

The Srebrenica Massacre as Paradigmatic Media Spin

By [Stephen Karganovic](#)
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This year the twentieth anniversary of the massacre in Srebrenica is being observed. On July 11 a huge spectacle will take place at the Srebrenica Memorial center specially constructed for that purpose. It will feature the presence of most of the rather insignificant individuals purporting to be political leaders in the region and the Western-dominated world. Their speeches, which never vary substantially, will be infused with the predictable platitudes.

I propose to deal with some aspects of the Srebrenica narrative from the standpoint of the media. As I am sure there is no need to remind you, after two decades of conditioning at the mention of the word "Srebrenica" two memes immediately come to your mind: "genocide" and "8.000 executed men and boys." If I am right, and if I have successfully read your minds even though this is the first time I have met most of you, that means that the Srebrenica media spin has been a resounding success. I would like to offer a few reflections on how that came about and why.

First, we should put the issue of Srebrenica in some sort of general framework. As with most unspontaneous events, special operations mounted to achieve some political effect, Srebrenica is a purposely a multilayered affair. As an American scholar who has devoted an inordinate amount of time to Srebrenica, Prof. Edward Herman, has put it, far from being a straightforward story "Srebrenica symbolizes the triumph of propaganda at the end of the twentieth century." To this sobering injunction we can add the extraordinary thought recently expressed by judge Jean-Claude Antonetti of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the dissenting opinion he wrote in the Tolimir case, which focused on Srebrenica:

"If the relatives of those killed were to ask me who ordered the killing of their dear ones and why, I would not know what answer to give them."

This statement is an amazing admission of opacity, considering the fact that ICTY has been in existence for over twenty years, has been collecting evidence about Srebrenica since 1996, for at least nineteen, and has convicted over a dozen defendants of involvement in the Srebrenica affair, meeting out harsh sentences, including life imprisonment.

Secondly, I suggest therefore that we try to find the most suitable form to organize the information about the events in Srebrenica that we have, actually or potentially. I propose

that that we use the “levels of information” model advanced by the distinguished British scholar, Prof. Anthony Sutton. His typology is rather nicely applicable to Srebrenica.

On the first level, we face the official version of the politically significant event. That is the portrayal of the facts in the form which is the most compatible with interests of powerful or influential forces which benefit in certain ways from the dissemination of a certain narrative, or at least reduce damage to their interests to a minimum. The official narrative usually consists of a carefully filtered selection of facts and a few oversimplified assertions (as, in the matter of Srebrenica, the ceaseless repetition of the mantras of “genocide” and “8.000 executed men and boys”). This approach aims principally at the emotions and perception management, and it is devoid of any critical component.

The first level, therefore, consists of those elements that power centers which control the flow of information consider useful for the public to find out. As Prof. Sutton puts it with English dry humor, any resemblance to the truth is unintentional.

The second level of approaching the truth of what actually happened has to do with a critical assessment of the official narrative. Assertions from the first level are challenged, but still mainly within the factographic confines set by the creators of the official narrative. Depending on the complexity and controversy of the research topic, in order to invest the official narrative with a semblance of credibility *nolens volens* a certain amount of authentic information is released, albeit selectively torn out of context and tendentiously presented. At this stage, therefore, the critical assessment of the evidence is mainly in the form of an immanent critique.

The sustainability of the official conclusions and supporting data base is checked against the evidence, or the premises, made available to us by the same official sources. Inconsistencies, lacunae, and discrepancies between the official conclusions and the evidence upon which they allegedly rest can be very informative and useful for the critical project. They may have very significant implications for the credibility of the official “truth” of the matter. Insights gained by the use of this negative methodology, the only one possible under the circumstances, can be very significant even when all the limitations are taken into account.

However, they are more likely to answer questions such as “what didn’t, or couldn’t have happened” in the given case rather than illuminating the more important questions of “what did actually happen, how, and why?”. So we come back now to the amazing statement of judge Antonetti that I quoted a bit earlier. Immanent critique may put the official narrative in reasonable doubt, and it might even serve as a sufficient justification for rejecting it altogether. But that does not help to achieve that ultimate goal of the research project, which is to satisfy our desire to learn the final and all-encompassing truth of the matter.

