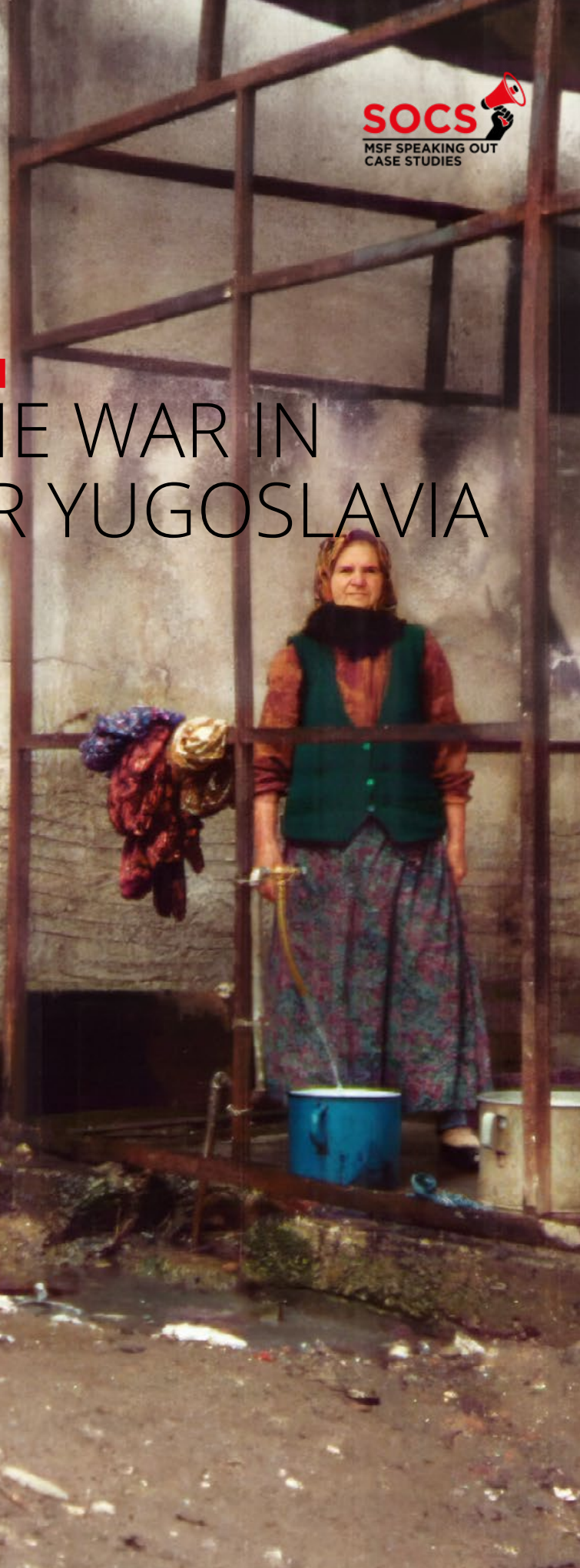


SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

MSF AND THE WAR IN THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA 1991-2003

LAURENCE BINET



The summary lays out the context and the content of MSF's public statements and the key dilemmas they sought to address.

It is part of a more detailed case study that reconstructs the events using excerpts from documents taken from the MSF archives or from media coverage at the time, as well as interviews with MSF personnel.

You can download the full case study on our website:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies

The MSF Speaking Out Case Studies is a project of MSF International. All our materials are available open access in English and French

SUMMARY

After the dismantling of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia¹ experienced separatist tensions of its own .

These tensions were exacerbated by the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, President of the Republic of Serbia, who sought to create a 'Greater Serbia' encompassing all regions populated by Serbian minorities. The federal army fell under the control of Serbia and supported pro-Serbian militias operating in the Croatian region of Krajina and Eastern Bosnia².

The Serbian Republic of Krajina, in April 1991, then the Republic of Bosnian Serbs (Republika Srpska) in January 1992, proclaimed their independence without any constitutional basis.

