

War in the Balkans, Srebrenica: The Memoirs of a Portuguese Peacekeeper

Part I

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In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

War pretext incidents. First published by SCF and Global Research in July 2017. Today July 11, 2020. 25 years ago Srebrenica, July 11, 1995

Featured image: Gravestones at the Potočari genocide memorial near Srebrenica (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

General Carlos Martins Branco is one of the most fascinating (and until quite recently also inaccessible) actors in the Srebrenica controversy. From his Zagreb vantage point as deputy head of the U.N. Protection Force (UNPROFOR) between 1994 and 1996, during the latter phase of the 1990s Yugoslav conflict as it unfolded in Croatia and Bosnian and Herzegovina, this Portuguese officer had privileged access to significant information. Confidential reports about the goings on in the field were crossing his desk. With first-hand information and further enlightened by discrete conversations with colleagues from various intelligence structures, Martins Branco was positioned ideally to learn facts which many officials would have preferred to cover up, and the media frequently ignored.



General Carlos Martins Branco (Source: Novosti.rs)

With a typically Latin emotional flair, refusing to remain silent as the “Srebrenica genocide narrative” was taking shape in the second half of the 1990s, Martins Branco published in 1998 an article provocatively [entitled](#) “Was Srebrenica a Hoax? Eyewitness Account of a Former UN Military Observer in Bosnia” In that early plunge into the toxic Srebrenica debate,

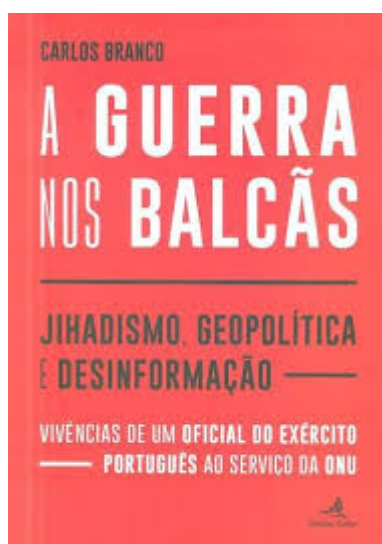
Martins Branco ventured a number of critical questions concerning the notorious events in July 1995:

“One may agree or disagree with my political analysis, but one really ought to read the account of how Srebrenica fell, who are the victims whose bodies have been found so far, and why the author believes that the Serbs wanted to conquer Srebrenica and make the Bosnian Muslims flee, rather than having any intentions of butchering them. The comparison Srebrenica vs. Krajina, as well as the related media reaction by the ‘free press’ in the West, is also rather instructive”.

Shortly after that expression of skepticism about the nature of the disputed events in Srebrenica, Martins Branco practically disappeared from view. Not physically, of course. He spent several years in Florence teaching at the European University Institute and preparing his doctoral dissertation. After that, in 2007 and 2008 he was attached by his government to NATO forces in Afghanistan in the capacity of media spokesperson for the Commander. From 2008 until recently, when he retired, General Martins Branco served as deputy director of the National Defense Institute of the Portuguese armed forces.

This impressive background, to which we may add the duty of head of the Intelligence Affairs Section of EUROFOR for Bosnia, Albania, and Kosovo from 1996 to 1999, bespeaks an elite and highly trained staff officer, with first-class intelligence capabilities and powers of observation.

Intrigued by Martins Branco’s out-of-the-box analysis of Srebrenica events, shortly after the founding of our NGO “Srebrenica Historical Project” we attempted to establish communication with him to see if he would share with us some of his exceptional information and insights. Our efforts were fruitless and correspondence with the general over the years came down mostly to an exchange of non-committal courtesies.



Defense teams at the ICTY in the Hague, which endeavored to obtain him as a witness on their clients’ behalf, had no better luck. However, not very long ago General Martins Branco wrote to us seeking answers to some questions concerning Srebrenica. He mentioned that in November 2016 his memoirs were published in Portugal. That volume, which he kindly made available to us, encompassed the period of his service in the Balkans. It was entitled “*A Guerra nos Balcãs, jihadismo, geopolítica e desinformação*” [War in the Balkans, Jihadism, Geopolitics, and Disinformation], published by Edições Colibri in Lisbon.

As already seen numerous times with high-level officials, in this case as well open expression of intimate views and public disclosure of facts regarded of a delicate nature had to wait for retirement. In General Martins Branco's case, the wait was worthwhile. These fascinating recollections from the Balkan war theater consist of the insights of a Portuguese officer attached to UN forces into such episodes as the merciless expulsion, accompanied by mass killing, of the Serbian population of Krajina by Croatian forces. These outrages were orchestrated with the discrete backing of the NATO alliance, for which the author indirectly happened to be working at the time. Events surrounding Srebrenica in July of 1995 encompass another portion of his recollections. For the moment, we will focus on the latter and Martins Branco's perception of the background and impact of the Srebrenica situation.

Already in his introduction to the chapters of his memoirs that deal with Srebrenica, Martins Branco questions the coherence of the prevalent view that it constituted genocide:

"General Ratko Mladic had made it known that he was leaving open a corridor for withdrawal toward Tuzla. With Mladic's approval, about 6.000 persons took advantage of that opportunity. In a report by the Dutch Foreign Ministry it is noted that, according to UN sources, by August 4 a total of 35.632 displaced persons had made it to Tuzla, of whom between 800 and 1.000 were members of Bosnia and Herzegovina armed forces. Out of that total, 17.500 had been evacuated by bus". (Page 195)

The Portuguese general then continues:

"Srebrenica was portrayed – and continues to be – as a premeditated massacre of innocent Muslim civilians. As a genocide! But was it really so? A more careful and informed assessment of those events leads me to doubt it". (Page 196)

Martins Branco goes on to raise some pointed questions, and he does so purely in the capacity of a professional soldier:

"There are various estimates of the relative strength of forces involved in the Srebrenica battle. On the Serbian side, at most 3.000 fighters could have taken part. The number of armored vehicles is more difficult to determine, as stated at the beginning of this chapter. According to field reports, however, not more than six such vehicles were in motion at any given time. Though we lack reliable information about troop strength on the Muslim side, it is entirely probable that they numbered a minimum of 4.000 armed men, counting together Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina soldiers and members of the paramilitaries. According to some sources, they numbered up to 6.000. But for the purposes of this analysis, we will consider the 4.000 figure as credible". (Page 196)

The general then goes on:

"The topographical features of the terrain around Srebrenica, and Eastern Bosnia as a whole, are extremely rugged and hilly. Crags, thickly forested areas, and deep ravines impede the movement of military vehicles while facilitating infantry operations. In relation to ground features, which beyond any doubt favor defenders, the numerical relationship of forces on the

opposing sides suggests that Bosnian army troops had at their disposal more than sufficient manpower to put up a defense. They, however, failed to do that. Taking into account the numerical ratio of attackers to defenders, as we were taught at the military academy, for the attack to have any chance of success the number of attackers would have to exceed that of the defenders by a factor of at least three. In the case at hand, that ratio was more than advantageous to the defenders (4.000 defenders versus 3.000 attackers). In addition, the defenders had the additional benefit of knowing the landscape". (Page 196)

Martins Branco then asks one of the key Srebrenica questions:

"Given that military advantage favored the defense, why did the Bosnian army fail to put up any resistance to Serbian forces? Why did the command of the 28th Division of the Bosnian army – acting apparently contrary to its interest – fail to establish a defense line, as at other times it knew well how to do, as for instance during the April 1993 crisis? Why did Muslim forces in the enclave fail to act to regain control over their heavy weapons, which had been deposited in a local warehouse under UN's lock and key? Was it no more than an oversight?" (Page 197)



A Dutch YPR-765 as used at Srebrenica (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

As a supplement to these well-formulated questions, we may note that already on July 6, as the Serbian attack was commencing, the Dutch battalion command in Srebrenica let it be known to the 28th Division that it was free to retrieve its warehoused heavy armaments, if it so wished. That fact was revealed in the Dutch battalion "Debriefing", which came out in October of 1995. However, Muslim forces in Srebrenica inexplicably ignored this invitation, thus reinforcing the impression that – for political or other reasons – they lacked the purpose of militarily resisting the Serbian attack.

Which leads the author to the following reflections:

"Twenty years later, we still lack satisfactory answers to questions that seem crucial, assuming that we are seeking to find out what exactly happened. The passivity and absence of a military reaction on the part of Muslim forces in the enclave is in stark contrast to their offensive behavior during the preceding two years, which was manifested in the form of systematic slaughter of Serbian civilians in the villages surrounding Srebrenica". (Page 197)

The author then discloses an intriguing detail that was previously unknown even to this

reviewer:

“Ramiz Becirevic [in command of the 28th Division in Naser Oric’s absence] initially issued an order for the heavy weapons to be collected. However, he cancelled it shortly thereafter, explaining that he had received a countermanding order. Who was the source of that order, and for what reason was it given? For the record, let it be noted that in the morning of July 6, as the Serbian attack was starting, acting on his own responsibility, the Dutchbat commander informed the leadership of the Bosnian army that the Serbs had ‘trespassed’ the enclave’s boundaries and that the UN would not be object should they come to retrieve their heavy weaponry that had been deposited in a local warehouse”. (Page 197)

Pressing further his point about the enigmatic dissipation within the Srebrenica enclave of the will to resist, Martins Branco points out that Naser Oric, “the charismatic leader who very likely would have acted differently”, was withdrawn from the enclave in April of 1995, never to return. He therefore goes on to ask some common sense questions:

“Was [Oric’s] return prevented by the Second Corps of the Bosnian army, of which 28th Division was part? What could have been the reasons for that? We still lack convincing answers to these questions”. (Page 198)

“On the other hand”, the Portuguese author continues with his detailed analysis of the suspicious train of events,

“officials of the local SDA, the Party of Democratic Action that was in charge in Sarajevo, not only refused, citing strange reasons, to assist UN forces in evacuating Srebrenica, which is to say their own population and refugees from the surrounding villages who had taken shelter in the town, but they went even further by preventing them from fleeing in the direction of Potocari. Instead, they submitted to the commander of B Company [of the Dutchbat] a long list of demands, the fulfillment of which was insisted upon as the condition for their cooperation. The nature of these demands suggested the existence of a carefully elaborated advance plan which, however, did not mesh with the conditions that actually prevailed on the ground at that particular moment. At that point, there were only two issues which were of significance to the municipal president: one, the demand to the Military Observers on July 10 to disseminate to the outside world a report alleging the use of chemical weapons by Serbian forces, although that was not true; secondly, to publicly accuse the international media of spreading misinformation that Muslim forces were offering armed resistance, with an additional demand to the UN to also issue an official denial to that effect. According to him, Bosnian soldiers neither used heavy weapons, nor were they prepared to ever do so. At the same time, he complained about the lack of foodstuffs and the dismal humanitarian situation. The outline of an official narrative was becoming perceptible and it consisted of two messages: the absence of any military resistance and lack of food”. (Page 198)

To put it in plain English, this elite NATO officer with excellent powers of observation and acumen for critical analysis “smelled a rat,” and he did so right from the beginning of the game. He does not say it outright in his memoirs, but it is strongly suggested that these doubts about the authenticity of the official Srebrenica narrative were proliferating in his

mind in real time, as field reports accumulated on his desk in Zagreb.



Headquarters in [Potočari](#) for soldiers under [United Nations](#) command; “[Dutchbat](#)” had 370[11] soldiers in Srebrenica during the massacre. The building was a disused battery factory (Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Martins Branco then pops the logical question or, rather, he points his finger at one of the key incoherencies of the official account of Srebrenica events:

“A question mark could also be put over the complete absence of a military response of any kind by the Second Corps of the Bosnian army, whose zone of responsibility encompassed northeastern Bosnia, including Tuzla (where its headquarters was located), as well as Doboj, Bijeljina, Srebrenica, Zepa, and Zvornik. Bosnian army intelligence agencies, whose ear was constantly fixed on Serbian signal communications, were perfectly aware of the impending offensive operation. In spite of not at all being in the dark concerning the Serbs’ intention to attack, the Second Corps of the Bosnian army did not make the slightest move to weaken the Serbs’ pressure upon the enclave. It was a known fact that the Drina Corps, the Serbian army unit in whose zone of responsibility Srebrenica was located, was exhausted and that the attack on Srebrenica was made feasible only by scraping together forces withdrawn from other segments of the front, which naturally left in its wake many vulnerable points. Why didn’t the Second Corps undertake an attack along the entire front line with the Drina Corps, not merely in order to relieve the pressure on Srebrenica but also to exploit the Serbian forces’ temporary vulnerabilities in order to seize territory in areas that were left unprotected? Following the passage of twenty years, we still do not have the answer to this more than coherent and reasonable question”. (Pages 198-199)

These are just some of the more important reasons leading a professional soldier to be skeptical of the general framework of the accepted Srebrenica narrative. As we will see in the next installment of this review, his more detailed analysis raises even more troubling questions.

To be continued.

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