For that we must rely on the third level. The more complex and sensitive the underlying issue, the longer this level of information remains inaccessible to those who seek exhaustive explanations and final answers. It consists of a broad and unfiltered spectrum of new, original, and relevant data that lead to insights and conclusions immensely more significant than those reached by the method of negative criticism. At this level we can finally understand the background, context and real motives of the event, gaps from the second level are filled, and the seeming contradictions generated by fragmentary data are resolved.

Here we are dealing with a qualitatively new sort of facts which promote deeper insights.

Such facts not only tend to discredit the official narrative but – and potentially this is far more dangerous – they might explain and substitute it altogether, which is why facts at this level are usually kept under a long-term embargo. Much key Srebrenica evidence, including aerial photos, are under lock and key for the next several decades. Third level data are extremely difficult to access, including information what archives or storage facilities they are kept in.

The distinguishing feature of the third level information is that it frequently radically changes the perception projected at the first level, and significantly supplements and contextualizes the insights gained at the second level.

The current status of Srebrenica research is that it is at the second level of information. We do not know where the bunkers of the third level are located and even if we were to find out they are for the moment impenetrable.

Before I briefly discuss the results of some empirical research into the media portrayal of Srebrenica, I want to point out two important reasons why the media projection is so fiercely defended and virtually immune to all criticism at the mainstream level.

First, and I am using Diana Johnstone's simple and incisive concept of the "uses of Srebrenica," the official narrative serves the Bosniak political establishment in Sarajevo as a mobilization tool and national identity building device. "Srebrenica genocide," based on a common threat, shared suffering, and shared enemy, all very primitive but effective mechanisms for creating and consolidating social cohesion, is the founding myth of the recently engineered Bosniak Muslim identity. That is why the Sarajevo leadership cannot compromise on it, because were it to do so the artificial barriers it is constructing to wall its constituency off from Orthodox neighbors, thus maximizing control over it, might begin to founder and dissolve under the obvious weight of common ethnicity, common language, mostly common mentality and customs, and largely common history. The self-perpetuating governing class in Sarajevo might find itself displaced and irrelevant if commonalities were to be recognized and given due weight. That is why they insist on every possible distinction, real or contrived, and Srebrenica genocide of Muslims allegedly at the hands of Orthodox Serbs is their argument-in-chief.

The second important party keenly interested in the perpetuation of the first level Srebrenica narrative is what I would broadly define as the Atlanticist alliance, including "all the usual suspects", the US political establishment, NATO, EU, and the rest of that power block. There is much evidence that the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, on a far more modest scale than came ultimately to be claimed, was improvised provide cover for the Western-organized and backed Croatian Operation Storm which came the following month, in August 1995, on the heels of the Serb takeover of Srebrenica. US ambassador in Zagreb at the time, Peter Galbraith somewhat significantly admitted several years ago that "without Srebrenica there would not have been Operation Storm."

A careful study of the chronology of events coupled with official utterances suggests that several years passed before Western policy makers realized the additional potential of Srebrenica as a rationale for "humanitarian interventions" against sovereign states, or the now famous doctrine of R2P. The first application of this doctrine, with the moralistic cry of "not another Srebrenica" was Kosovo in 1999, where the Albanian minority was supposedly in danger of being exterminated by the Serbs. More applications using the same invented

pretext followed in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein was allegedly at the point of exterminating Kurds, then in Libya and Syria, as all will easily recall. In each of these campaigns mounted to destroy governments unfriendly to Western political interests emotional reliance on the level one misrepresentation of what happened in Srebrenica was the motivating factor and relentless media promotion was the key element in its political success.