In eastern Bosnia, the Bosnian Serb militias conducted a policy they qualified as ethnic cleansing by using terror to expel all non-Serbian minorities from the new republic. This policy affected Bosnian Muslims in particular, who took refuge in Muslim-majority cities in eastern Bosnia. These cities became de facto enclaves that were overcrowded, besieged and regularly bombed by Bosnian Serb forces.

In September 1991, the European Community (EC) dispatched civilian 'White Helmets', powerless observers of multiple ceasefires that were regularly broken. Then, refusing to forcefully impose a political solution, the EC instead focused on mass distribution of humanitarian aid to victims of the war.

Beginning in February 1992, an international peacekeeping force called UNPROFOR was deployed, first to Croatia and then to Bosnia. Its mandate, however, restricted the use of force to defending UN troops ('Blue Helmets') and protecting humanitarian aid convoys.

In May 1992, The UN Security Council placed an embargo on arms deliveries to the belligerents. This had the practical effect of giving an advantage to the Serbian forces, which had inherited the weapons from the Yugoslavian federal army.

In August 1992, journalists revealed that Bosniak prisoners were being held in camps in inhumane conditions by the Bosnian Serbian forces. Under international pressure, the prisoners were finally released on condition they left Bosnia for western Europe.

In late 1992, fighting also broke out between Bosnian and Bosnian Croat forces, which lasted until a ceasefire went into effect in February 1994. This was followed by the creation of the Muslim-Croat Federation, which brought together the Croatian Republic of

1. The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was composed of six Socialist Republics (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia) and two autonomous provinces attached to the Socialist Republic of Serbia (Kosovo and Vojvodina).

2. Bosnia-Herzegovina is home to three peoples: the Bosnian-Serbs, the Bosnian-Croats and the Bosnians or Muslims (Slavs who became Muslims under the Ottoman Empire).

Herzeg-Bosnia, founded by the Bosnian Croats, and the territory controlled by the army of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

In March 1993, Bosnian Serb forces attacked the Srebrenica Muslim enclave. General Morillon, Commander-in-Chief of UNPROFOR, promised that the UN would not abandon the population. Srebrenica remained under siege, but was declared a UN-protected safe area as well as Bihac, Gorazde, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zepa.

In March-April 1994, Bosnian Serb Forces attacked the Gorazde enclave. NATO air strikes, in support of UNPROFOR, prevented its seizure. However, the enclaves supposed to be under UN protection remained besieged.

In July 1995, Srebrenica finally fell to Bosnian Serb forces despite the presence of a battalion of Dutch peacekeepers and NATO air strikes, which came too late, were insufficient, and ineffective. Eight thousand men over 16 years of age were separated and massacred during a forced evacuation of the population.

During each of these episodes, Bosnian Serb forces took Blue Helmet peacekeepers hostage in attempts to dissuade NATO from conducting air strikes. In late August 1995, in response to renewed Bosnian Serb bombing of Sarajevo, these air strikes were finally conducted more consistently and efficiently. The NATO strikes put a stop to the Bosnian Serb forces' seizure of territory after more than two years of laying siege to the enclaves of eastern Bosnia.

In the aftermath, the Croatian forces from Croatia and Bosnia, along with Bosniak forces, recaptured Croatia's Serbian territories, including the Krajina region. Tens of thousands of Serbians were then driven out of their homes and expelled to Serbian Bosnia while the Bosnian Serbs continued ethnic cleansing operations.

On 14 December 1995, the Dayton Accords, negotiated under the leadership of the United States, brought the war to an end and led to the creation of the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, comprising the Muslim-Croat Federation and the Serbian Republic of Bosnia (Republika Srpska).

Around the same time, the media released information suggesting that, shortly before the fall of Srebrenica, UNPROFOR and Bosnian Serb leaders had agreed to free the UN hostages in exchange for cessation of NATO air strikes.

On 15 November 1999, a UN report on the Srebrenica events recognised the organisation's "errors in judgement" and asked the implicated Member States to conduct investigations regarding their own responsibilities for the events.

