

Ratko Mladic arrest: Srebrenica massacre was UN's darkest hour

The Srebrenica massacre took place as United Nations peacekeepers stood by and watched while Bosnian Serb forces, commanded by General Ratko Mladic, killed thousands of Muslim men and boys.

By Bruno Waterfield, Brussels

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Designated as a UN "safe haven", 600 Dutch infantry were supposed to be protecting thousands of civilians who had taken refuge from earlier Serb offensives in north-eastern Bosnia.

As Serb forces began shelling Srebrenica, Bosnian Muslim fighters in the town asked for the return of weapons they had surrendered to the UN peacekeepers but their request was refused.

Colonel Thom Karremans, the Dutch commander, threatened to call in air strikes unless the Serbs withdrew. Mladic refused but no air strikes came, Col. Karremans had submitted his request on the wrong form.

Gen. Mladic entered Srebrenica and summoned the Dutch commander to deliver an ultimatum for Muslim surrender in a meeting that came to symbolise the West's helplessness in the face on genocide.

Just days later, on 13 July 1995, the first killings of unarmed Muslims took place in a warehouse in the nearby village of Kravica. Three days later the Dutch retreated from Srebrenica and the way was clear for Bosnian Serb forces to overrun the town. By 21 July 1995 over 8,000 Muslim men and boys are thought to have been killed.

The international community's failure to protect civilians and prevent an act of genocide traumatised European and Western powers and set the world on course for a new doctrine of "liberal interventionism".

By 1999 as the Serbs threatened to do in Kosovo what had been done in Srebrenica, but on an even greater scale, Tony Blair, a new young Prime Minister vowed that this time the West would not stand by, in a crisis he regarded as his "first real moral test".

As Bill Clinton, the US President who had stood by in Bosnia, again wavered, Mr Blair warned that Kosovo was test of whether civilized nations awoke to the warning signs of evil before it was too late.

"This is not a battle for territory; this is a battle for humanity, it is a just cause, it is a rightful cause," he argued passionately.

Britain's involvement in the successful military action in Kosovo marked a turning point in Mr Blair's "ethically based" foreign policy. The following year British troops intervened, again successfully, in Sierra Leone.

In 2003, Mr Blair used the example of Srebrenica to illustrate the consequences of Western inaction while battling to convince reluctant European allies that the use of military force against the Iraqi regime was necessary.

Although the Iraq war and occupation discredited Mr Blair, in 2011 another new, young British Prime Minister used the specter of the West standing by in the face of genocide to rally Barack Obama, another reluctant American President.

In March, David Cameron successfully rallied wavering US and European allies with a passionate plea that as Colonel Gaddafi massacred civilians in Libya "words are not enough what we will be judged on is our actions".

"We cannot stand by," he said.

In Libya today it is the ghosts and the guilt of Gen. Mladic's acts of genocide in Srebrenica that have provided the spur for military intervention.

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