Here, it is important to note two things. First, this alliance between political Sarajevo and Western interests with regard to Srebrenica is not of a principled, but of a purely tactical nature. Their interests overlap at the point we call "Srebrenica." Secondly, the partners are anything but equal, at least in the arena that matters, which is media control. Without the logistical support of Western controlled media, Sarajevo would have managed to achieve very little - most likely nothing - in the way of imposing the official, level one Srebrenica narrative on most of the world.

From this, there follows a corollary conclusion which is very important. When the strategic picture changes and the Western factor no longer perceives it in its interest to continue placing its media facilities at Sarajevo's disposal to propagate the "genocide" and "8,000 men and boys" Srebrenica narrative, the level one story will collapse. Unfortunately, with its legendary shortsightedness Sarajevo does not seem to have prepared a Plan B to accommodate that scenario. But when and if that happens, depending on the geopolitical context of the falling out, Sarajevo must brace itself for more unpleasant developments if level three data are made accessible and, as a result, the entire Srebrenica edifice comes crashing down.

Finally, before I draw some broad conclusions, I want to present some empirical evidence about media treatment of Srebrenica. Two significant surveys have been conducted, one of the American media by Prof. Edward Herman, and the other of the British media by Philip Hammond.

In his essay "U.S. Media Coverage of Srebrenica," Prof. Herman reviews and analyses 95 print media articles that had "Srebrenica" in their title, published in six major U.S. media outlets between April 1992 and November 2004. Sixty three of the articles were in the two leading newspapers, the New York Times (28) and Washington Post (35), ten were in the Boston Globe, seven in the Christian Science Monitor, four in Newsweek, and in USA Today. Seventy one of the 95 articles were published in mid-July 1995 or after and therefore deal with the events in and around Srebrenica when the "Srebrenica massacre" took place. The remaining 24, of which 14 were in the Washington Post, center in an earlier Bosnian Serb siege of Srebrenica in the Spring of 1993.

The results of the survey show that, as Prof. Herman, puts it,

"the main features of these articles are their formulaic character, their uniform adherence to a quickly established Western party line, their limited use of sources, and their failure to provide context or ask challenging (and sometimes obvious) questions."

Specifically, twenty-one of the 71 that date from mid-July 1995, refer with only minor variation to the killing as "the worst massacre in Europe since World War II," and a majority give a figure for the missing or executed "Muslim men and boys" ranging from 2,500 to 8,500. The smaller figure was given early but was quickly dropped in favor of 7,500 - 8,500,

which was based on initial and unverified Red Cross estimates of people claimed to be missing. That contrasts starkly with the eventual downward adjustment in claimed numbers of people killed in 9/11 and in Croatia's Krajina region in August 1995, as well as the more recent claims of civilian deaths in the Darfur region of Sudan which were radically revised downward once the apparent political goal of separating that oil rich province from the rest of Sudan had been achieved. The evidence that many Muslims were killed in fighting while conducting a military style breakout from Srebrenica and that many had made it safely to Bosnian Muslim controlled territory was largely ignored. Also ignored was the failure to find bodies and to provide forensic evidence supporting anything like 7,500 to 8,500 execution figures.

In his survey "U.K. Media Coverage of Srebrenica" Philip Hammond considers reports in four major British publications and reaches remarkably similar general conclusions about "party line" reporting on Srebrenica by the media in Great Britain. However, he found two interesting stylistic difference between American and British accounts. In Great Britain, contrary to the picture of one-sided, genocidal attack by Serbs against defenseless Muslims, which emerged later, there was initially some reporting of fighting between Serb and Muslim forces around Srebrenica which may have resulted in legitimate casualties. Another difference Hammond notes is "how often Srebrenica is presented, less as a defeat for the Bosnian Muslims, than as a defeat for the West" and he terms that "striking." Some additional differences identified by Hammond are that initially in Britain that attention to context seems to have persisted longer, although it definitely started to decline after the initial period in mid-July 1995, and estimates of the missing and presumed dead varied widely and developed into an orthodoxy only slowly over a period of weeks.

Shifting the focus of the British survey from 1995 to 2001, Hammond finds three major points of interest: first, the role of ICTY in interpreting what happened in Srebrenica is heavily stressed; second, related to this, Srebrenica is now unequivocally labeled as "genocide", with frequent parallels drawn with the Second World War; and, third, the alleged proof of the massacre is mentioned by referring to the corpses in the morgue in Tuzla, where they were collected prior to burial.

Hammond finds that one of the most notable features of coverage of Bosnian Serb operations around Srebrenica is that the event is rarely understood or explained by the British media in the context of civil war. One indication of that is the negligible number of articles that mention the local Srebrenica Bosnian Muslim commander Naser Orić. Between 1995 and 2004, Orić is mentioned in only nine articles in four papers. The predominant image projected of him is of a Robin Hood character, ignoring allegations of his role in organizing assaults and committing atrocities against Serb civilians in the surrounding villages.

Hammond concludes that whatever initial efforts to achieve reportorial balance may have been made, by late July 1995 British "coverage had already descended to the superficial and the biased." From that point on, British reporting tended to merge with the American, stressing an uncritical, party line account of what happened in Srebrenica.

We are now ready to draw several conclusions about Western media coverage of Srebrenica. Its paradigmatic nature remains to be more fully confirmed by a comparative study including a survey of Western media treatment of some other core narratives of the modern times.

The first conclusion that is suggested (and remains to be tested in relation to other narratives of comparable significance) is that the more politically important the narrative, the more intense is the media solidarity behind its fundamental premises. Srebrenica in that sense is clearly very important, as explained, as the seeming rationale for various Western political projects and operations.

Second, the media phalanx around the Srebrenica narrative suggests that there is very little space for autonomous reporting or critical analysis in contemporary Western journalism. Western media versions of the downing of MH17 or the alleged Russian invasion of the Ukraine, which show very little variation from the narratives put forward by official government agencies are stark evidence of this distressing fact which one would sooner expect to find in a totalitarian than in a democratic society.

Third, there is a clear willingness with regard to Srebrenica, if not yet to other protected core narratives that have been raised to the level of orthodoxy, when everything else fails to resort to repression in order to keep the party line inviolate. Bosnian Muslim spokesmen, possibly acting as Western proxies, have called for the imposition of legal prohibitions on “denying genocide” in Srebrenica and for criminal punishment of the offenders. Under strong political pressure the European Parliament and parliaments of several European countries have voted resolutions officially affirming the status of Srebrenica as genocide. That cannot but have a chilling effect on all who might consider challenging the basic premises of what is increasingly becoming a protected and unquestionable narrative, exempted from independent inquiry.

A disturbing example of the use of repression as a tool for enforcing a particular vision of what happened in Srebrenica was the damage suit filed in Switzerland several years ago against a local weekly in the canton of Vaud, *La Nation*, for publishing a series of articles which questioned some elements of the officially prescribed version of what happened in Srebrenica. Switzerland does not have a Srebrenica denial law, but the plaintiffs got around that by invoking article 261 bis of the Swiss Criminal Code which prohibits racial and ethnic discrimination and public expression of support for genocide. The Swiss Code, however, does not prohibit free inquiry into such matters.

The ultimate legal outcome of this lawsuit against a small and vulnerable Swiss cantonal newspaper is of little importance compared to the ominous message its filing sends. It is a warning that getting out of line on Srebrenica (what other protected core issues of the Western political narrative are going to follow?) carries a price and may involve a media outlet in costly litigation where even an ultimate legal victory amounts to a net loss. It is an exercise in intimidation. Instead of running the risks, many, if not most, media organizations will prefer to play it safe and toe the party line.

Our NGO, Srebrenica Historical Project, has thoroughly investigated all aspects of the Srebrenica massacre, we have assisted with the preparation of Srebrenica court cases, and testified as expert witnesses. Though necessarily incomplete and still at what I have called “information level two”, that factual picture makes it clear that the media narrative we have discussed beyond all doubt is not just erroneous. It is a deliberate spin in the service of a political agenda.

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