From 2000-2003, investigations were carried out in France and the Netherlands and concluded that the international community acting in the region bore responsibility for the tragedy in Srebrenica.

MSF ACTIONS IN THE CRISIS

At first, Médecins Sans Frontières struggled to set up operations in an environment where needs were still being met by health facilities and health workers remaining from the former Yugoslavia.

Resolving to provide aid during the conflict, MSF organised a convoy on 18 October 1991 to evacuate 109 wounded patients from Vukovar, a Croatian city besieged by Serb forces. On their return, a mine exploded under the wheels of a truck and seriously wounded two MSF nurses. MSF publicly condemned the mine attack and soon learned that this event was instrumentalised by the same Croatian and Serbian belligerents who authorised the convoy: the Serbs allowed the convoy to pass through in exchange for the release of a contingent of the Yugoslav army being held by the Croats. The Croats hoped to get injured combatants out of Vukovar.

From 1992, MSF sections based in Europe, where public opinion was very sensitive about the events occurring in the former Yugoslavia, partnered with other organisations to urge political leaders to intervene.

The MSF Belgian and Dutch sections decided to focus on distributing medicines, medical supplies, and first-aid materials throughout Bosnia and to refugees in the neighbouring republics. The European Community was the primary donor for these projects.

For its part, MSF France chose not to develop such operations, believing they supported the policy of 'humanitarian alibi' pursued by the European Community. The MSF France President, actively present in the media, advocated that the international community's policy of mass distribution of humanitarian aid could not compensate for their reluctance and weakness to take the necessary political and military measures to end the conflict. In June 1992, he publicly stated the need for military force against the Serbian artillery surrounding Sarajevo. During the following weeks, the Secretary General of MSF International and the General Director of MSF Holland also came out publicly in favour of force.

In late 1992, the French section of MSF set up a project to support former Bosnian Muslims concentration camp prisoners who had taken refuge in France and documented their personal accounts of events. In December, MSF published a report based on these accounts. The report described the ethnic cleansing process carried out by Bosnian Serb forces in eastern Bosnia, as "crimes against humanity". The report was accompanied by a series of video clips that were unfortunately released at the same time as a Médecins du Monde poster campaign comparing Milosevic to Hitler.

In March 1993, a team from the Belgian section managed to enter the Srebrenica enclave with the UNPROFOR convoy. MSF teams reported the desperate living conditions in the enclave to the press and demanded that this population be protected.

MSF set up a medical and health project that would be jointly managed with the French section, like the one opened in July 1993 in the Bosnian Muslim enclave of Gorazde. For MSF France, bringing humanitarian aid in these enclaves would meet basic needs and save lives.

For two years, MSF teams engaged in a constant arm wrestle with the besiegers to get authorisation to supply the enclaves, which some considered open-air prisons, where populations asphyxiated by the siege were barely kept alive. MSF regularly denounced the Bosnian Serb authorities for the hindrance of supplies entering Gorazde and Srebrenica.

During the attacks against Gorazde in 1994 and Srebrenica in 1995, MSF international staff remained in the enclaves, helped local teams treat the wounded, witnessed the situation in real time, and made continual appeals for protection of the population.

In Tuzla, another MSF team supported Srebrenica survivors and collected their accounts, which were widely distributed to the media.

In August 1995, MSF teams helped Serbian refugees fleeing Croatian Bosniak offensive in the region of Krajina and publicly reported their situation. MSF also condemned Bosnian Serb forces for expanding their ethnic cleansing operations to the remaining Muslims of Banja Luka.

In late August 1995, MSF expressed its concern about the lack of protection for the Gorazde population as the Ukrainian and British Blue Helmets were withdrawing from the enclave. Then, MSF drew attention to the plight of a group of Bosnian Muslim dissident refugees, allied with the Serbians and rejected by all sides, found by the side of the road in dire conditions from the Kupljensko camp.

In December 1995, after the Dayton Peace Accords were signed, MSF released a public statement questioning whether the desire for peace would interfere with justice and the establishment of responsibility for the events in Srebrenica.

