriate actions are taken to impede the aggression. Ethnic conflicts not only lead to atrocities, such as mass murder, but they also contribute to the global refugee crisis as the number of refugees significantly increases with time. According to the UNHCR Global Trends 2014 report, 59.5 million people are displaced and have been forced to flee their homes as a result of conflict. This is the highest figure to date and it confirms that peacekeeping is ineffective since the refugee problem is growing out of control. This issue is worth studying because it is one of the greatest challenges humankind faces today. Millions of people are victims of conflict and they need protection and humanitarian aid.

This research focuses on the UN because it is a well-known international organization that has a large membership base and access to adequate funds and support from its member-states, which generates the capacity for the UN to be exceedingly successful in peacekeeping and providing humanitarian aid. It is crucial that this puzzle is studied because it will uncover

approaches of how to deal with conflict and undergo effective peacekeeping missions in order to end the unnecessary bloodshed and stop the number of global refugees from further escalating.

### The Bosnian War background

In 1991, the Bosnian population was split between remaining part of Yugoslavia, which was preferred by Bosnian Serbs, or declaring independence, which was preferred by Bosnian Croats and Muslims (Fortna 2002, 164). This combination of discord and ethnic tension triggered a war in 1992 that would lead to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians. The Bosnian War took place from April 1992 to October 1995 and an estimated 200,000 people died during the armed conflict (Kritz 1999, 984). During the war, Bosnian Serbs set out to ethnically cleanse the region of Bosnian Muslims, which resulted in an atrocious genocide. In Bosnia, religious affiliation typically corresponded to national affiliation since Serbs were mostly Orthodox, Croats were mostly Catholic, and Muslims were usually Sunni Muslim (Rogel 1998, 29). Of Yugoslavia's six republics, Bosnia-Herzegovina was the most diverse because it did not have a majority national group or majority religious group. In 1991, Bosnia-Herzegovina had a population of 4,364,574 and 43.7 percent of citizens were Muslim, 31.4 percent were Serb, 17.3 percent were Croat, and the remainder simply identified themselves as Yugoslav (Cruden 2012, 12).

Ethnic cleansing as a Serbian war strategy was first used in 1991 in eastern Croatia when the Serb forces aimed to rid Croatian regions of non-Serb residents by targeting Croats (Ajami 1996, 162). However, the practice of ethnic cleansing was most severely employed in Bosnia after the state declared independence in April 1992. Muslims became the main target of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, and the slaughter was executed steadily and methodically. Citizens who were terrified of being degraded and murdered fled the region. Approximately 2.7 million

people, which formed 60 percent of Bosnia's population, abandoned their homes and took part in voluntary ethnic restructuring by moving into areas where their own ethnic group was the majority (Rogel 1998, 65). Anywhere the refugees entered, they placed a fiscal strain on the host state; the UNHCR endeavored to manage the vast humanitarian crisis in the region (Sudetic 1998, 175).

### The UN's failure in Bosnia

The primary arguments in this analysis include: the UN was ineffective in the conflict in Bosnia since it failed to end the bloodshed; the UN was most limited by domestic factors in Bosnia (the situation on the ground) rather than factors within the UN structure; the UNHCR was the only effective UN agency during the conflict; and the tragic losses during the Bosnian War could have been prevented or greatly reduced if the UN had effectively enforced its strategies.

The failure of the United Nations in Bosnia is evident due to its the inability to successfully stop the violence before the death toll escalated to 200,000. "The presence of the international community has certainly stabilized the political development of Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war, but the UN mission did not affect the intensity of violence during the conflict" (Costalli 2014). The case of the UN peacekeeping operation during the Bosnian War is regarded in this paper as a failure because there was poor leadership, the situation was not deescalated, and the afflicted individuals' needs were not satisfied. Bosnian Muslims were targeted and terrorized because of their ethnicity and the UN failed to stop the massacre. "While the conflict is cloaked in the guise of a 'humanitarian tragedy' (the inference being that all people in the region are affected equally), in truth the Bosnian Muslims are being targeted by the Serbs because of their religious identity" (Lemsine 1995). Innocent people suffered for years as the Serbs raped, tortured, and killed Bosnian Muslims throughout the region from 1992 until 1995.

Although the UN's ineffectiveness in Bosnia is nearly indisputable, the explanation for their failure is debatable.

It can be argued that the UN failed primarily because of domestic limitations within Bosnia rather than limitations within the UN structure. This argument indicates that the UN's ineffectiveness was not due to lack of preparation or inaction, but that the Serbs defiance and the UN's self-imposed obligation to act responsibly hindered its success. The UN is obligated to maintain some degree of neutrality and it cannot blatantly put peacekeepers in a situation of guaranteed harm or the international organization would suffer from a complete breakdown. There were pressures from other nations and high expectations from the international community to protect the peacekeepers, but also to fix the problem in Bosnia. Although the UN's undertakings were undoubtedly not enough, it is crucial to point out these conflicting demands of the international community. It was impossible for the UN to meet one of these expectations without sacrificing the other. The UN was expected to stop the violence, but numerous countries expected their citizens within the peacekeeping forces to be looked after.

The demands from supporting countries placed a burden on the UN and constrained its approach to peacekeeping in Bosnia. With the whole world watching, the UN could not afford to make a mistake; and, although their mission in Bosnia was disastrous, it could have been much worse if there were many peacekeeper casualties. The UN's reputation was at risk. "The focus of the UN mission in Bosnia now centered on self-preservation. This fact alone may prove to be a stark admission that the humanitarian mandate has been manipulated by parties who are unwilling to settle differences through negotiation and settlement" (Marnika 1995). For the future of peacekeeping and the future of the UN, the international organization needed to be prudent with the course of action it chose to take. This ultimately resulted in minimal action that

was futile in putting an end to the conflict. Peacekeeping relies on the readiness of member states to supply troops, and if the UN did not take care of the forces in Bosnia, the international organization could quite possibly collapse and cease to exist in the long term.

"In the same year the peacekeepers had serious problems in Sarajevo, even though they had their headquarters in the city. The shelling of the Markala marketplace caused heavy civilian casualties and UN forces were not able to control the mountainous areas surrounding Sarajevo, where clashes between the Bosnian and Serb forces were harsh and widespread" (Costalli 2014). The UN was also greatly hindered by the topography of Bosnia because the region has restrictive, mountainous terrain. Mountainous terrain requires a high degree of training because one cannot see the top of the mountain from a lower elevation, which can be used by adversaries for concealment. The UN was not as familiar with the land as the Bosnian. In a mountainous environment, limited visibility and rugged terrain can be unfavorable unless one is familiar with the landscape. Serbian forces were accustomed to the conditions and terrain of Bosnia, which gave them a major advantage over the UN forces and certainly affected the outcome of the UN mission during the war.

Many critics of the UN's peacekeeping operation in Bosnia claim that the UN did not take action to stop the genocide, but the UN took action when it established no-fly zones and spoke out against the violence. Nonetheless, the Serbs complicated the situation in Bosnia as they boldly disregarded the no-fly zones, which seriously hindered the UN's peacekeeping operation. The Serbs were uncooperative and they presented the UN with countless obstacles, which essentially placed the UN in a no-win situation. "They violated Bosnia's safe areas (especially Gorazde), expelled Western journalists, abducted UN troops, fire-bombed UN humanitarian relief offices (UNHCR) in Belgrade, and in April shot down a British plane that was evacuating

Muslim war victims for the Red Cross" (Rogel 1998, 36). The conflict in Bosnia resulted from disagreement and ethnic divisions, and the Serbs were committed to eliminating the Muslim population.. The Serbs were determined to rid the region of Muslims and it is very difficult to stop genocide without using considerable force, causing more casualties. Until recently, UN peacekeepers have been expected to use minimal force and, traditionally, only in self-defense. Although the rules of engagement for UN peacekeeping forces restricted the UN's progress in Bosnia, engagement can do very little once the situation on the ground is out of control due to extreme ethnic divisions and religious intolerance. Ultimately, a combination of noncompliance from Bosnian Serbs and discordant aims from the global community placed the UN in an unfavorable position. Therefore, during the Bosnian War, the UN was primarily hindered by domestic factors in Bosnia rather than factors within the UN structure.

#### The UNHCR in Bosnia

The next argument asserts that the UNHCR was the most effective UN agency during the conflict in Bosnia because it was the best UN responder to humanitarian concerns. Although the UN did not successfully intervene in the Bosnian War, a campaign led by the UNHCR supplied humanitarian assistance for the numerous displaced, hungry, and wounded victims (Crisp 2001, 174). On 30 December 1994, Bosnia had been at war for one thousand days and the death toll was at approximately 200,000 people (Costalli 2014). There were also 2 million refugees and 1.1 million of those refugees had fled Bosnia to live overseas (Holder 1994, 42). Unfortunately, millions of Bosnians were displaced from their homes and the UNHCR was not able to take care of them all, but the UN agency was able to assist a vast number. The UNHCR did struggle to interfere during the Bosnian War because it was caught between two difficult choices. "The UN relief agencies were finding their way through a thorny moral maze, into which they had been

cast by Serbian blackmail: by accepting refugees across Croatia's borders and finding third country places, they were merely doing the Serbs' work for them. By refusing to take the refugees, the UN was condemning them to continuing persecution and violence" (Vulliamy 1994, 125). This draws attention to the multifaceted circumstance in Bosnia given that if the UNHCR housed refugees, it would essentially be helping the Serbs "cleanse" the region, but if the UNHCR did not take in the refugees, then the Serbs would continue to murder innocent Muslim civilians.

The UNHCR decided not to relocate the refugees but was able to provide them with basic needs by transporting food and medical supplies. Operation Provide Promise started in 1992 and was a collaboration between the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) to airdrop relief supplies into Bosnia (Thomson 1993). The humanitarian relief operation lasted from 1992 to 1996, making it one of the longest humanitarian airlifts ever implemented (Dimitrijevic and Milanovic 2008, 86). During the course of Operation Provide Promise, approximately 159,622 tons of food, medicine, and equipment were delivered to Bosnia (Jenkins 1997, 42). Operation Provide Promise demonstrates that the UNHCR was effective in providing Bosnians with humanitarian aid during the conflict as it was able to deliver loads of supplies to the afflicted individuals. Therefore, the UNHCR was the only successful UN agency during the Bosnian War because unlike the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which failed to maintain peace in Bosnia, the UNHCR was successful in delivering provisions.

However, the UNHCR did face obstacles because the Serbs frequently made attempts to wreck the UNHCR's operations. "The UNHCR was reporting that trucks bringing aid to the swelling number of refugees across the country were being seized by Serbian irregulars, and aid into Sarajevo being stopped by 'Yugoslav' soldiers controlling the access roads" (Vulliamy 1994,



76). Although the Serbs were posing many obstacles that the UNHCR had to overcome, the refugee agency was still able to airlift thousands of tons of supplies to victims of the genocide in Bosnia. Furthermore, it is imperative to keep in mind that the UNHCR is a refugee agency that must be looked at differently than the UN's peacekeeping operation in Bosnia . The peacekeeping mission is not the UNHCR's responsibility. The UNHCR's focus is to support and provide care for refugees, and in the case of the Bosnian War, the UNHCR was able to successfully provide food, water, supplies, and medical care for many victims of the genocide (Rijsdijk 2011, 2226). The UNHCR's resolve and determination to provide assistance to the persecuted Bosnians is why this paper argues that the UNHCR was the most effective UN agency during the conflict. The UNHCR was dedicated to helping the Bosnians and providing them with basic needs in their time of crisis.

#### Preventing genocide in Bosnia

The last argument in this paper reasons that the tragic losses during the genocide in Bosnia could have been prevented, or greatly reduced, if the UN enforced their strategies instead of offering empty promises. Once the Bosnian government requested the UN's assistance, the UN acted by recognizing Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent nation and imposing economic and political sanctions on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) for its contribution to the violence and for supporting the Serbs in their campaign of ethnic cleansing (Cruden 2012, 84). Regardless of the UN's threats, the conflict continued, and by the summer of 1992, concentration camps and appalling crimes against innocent people began to engulf Bosnia. In November of 1992, 6,000 United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) troops were sent to deal with refugees and war prisoners and to distribute humanitarian assistance (Gouthro 1995). The UN Security Council also made an attempt to manage Serb aerial assaults by proclaiming Bosnia a

no-fly zone. In 1993, the UN set up an international court to put war criminals on trial for their heinous crimes against humanity (Malik 1999, 15). The United Nations also approved a motion to permit NATO to fire at violators of the no-fly zone, and the UN declared the cities of Sarajevo, Bihac, Gorazde, Srebrenica, Tuzla, and Zepa as "safe areas" under UN safeguard (Brunborg, Torkild, and Urdal 2003, 235). Most of these UN declarations were ultimately unfulfilled promises that were not enforced and were frequently disobeyed by Serbian forces.

It is apparent that the UN did not back up their claims with appropriate actions, but if the UN did use military force against the Bosnian Serbs for their transgressions, then the Serbs would have no choice but to surrender. During the conflict in Bosnia, the Serbs were unopposed and free to carry out genocide against the Muslims. The UN did not follow up on their warnings, and this permitted the conflict to persist. This is largely because UN peacekeepers were required to use minimal force and they typically only used force in instances of self-defense. "A traditional UN peacekeeping operation is designed to enforce a peace already established. When UNPROFOR established itself in Bosnia, it was operating on the same neutrality mandate. In fact, UNPROFOR was instructed to view Serbs, Croats, and Muslims as equally responsible for the war. UNPROFOR's role was strictly to protect the aid effort" (Cothran 2002, 24). UNPROFOR's authorization restricted its ability to end the slaughter in Bosnia because the team was unable to use acute force to coerce the Serbs to end the genocide before 1995 and before thousands were murdered. "All parties signed the Dayton Peace Accords in Dayton, Ohio, in November 1995, but by then, nearly 200,000 Bosnians were dead. The accords resulted in the division of Bosnia along ethnic lines" (Cothran 2002, 25).

The UN has been criticized for its restrictive policies of engagement that ensured the organization's failure in Bosnia. UNPROFOR's operation was a major letdown since an entire

ethnic group was targeted, besieged, and nearly eliminated in Bosnia. "Bosnia's war with Croatia ended with the 1994 cease-fire, but its war with the Bosnian Serbs continued until November 1995, when the UN was able to broker a peace agreement. NATO's bombing of strategic Bosnian Serb locations had helped bring the Bosnian Serbs to the negotiating table" (Cothran 2002, 25). It is evident that NATO's attack was central to terminating the massacre, and if the UN had been authorized to carry out strikes against the Serbs, the conflict might have ended much sooner than it did. Ultimately, casualties during the conflict in Bosnia could have been drastically reduced if the UN had employed greater force and backed their proclamations with military action. This would be possible if the UN was authorized to use utmost force when necessary to prevent innocent human suffering, particularly in the case of ethnic cleansing and genocide, where hatred and intolerance propel the systematic slaughter of an innocent population.

This analysis discussed the following arguments and supported each claim with well-researched evidence: the UN was ineffective as a peacekeeping organization during the genocide in Bosnia since it failed to end the bloodshed; the UN was primarily limited by factors outside of the UN structure (the situation on the ground in Bosnia) rather than factors within; the UNHCR was the only effective UN agency during the Bosnian War; and the death toll during the Bosnian War could have been drastically reduced if the UN reinforced its declarations with the use of force.

### Conclusion

After analyzing the ineffectiveness of the UN as a peacekeeping organization during the Bosnian War through the lenses of the challenges the UN faced on the ground in Bosnia, the UNHCR's small successes, and UNPROFOR and the use of force. The Bosnian case of UN peacekeeping operations is considered a failure because the situation was not deescalated and

thousands were killed in the genocide. The accusations of inaction from the UN are inaccurate because action was taken, but without the use of force, its strategies were not enough to stop ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. It can also be concluded that the UN's failure in Bosnia is not attributed to only one factor, but several factors. This paper credits the UN's failure to ethnic and religious intolerance, Bosnia's mountainous topography, Serbian defiance, and conflicting international demands.

The genocide in Bosnia persisted because it was allowed to continue without strong interference from the UN. Although the UN's failure was due to limitations within Bosnia rather than limitations within the UN structure, the UN nevertheless failed to stop the genocide. The UN intended to maintain peace in Bosnia that never truly existed. In a nation where peace was a facade that concealed deep ethnic divisions, the UN should not have taken a diplomatic role, but a militaristic role. During the Bosnian War, the government did not stop the massacre, but instead took part in the violence. The UN was the last hope for the victims and the UN peacekeepers should have been authorized to use force in circumstances other than self-defense. Protecting innocent civilians needs to be a top priority in UN peacekeeping operations; the UN should have conveyed greater concern for the bloodshed and determined early on that the use of force would be necessary in Bosnia.

Internal conflicts are increasingly prevalent around the world. These conflicts give rise to a large number of refugees and thousands of people suffer from the horrific violence. This research is relevant and critical to facilitating a fundamental understanding of violence, war, and peacekeeping within the field of international organizations. By analyzing the case of the Bosnian War, one can identify the role of the UN as a peacekeeping organization and develop an understanding of the advancement of its refugee agency, the UNHCR.

Peacekeeping is imperative to maintaining some degree of order in the world, and most modern internal conflicts require intervention by an international organization such as the UN. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are great tragedies, and UN peacekeeping operations have the potential to deescalate conflicts and protect civilians. This research topic is significant because it will help draw attention to the UN's flaws by suggesting the need for reform in order to help resolve violent conflicts and worldwide refugee problems in the future.

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