



## STOLTENBERG'S CO-RESPONSIBILITY FOR SREBRENICA

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**I**N CONNECTION WITH THE FACT that it has been 10 years since the massacre in the UN-declared “safe zone” of Srebrenica, mid-June 1995, Thorvald Stoltenberg’s ( *b. 1931, Norwegian diplomat and politician, holding several minister posts for the labour party, from 1993 UN's peace mediator in Yugoslavia*) role as a peace mediator has come into focus. Stoltenberg has been given the chance once more to explain what took place and how he evaluates the part played by himself during the course of events. And he has asserted once more that he finds no reason to blame himself for anything.

STOLTENBERG'S WAY OF MEDIATING FOR THE UN, allows us to see some important facts about the dominant approach of the Western countries to the so-called “civil wars” in the Balkans. As well as representing this prevailing tendency, Stoltenberg was personally qualified for the job. He worked at the Norwegian embassy in Beograd early in the 1960's, spoke Serbo-Croatian and knew people holding central positions in Tito's Yugoslavia. Up until the death of Tito in 1980, Yugoslavia was a favoured country to visit as well as a political point of reference to many West-European intellectuals and politicians. The country was seen as representing a “third path”, and Tito's independency from Moscow was held in high regard. Furthermore, since the days of the Second World War, a bond had existed between members of the Norwegian resistance and Serbian prisoners of war. In the concentration camp of Jasenovac, ruled by the Nazi-friendly Croatian Ustacha-movement, more than 50 000 Serbs, and many Gypsies and Jews, were killed during the war. An image of Serbians as *victims* was formed in people's minds – they were seen as victims of Muslim (Ottoman) invaders since the 1300's, or of the Nazis. These historical events gave rise to life-long personal and ideological bonds between Norwegian social democrats and Yugoslavian partisans. It is apparent that Stoltenberg remains shaped by these loyalties and this perspective even today.

IN THE LIGHT OF LATER EVENTS, one is able to discern how this historical ballast became more of a disadvantage than a resource to Stoltenberg's performance as a negotiator. Like the surrounding world in general, he was totally unprepared for ethnic conflict of the kind that broke loose in Yugoslavia from 1991 – he was unprepared for the conflict itself as well as its brutality. Thus, he saw the scenario of the 1990's, which became nothing less than genocide, through the lenses of the 1960's and -70's.



WHEN EVALUATING STOLTENBERG'S ROLE TODAY, we must take the general climate of the 1980's and -90's into account. A central key word is *relativism*. There are no Truths with a capital T, nothing is either black or white, rather every phenomenon is to be regarded in a non-essentialist way as being ambiguous and complex, enabling one to be tolerant and to endure ambivalence. Every event must be subject to interpretation, and the diversity and manifoldness of the interpretations reflect the particularity of the interpreters, all of whom are coloured by their particular point of view and their way of experiencing an event. Since there is no Truth, and since everyone has the right to interpret the world from his or her specific point of view, everyone affected by a particular event must enjoy an equal right to articulate his or her opinion and to be listened to. Since there are no privileged points of view (which would imply oppression, marginalization and intolerance), no one has the right to judge that someone else is mistaken; a signal of *Besserwissen* and cockiness of an outdated kind in an age when every established authority must be challenged.

DURING THE BALKAN WARS, the relativism I have described in philosophical-intellectual terms (which – misinterpreted or not – bears an unmistakable resemblance to “deconstruction” à la Derrida) was shown to extend beyond the limits of the seminar rooms. Relativism was transferred from the domain of esoteric theory to the field of applied politics. It became the dominant perspective of state leaders such as Clinton, Mitterand and Major. In its new suit, relativism amounted to a *moral equalization* between the so-called “parties” of a given conflict, *in casu*: between Serbs, Croats and Muslims in Ex-Yugoslavia.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE EVENTS are deep and extensive, although a lot has changed dramatically after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001; the relativism of Clinton has been replaced by Bush's fundamentalism. They are both dangerous, but this fact will have to be left aside for now. We find ourselves in the 1990's. World famous intellectuals, as well as American, French and English career diplomats, politicians and army officers were discussing the case of Bosnia on the basis of a shared set of premises. With only a few exceptions (a lonely Susan Sontag in the besieged city of Sarajevo), everyone on the left as well as on the right thought that a war – that is, a military intervention of a third party – must be avoided at any price. War was a non-starter. Given the assumptions of political correctness, negotiations were called for. One had to speak with all the affected parties at the same table, thus letting them perceive and understand each other's interests and points of view, with the aim of reaching – if not complete consensus, then the second best alternative – compromises. When a conflict has come into being, the only realistic solution is that each of the parties must give and take. It is the



task of the internationally appointed mediators to achieve such compromises, where no party feels treated unfairly, slighted or neglected. In the opposite case, violence will escalate once more, and the replacement of the conflict by a state of peace and reconciliation will be postponed.

THERE ARE SEVERAL CAUSES of the marriage of intellectual relativism to the international diplomacy, which cannot be addressed here. Yet there is one central element that must be mentioned – the traditional diplomatic fixation on *impartiality and neutrality*, the *credo* of the mediators being “as mediators we must always talk to all of the parties; the small progress we are able to make in this manner is preferable to the losses a military intervention would bring about”. The logic common to diplomats, officers and intellectuals is persuasively simple and apparently unassailable: A one-sided and decisive intervention by means of force is necessarily directed against the party whose actions one aims to stop. Thus directed against one particular party, against this party’s consent, the intervention amounts to taking a stand, against one party and for the other or others. Hence one’s impartiality has been abandoned, and one loses the party one positions oneself against as a future party for cooperation and consent, and for further humanitarian work to which the UN as a neutral organ, is obligated.

**A**S I SEE IT, the approach of the West to the course of events in Bosnia up to, and including the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995, represents a double moral failure. This failure was articulated particularly clearly by the head of the UN in Bosnia, the diplomat Asushi Akashi, the mediator for the EU, David Owen, and the mediator for the UN, Thorvald Stoltenberg. Well documented, illegal and genocidal encroachments were allowed in the sense of not being prevented by use of the political and military means available, while simultaneously the legal and internationally recognized right to self defence in cases of genocide was denied to Bosnia-Herzegovina, a state recognized as independent since May 1992. Furthermore, the UN-enforced weapon embargo dating from the same year froze a grotesque disproportion in military power between the Serbian “party” on the one hand and the Bosnian-Muslim (Bosniak) “party” on the other. Treating parties equally makes no sense when the parties *de facto* stand in a dramatically asymmetrical relation of power to one another. The equalization on the part of the mediators and other representatives of “the international community” serves as a smoke screen over the fact that the situation on the ground was one of crude encroachments. Stated in principal terms: If neutrality is interpreted as being irreconcilable with military intervention towards one party – be it in cases of systematic genocide – third party neutrality is the best attitude assailants may wish for, and the attitude to be most feared by their victims.



WHAT DOES THE CASE OF BOSNIA IN GENERAL and Srebrenica in particular teach us? Firstly, while impartiality and neutrality are being praised as diplomatic virtues, like complexity and ambiguity are praised as intellectual ones, all these virtues are – at least potential – vices in situations of being faced with, and being responsible for judging, the phenomenon of genocide. Genocide – the attempt to extinguish a particular group of individuals, defined by their race, nationality, gender, religious beliefs or ethnicity – is the absolute crime, the immoral action *par excellence*, and it demands a reply which corresponds to the absoluteness of the acts and intentions of the aggressor. The only reply that would have had such a corresponding, and effectively preventive, effect in the case of Srebrenica would have been a military intervention towards the aggressor to save the victims from the fate they would suffer if left in the hands of the aggressor.

GENERAL RATKO MLADIC knew what he was doing when he planned and carried out the massacre of Bosnian-Muslim boys and men in Srebrenica. He had more than three years of experience (from negotiations with Stoltenberg amongst others – even while Srebrenica was being attacked) to base his calculations on – that he would succeed in taking the UN-declared "safe zone" without being countered by the military of the third parties on the ground or from the air. He calculated that he would manage to separate, in Auschwitz fashion, men from women, that he would get all the days he needed transport the 8 000 selected victims in trucks and buses out of the centre of Srebrenica, partially by using Dutchbat's fuel and by dressing his own forces in Dutch UN uniforms and equipping them with speaking-trumpets, so that those who tried to escape into the forest could be brought to surrender themselves to UN "safety". He calculated that he would succeed in accomplishing exactly what he had come for – the greatest massacre on European soil since the Second World War – without being stopped on his way and without being arrested and punished in the aftermath, that he would be given free scope to humiliate the UN, the EU, NATO – the international community – in the most impudent and hideous way. In brief, that his genocidal act would succeed with impunity and that the entire world would be passive bystanders, on the spot as well as in the intelligence and the media.

**T**HUS FAR I HAVE DISCUSSED the course of events from a principled point of view. But how should we evaluate the part played by Stoltenberg?

When Stoltenberg and I discussed Srebrenica ten years after the event, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July 2005, on Dagsnytt Atten (*Norwegian news programme*), he said: "Since the UN allowed Bosniak bases inside the zone, it was a



reasonable assumption that there would be shootings towards the zone once it was possible to shoot out of it" (quoted from memory).

THIS IS A REMARKABLE WAY TO DESCRIBE THE COURSE OF EVENTS – although not to Stoltenberg. For he remains faithful to his own perspective and his own way of acting, regardless, it seems, of the years going by, of the number of other actors who criticize themselves in public (more or less convincingly). After having witnessed countless interviews on NRK (*Norwegian stateily owned TV channel*) and in the newspapers and two memoir books, I still haven't seen one single of Stoltenberg's sentences containing critique of the Serbian encroachments that is not immediately followed by another containing negative characteristics of Bosniaks or Muslims. Even when he is talking about Srebrenica, he hurriedly "enlightens" the listener by emphasizing the way in which the victims contributed to their own misfortune. Hence when the aggressor is Serbian, this fact is never allowed to remain in focus. According to him, one should always remember that *everyone* committed some cruelties *no one* was innocent. Stoltenberg still remains uninfluenced by the evidence (coming from the not particularly Bosniak-friendly CIA, among others) showing that 90 percent of the cruelties were committed by Bosnian Serbs led by Milosevic, Karadzic and Mladic; the cognitive dissonance is simply too great, as well as the prestige he attaches to defending of his own role. In his case – even more than with his colleagues Akashi and Owens – the problem cannot be thought to be of a principal kind, pertaining to the problematic character of impartiality and neutrality as diplomatic virtues – the virtues that were perverted when faced with the acts and intentions of Mladic. As far as I can see, we must in the case of Stoltenberg, given his biographical equipment mentioned above, discuss the problems of partiality rather than those of impartiality, although these were less clearly distinguished in Bosnia than a written account is able to convey. I have argued that when the parties are in fact *unequal* in terms of force and power, a "principled" impartiality may become the best ally the strong party may have and the second most dangerous enemy of the weaker party. This analysis fits Asushi and Owen, as well as leading officers such as Bernard Janvier and Michael Rose. Stoltenberg, to the contrary, appears to be unable – or unwilling – to see the course of events in Bosnia from 1991 to 1995 from any other point of view than the officially Serbian, that is Milosevic-tainted, one. Thus, it will be hard work to see that Stoltenberg's analysis in his speech to the Norwegian refugee council on the 31<sup>th</sup> of May 1995 (six weeks before Mladic enters Srebrenica) *departs* from the point of view voiced from Beograd at the time.

IN THIS SPEECH – a speech for which (unnoticed in Norway) Stoltenberg was awarded the "useful idiot-price" in *The Spectator* – Stoltenberg states: "The following is absolutely crucial: You cannot force people to



live together." Thus he turns the facts upside down. No power in multi-ethnic Bosnia was trying to *force people to live together*. The three ethnic groups that were separated into "parties" overnight from 1991–92, rhetorically at first, and then physically and geographically, *lived together* until "ethnic cleansing" started in Bosnia in the spring of 1992. What they were forced to do, through expulsions, mass rapes and killings and led by Bosnian-Serbian extremists and "conflict entrepreneurs" (Espen Barth Eide) (*head of the department of international politics at NUPI, Norwegian Institute of Foreign Politics*) was to *live separately*, in ethnically homogenous mini states, drawn out by the "peace plans" of Owen and Stoltenberg. Thus Milosevic's and Karadzic's aim of ethnic separation was realized without great troubles, while Stoltenberg contributed to forcing weaker party – the Bosniaks led by Izetbegovic – to accept the plan as the only possible solution.

**F**INALLY, in claiming that the peace plans he recommended to the Bosniaks would have saved many human lives, including the victims of Srebrenica, and that the Dayton-agreement of December 1995 is not very different from (where territorial division is concerned) his and Owens' rejected proposal, Stoltenberg overlooks the fact that his model is far from being legitimate according to morality and international law. To sum up, following Wilhelm Agrell and Jesus Alcala:

The Dayton agreement is equivalent with an acceptance of the political result of horrid and systematic violations of international law. The precedence since the Second World War has been replaced by another, one that is not changed by processes against singular war criminals in the Hague. The agreements shows that both the original architects of the war and the organs of power responsible for the terror can survive by making themselves indispensable contracting parties.

Stoltenberg's co-responsibility for Srebrenica boils down to the fact that he – despite having no responsibility for commanding the military of political authorities that enabled Mladic to get his hands on the enclave, through his three years as a central mediator contributed to the formation of a diplomatic, political and (indirectly) a military climate – of such a kind that Mladic was right in assuming he could do exactly what he wanted with the Muslim population of Srebrenica.