In February 1996, MSF published a report containing personal accounts of the evacuation of Srebrenica and of 22 members of MSF's local staff and medical personnel who went missing during the events of July 1995. MSF launched an appeal for information about their fate.

In July 2000, MSF France appealed to the French parliament to establish a Commission of Inquiry regarding France's responsibility for the events in Srebrenica. The parliament set up a fact-finding mission, to which MSF lent critical support, suggesting questions to ask and documents to research. Transcripts of the hearings were made available on an MSF dedicated website.

Upon the publication of the fact-finding report in November 2001, MSF France released a public statement stressing that, while the report recognised France's military responsibility for the events, it failed to mention the government's political responsibility.

For its part, MSF Holland released public statements in 2002 and 2003 on the various reports published at the request of Dutch authorities, insisting on the need to learn lessons for the future protection of civilians from war-related violence.

In January 1993, MSF France and MSF Holland publicly asked the United States and the United Kingdom to conduct investigations regarding their responsibility for the events in Srebrenica.

MSF DILEMMAS AND QUESTIONS

Throughout this period, MSF faced a variety of questions and dilemmas:

- ▶ To what extent, such as in Vukovar, should MSF risk the lives of its staff to operate in conflict zones?
- ▶ Should MSF condemn obstacles set up to limit the access to populations in the enclaves of eastern Bosnia, if it means no longer having any access at all?
- ▶ Could MSF, as a humanitarian medical organisation, denounce the fact that humanitarian aid was presented by international political leaders as the only solution to the conflict and then call for military force, an action that would lead to loss of human life?
- ▶ By agreeing to provide a minimally acceptable level of relief to a besieged population, was MSF contributing to the strategy of the besieging troops while concurrently softening their image? Could MSF call for the evacuation of civilians who wished to leave, thereby risking abetting the ethnic cleansing policy of the besieging army?
- ▶ Could MSF, as in Gorazde, raise alarm about the seriousness of the crisis by disseminating a balance sheet of the wounded and dead that is difficult to verify, at the risk of being instrumentalised by the source of the numbers?
- ▶ Having trusted the UN Protection Force's commitment to protect the enclave and its population, must MSF accept partial culpability or complicity in the UN's abandonment of the enclave and the ensuing massacre of the population? Did MSF give the population the false impression that they were safe as long as the team was present?
- ▶ Is it the role of a humanitarian medical organisation to issue an appeal for a Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, then, once it is established, to actively monitor and criticise? On the other hand, how can MSF not try to understand the circumstances and responsibilities which, at the global level, led to the abandonment and massacre of a population that MSF teams had supported with relief? Can MSF call for a parliamentary investigation without ensuring that sensitive questions are asked that will give clear answers regarding the events?
- ▶ By failing to also explore the shadowy areas of agreements signed between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks, does MSF risk acting as a prosecutor of only the UN and member state practices and not of other actors?

- ▶ Should Srebrenica be viewed as an accident of history or as a clear-cut example of the impossibility of protecting populations under international mandates established by the UN?
- ▶ La tragédie de Srebrenica doit – elle être considérée comme un accident de l'histoire ou comme une preuve de l'impuissance des mandats internationaux de protection des populations développé par l'ONU ?

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<https://www.msf.org/speakingout/msf-and-war-former-yugoslavia-1991-2003>

N.B. This case study does not cover the Kosovo war (1998-1999) and partially covers the events of Srebrenica. For more details, please see these two studies:

<https://www.msf.org/speakingout/violence-against-kosovar-albanians-natos-intervention-1998-1999>

<https://www.msf.org/speakingout/msf-and-srebrenica-1993-2003>

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Thank you for reading.

If you would like to explore these events further, we invite you to consult the SOCS project website where you will find:

- the complete case study
- maps showing where MSF worked
- a detailed chronology
- MSF videos and extracts from the period

Some case studies have also been adapted into podcasts and online courses

Find all the MSF Speaking Out Case Studies materials here:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies