An Analysis of United Nations Intervention During the 1,000 Days of Siege in Sarajevo Through Political Cartoons

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1,000 days of siege in Sarajevo the United Nations struggled to intervene and end the ethnic cleansing and aggression on Bosnian Muslims. The UN played an important interventional role and strove to provide enforced safe zones, peacekeeping troops, humanitarian aid and peace treaties. Yet the success of the UN’s intervention strategy during the conflict remains controversial for several reasons. Sarajevo’s daily newspaper ran regular political cartoons that tended to portray the UN’s actions as more destructive than constructive. Analysis of these cartoons reflects how the citizens of Sarajevo believe the UN failed to intervene successfully during the siege, and how Bosnian people suffered immensely from this failure. This paper analyzes three issues addressed by these political cartoons: UN complicity with the Serbian aggressor, the failure of UN-enforced ‘safe zones’ and lack of success in the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Introduction

During the war in Bosnia the capital city of Sarajevo was under siege for over 1,000 days. This research aims to examine the views of the residents of the city of Sarajevo with specific emphasis on their perceptions of United Nations (UN) intervention during the siege. This subject will be explored through the analysis of political cartoons that ran in a prominent daily newspaper in Sarajevo during that period, the Oslobođenje. This approach in studying complex political issues is one of bottom-up vs. top-down and offers us fresh insights into the conflict through a simplistic and understudied mainstream medium.

Political cartoons are an enlightening resource for the study of complicated political issues as by their nature they offer concise summaries that appeal to the general population (Greenberg 2002). In general, political cartoons are an understudied field with a strong focus on form and political candidate characterizations (Romano & Westgate 2007). In the case of the conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, political cartoons printed in the daily Sarajevo newspaper, the Oslobođenje, depict various sides of the conflict and offer very clear and opinionated insights into the struggles of the Sarajevan people.

The cartoons printed during the siege of Sarajevo have been the subjects of very little research; none at all in regards to their criticism of UN intervention. These cartoons offer an intimate and opinionated account of the siege and UN interventions from a distinctly Bosnian standpoint. With a multi-ethnic staff and several different cartoonists, it is clear that the cartoons did not lean toward any particular ethnic or religious sect, but sought to portray and defend Sarajevo as a whole (Gjelten 1995).

While Serbian nationalists and Bosnian citizens dispute the actual beginning of the war it is commonly asserted that the war began with numerous politically driven killings during the first quarter of 1992 (Ramet 2002). Officially, the war began on April 5th of that year, the day of Bosnia’s declaration of independence when massive peace rallies took place in Sarajevo. The largest group of protesters marched towards the parliamentary building when Serbian gunman began firing on the crowd from the Serbian Democratic Party headquarters and killed two individuals, often considered the first casualties of the war (Malcolm 1996).

This paper will define several major UN intervention strategies during the time of the siege and provide evidence of the infectiveness of these interventions through particular content in political cartoons printed during that time. It will provide an important analysis of Sarajevan’s sentiments towards UN intervention and how these are demonstrated through the content of archived political cartoons. The major criticisms presented in the political cartoons during this time frame are in regards to complicity, humanitarian aid, and UN enforced safe zones. This paper will address the UN intervention in question,
an understanding of the Oslobodenje and its sense of obligation to its readership, and professional assessment of the political cartoons in context and content.

The Newspaper

The Oslobodenje is Sarajevo’s most prominent daily newspaper and was the only paper that continued to print consistently throughout the siege, printing every day during the conflict; though they did fail on two occasions to get it distributed throughout the city due to heavy attacks (Gjelten 1996). During the siege, daily press run fell from 60,000 papers to 3,500 and the paper shrank from twenty-four broadsheet pages to eight tabloid pages, although single papers tended to be shared between several readers at a higher rate than average (Gjelten 1996). “Oslobodenje” is Bosnian for Liberation and the newspaper was named such when it was established in 1943 as an anti-Nazi publication during Yugoslavia’s occupation. When the multiparty political system was introduced the paper adopted an independent political orientation. The paper and its staff felt not only that they represented the dignity and perseverance of the Bosnian people but that they also had a certain obligation to meet the needs of their diverse readership and serve them to the best of their ability (Kurspahic 2003).

The Oslobodenje faced many struggles as it persevered in putting out a daily paper throughout the siege but managed to be the only newspaper printed consistently in Sarajevo during the 1,000 days of siege (Gjelten 1996). The paper stood as an international symbol of hope and determined journalism with organizations the world over recognizing their plight, printing some of their stories in foreign papers, and even donating much needed materials like news ink (Gallez 1998). The International Press Institute, a global network advocating the freedom of the press, honors the newspaper and its incredible integrity under harsh circumstances, “During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the independent Sarajevo newspaper Oslobodenje was a symbol of peaceful coexistence and the struggle against intolerance and ethnic cleansing.”

The paper stood as a popular target for Serbian attacks, its headquarters bombed and set on fire several times, because of the symbolism that it held in celebrating Bosnia’s multi-ethnic population (Gjelten 1996). In 1992 the paper’s headquarters were set on fire by Serbian forces and the staff was forced to compose the paper in an underground bomb shelter while the building crumbled above them. This determination was an inspiration and provided much hope for the Sarajevan people; even when they could not even purchase a loaf of bread on the streets newspapers were always available to them. In this sense, the Oslobodenje was a symbol of their strength, endurance and unity as a people. (Gjelten1996).

The Oslobodenje was an important medium for expression among a diverse readership, serving equally and without discrimination those of all ethnic backgrounds. The staff itself was composed of writers and editors representing every ethnicity in the multi-cultural city. “Residents of all ethnic backgrounds fought valiantly…and Oslobodenje had a lead role. As one of Sarajevo’s most prominent multi-ethnic enterprises, it had a large stake in the outcome of the struggle. But, as the city’s leading newspaper, it also had the responsibility to cover events honestly, even when being forthright could make things worse” (Gjelten 1995).

Understanding the integrity and esteem with which the writers and editors of this paper held their work is important. The role of a multi-ethnic staff and their feelings of obligation towards their readers assists us in developing a sense of the newspaper’s political sentiments and potential motivations in the publication of political cartoons. The incredible respect for objective, balanced reporting demonstrated by the staff of the Oslobodenje means that this standard would likely be demonstrated through political cartoons as well. Knowing these elements of the Oslobodenje’s goals and the multi-ethnic composition of the newspaper’s staff demonstrates how that paper would advocate the rights of the Sarajevan population and their freedom, even to the point of condemning unsuccessful attempts or inaction on the part of UN intervention in published political cartoons.

The Cartoons

Research of the political cartoons took place in the Oslobodenje’s headquarters in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. All papers printed during over a 1,000 days of siege, from April 5th, 1992 to
February 29th, 1996, were assessed and those containing cartoons that portrayed UN involvement in any way were selected, copied and translated by a Bosnian speaker. Relationship to the UN was determined by whether the cartoon contained a direct depiction of the UN, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), then UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Gali; European Union peace envoy and appointed high representative in charge of civilian aspects of the Dayton Peace Accord Carl Bildt; and Senior UN envoy to former Yugoslavia Akashi Yasushi, among other key figures.

These were then sorted according to date and numbered. The total sample size included 288 cartoons. Of these, 22 related directly to UN humanitarian aid efforts, 18 to UN designated “safe zones” and 93 to general UN complicity with the Serb aggression. 155 of the cartoons sampled addressed general ineptitude on the part of UN intervention but did not pertain directly to the three topics of this research and will therefore not be employed in this study.

Figure 1 charts the fluctuations in cartoon content over the course of the 1,000 days of siege. The graph demonstrates how cartoons criticizing these specific issues regarding UN intervention were printed throughout the siege and peaked in 1995, with the exception of humanitarian aid which reached its crescendo at the beginning of the conflict and became less of a criticism as the siege progressed.

![Figure 1.](image)

**Complicity**

Of the 288 cartoons sampled for this research, 93 of them related directly to UN complicity with the Serbian aggressor. Not only is the UN’s willingness to create agreements with the Serbian aggressors portrayed as compliance in the cartoons but the cartoons go so far as to allude to a deeper sense of compliance on the part of the UN to the Serbian aggressor. While the UN denies any possible complicity, weakening factors that contributed to the organization’s general lack of success in the region perhaps contributed to this sense of compliance (Malcolm 1996).

The UN was undergoing immense changes in its policies in the region due to the decision of the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to begin withdrawal of the majority of UN forces when violence began to flare. The organization had held an important presence in the region for some time when the 1991 arms embargo was enforced. This embargo was a controversial event as it froze an imbalance in Serb and Muslim military capacity, leaving the Muslims largely defenseless (Powers 2002, Malcolm 1996). This policy created an atmosphere throughout Bosnia of major imbalance, and for the Muslims, actual military vulnerability.

While the UN and the UNPROFOR were present in Bosnia throughout the beginning of the siege, the force was weakened by their loss of peacekeeping troops taken hostage as well as limiting mandates and the general dissipation of UN troops due to other international crisis situations (Donia 2006). The
withdrawal of a vast majority of their forces and other complications also left remaining peacekeepers, and the Bosnians, vulnerable to attacks (Malcolm 1996). The UN prepared to take necessary steps in protecting the city and defending the Bosnians but lacked adequate support from member states. Then-US president George Bush, for example, avoiding ensuing intervention and pressure by the rest of the UN member states by denying the seriousness of the situation in Bosnia, and as such, perpetuated the arms embargo and contributed limited resources to the UN’s intervention goals (Powers 2002). As Donia criticizes in his book Sarajevo; A Biography, “…because of a yawning chasm between the UN’s quite accurate understanding of the situation and the unwillingness of UN member states to commit resources to address it, UN policies often served to perpetuate the siege and the attendant misery in the city” (2006).

The arms embargo was a recurring issue during the siege and was portrayed within the cartoons as a limitation on the Bosnian army’s ability to defend its people. Discussion of lifting the arms embargo was a major landmark and with pressure from ex-US president Jimmy Carter a fairly effective UN enforced ceasefire agreement and “peace initiative” had been reached throughout much of Bosnia at the end of 1994, a new bill that encouraged lifting of the embargo was tabled in January of 1995 (Malcolm 1996). However, this ceasefire was only recognized for a short four months when Serbian forces shelled the Bihac area and other regions grew less protected. By springtime of that year the ceasefire was virtually non-existent. Political cartoons at this time reflect a clear frustration with the UN and particularly with NATO and UNPROFOR because of their apparent failure to protect the city and Bosnian civilians, see Figure 2.

Another example of a UN interventional strategy easily interpreted as compliance with the Serbian aggressor took place in May of 1995 when the UN granted NATO permission to respond with air strikes to the Serb bombardment of Sarajevo (Malcolm 1996). This form of intervention was highly successful in some regards, as it allowed for the total destruction of several ammunition supply bunkers outside Sarajevo, but the Serbian forces retaliated with increased shelling and taking UN personnel hostage, further weakening the abilities of the UN forces (Malcolm 1996). In fact, the UN was so stunned by the hostage situation and subsequent Serbian propaganda broadcast mainly to instill morale in Serb nationalists that it ceased the NATO bombing altogether and awaited the return of the missing UN forces. The fact that the UN did not persevere through this incident and instead gave way to the aggressor indicates a weakness that could be interpreted as fear of the aggressor or complicity, as is demonstrated through the political cartoons during this time.

Figure 2 demonstrates the fluctuations in the printing of political cartoons with content pertaining
to UN complicity with the Serbian aggressor during the siege. There is a direct correlation between this cartoon content and UN intervention activities at the time. The graph charts the printing of these cartoons on a monthly basis over the course of the thousand days of siege and indicates more criticism of UN complicity during periods of increased incidents of Serbian affronts on the city of Sarajevo. There is also a correlation with an increase in cartoons printed and major UN resolutions or major attempts at intervention, especially those that failed, like the massacre in the so-called “safe zone” of Srebrenica in the summer of 1995.

Figure 3 depicts the Serbian militia hiding behind the UN with their tank and artillery. The Serbians are clearly identified by the ocila on their helmets, a symbol that is said to date back to the 13th century, and shaggy beards (Judah 2000). The image offers a very obvious reference to complicity on the part of the UN by portraying the organization as serving to actually protect the Serbians. While many of the cartoons used in this study were as succinct as Figure 3 regarding the UN’s complicity, not all of the images sampled were this direct. Many of the cartoons addressed very specific events as indicators of UN compliance as opposed to laying blanket statements.

**Humanitarian Aid**

In late June of 1992 the Sarajevo Airport was opened to UN airlifts to counterbalance the siege under UN Resolution 757 (Donia 2006). The survival of the Sarajevan citizenry came to rely heavily on the staples provided by these airlifts that saved thousands of lives. Political cartoons depicting this transaction portray a certain gratitude that this aid had finally arrived but also criticize certain elements of how the airlifts were being executed and how unsuccessful they really were in supplying ample food for the citizens. While these airlifts did supply some 10,000 tons of food to Sarajevans over the course of the war the average Sarajevan still lost about twenty-five pounds (Gjelten 1995). The humanitarian aid was being dropped at the Serb-controlled airport on the outskirts of Sarajevo, often making it difficult or impossible for these goods to reach the citizens, as demonstrated in Figure 5.

Of the 22 cartoons sampled depicting UN humanitarian aid efforts, the majority did not so much portray it as a failed effort but focused more on ineptitude. Most of these were printed between June and December of 1992 after which point their appearance in the paper became much more infrequent, as evidenced in Figure 4. It was also during this period of 1992 that the UN Security Council approved new commercial sanctions against Yugoslavia and voted to ban all military flights over Bosnia.
In most of these 22 cartoons the UN peacekeepers or those distributing the aid are depicted as idiotic or weak to the point of not being physically capable of delivering the aid or being incapacitated by the Serbian aggressors. Figure 5 demonstrates this clearly with two UN troops and their humanitarian aid delivery truck observing the gigantic apple that the truck is carrying and the damage that it has sustained. Looking back at the half-eaten apple, one mentions to the other, “When we left the apple was whole.” The apple is representative of humanitarian aid and the damage sustained represents what has been stolen by Serbian aggressors, likely in territory controlled by them like the Sarajevo airport, the dramatic nature of the spoil highlighting the fact that the needy Bosnians to which this aid is being delivered will suffer much from the loss. The UN is depicted as helpless or idiotic in this situation.

“When we left the apple was whole.”

**Figure 5.** Bozo Stefanovic. October 28, 1992.
Heavy fighting and continuous shelling of Bosnian defenders by Serbian forces marked the end of 1992 and the first half of 1993. This correlates with an increase in political cartoons criticizing UN humanitarian efforts during this time frame, as shown in Figure 4. Figure 6 depicts two UN workers attempting to deliver humanitarian aid to Bosnian corpses. Both UN workers look confused and oblivious to the fact that the Bosnians that they are attempting to serve are entirely extinguished. The city around them is in rubbles. One asks the other, “They won’t take the humanitarian aid, they’re not mad are they?” The whole striking, and somewhat eerie, image demonstrates severe ineptitude on the part of the UN, pointing out not only an incredible lack of rationale but also a hopelessly tardy delivery of the aid.

UN intervention strategies became more acute throughout 1993 and in general, humanitarian aid efforts increased. Bill Clinton was elected president of the US and showed signs of interest in more serious interventional measures in Bosnia and as a UN member country, pushed the organization to do more in the region (Powers 2002). The UN performed numerous investigations on incidents of violence during this time frame, but the investigations often contradicted each other and were inconclusive.

Figure 7 shows Yasushi Akashi, the U.N. special envoy to the former Yugoslavia, feeding a resident of Bihac, a UN-designated safe zone, through a barbed wire fence behind the back of a Serb soldier. Akasi looks small and weak in the depiction, whereas the Serbian gunman demonstrates strength and power as he guards the fence with his heavy artillery.
Safe Zones

On May sixth of 1993 the UN proclaimed several distinct “safe zones” for Bosnian Muslims in Resolution 824. These included the cities of Sarajevo, Bihac, Srebrenica, Tuzla, and Zepa, but the physical parameters and actual protection promised by the UN were insufficient and non-distinct, as was the means of keeping them “safe” (Donia and Fine 1994). The safe zones ended up being loosely defined with the designation entirely unrecognized by Serbian forces. This particular act of international intervention was subject to much scrutiny by citizens of all of Sarajevo, particularly those threatened by the vulnerability of being Bosnian Muslim, victims of the crime of ethnic cleansing, and having very little safety provided for them. With Sarajevo being included as one of the UN designated safe zones, cartoons in the Oslobodenje paid particular attention to criticisms regarding this status.

In July of 1995 all of the weaknesses of the poorly defined safe-areas culminated in the brutal massacre of over seven thousand Bosnian civilians in Srebrenica. The massacre drew the attention of the international community for several reasons, one being simply the sheer number of casualties; the other was the question of the effectivity of UN intervention (Donia 2006). Serbian tanks entered the so-called safe zone of Srebrenica on July 9th and overran several UN outposts manned by Dutch soldiers, taking thirty-two of them hostage (Malcolm 1996). The Dutch commanding officer located there urgently requested NATO air strikes but UN officials stationed in Zagreb, Croatia, replied with such tardiness that the Serbians were on the offensive and threatened to kill the Dutch peacekeepers. In the time that NATO and the UN were thus incapacitated, Srebrenica fell to the Serbs in what Noel Malcolm claims was “the blackest moment in the history of the UN’s involvement in Bosnia” (Malcolm 1996).

Figure 8 demonstrates the rising concerns with the distinction of certain enclaves as UN-designated safe zones, as evidenced in the fluctuation in cartoons criticizing the matter until the disintegration of the definition. A few cartoons addressed the issue directly upon the announcement of the safe zones, but criticism was at it’s highest during the massacre in Srebrenica and the ensuing attacks on Bihac and Zepa in the summer of 1995.
Figure 8.

Figure 9. Bozo Stefanovic. August 21, 1995.

Figure 9 depicts UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Gali pointing to a sign that marks the UN-designated safe zone of Gorazde and answering a UN peacekeeping troop’s question of whether the area was a safe zone with the reply that for the troops, it was “prohibited”. This image clearly demonstrates frustration with the actual validity of these so-called “UN-designated safe zones” with irony. It raises obvious questions about how effective these safe zones must actually be if the UN peacekeeping units, the troops that are meant to serve as the protectors of these havens, are not even allowed within them. Secretary General Boutros Boutros Gali’s presence in the image also serves to point out a questioning of greater authority figures within the UN body that should be held accountable for interventional failure and should be responsible for creating safe zones that actually serve their intended purpose.
Figure 10. Zvonimir Markicevic. August 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1995

Figure 10 portrays the UN giving Srebrenica and Zepa, so-called UN safe zones, as gifts to the Serbian militia. Figure 11 depicts a UN peacekeeping soldier standing side by side with a Serbian militia and demonstrating a sense of idiotic camaraderie in front of a “UN Safe Zone” sign. In the background an obviously neglected village that was labeled a safe zone crumbles and burns up in flames. Both of these images serve as poignant illustrations of the Bosnian citizen’s distrust of the UN and a perceived complicity on the part of the UN to the Serbian aggressor.

Figure 11. Zvonimir Markicevic. May 19 of 1995
Conclusion

Political cartoons in the Oslobodenje played an important role in instilling a sense of insightful humor at a desperate time for those suffering in the besieged city, while simultaneously reflecting the sentiments of those citizens. With the newspaper’s integrity and sense of responsibility to provide its multi-ethnic readers with objective, honest news, it is likely that cartoonists were well educated on issues and did not perpetuate ethnic divides or instill animosity through their work, seeking rather to educate and provide socio-political commentary in this medium (Greenberg 2002).

While the UN had a definite interest in the region, the assistance that it provided on all fronts was sporadic and often insufficient. Political cartoons elucidated the weaknesses in these interventions with a strong lean towards concern for the wellbeing of Sarajevan citizens, the newspaper’s readership, and as such are representative of the citizens’ perspective on the conflict. Interventions and attempted interventions were assessed on many levels as cartoons portrayed the UN with a tone of frustration and disappointment in their continued failure to protect the city. Much of this is evidenced by the simple correlation between major UN interventional strategies and failures and how these were depicted in the Oslobodenje’s political cartoons during said events.

These cartoons offer a particular perspective that often goes unreported. Political cartoons are an understudied medium with a vast potential to inform us of the perceptions of a sometimes forgotten, yet essential, demographic. The bottom-up approach intrinsic to such research highlights the sentiments and opinions of the general citizenry of a region, as opposed to the experts or politicians. In this case, cartoons lend themselves well to illuminating the struggle and perceptions of the Sarajevan population as a whole during a very complicated conflict. The nature of political cartoons makes them an ideal medium for this purpose.

The vast majority of cartoons sampled demonstrated a clear frustration with UN intervention and, overall, questioned its effectiveness in the region. Being that these cartoons represented the general sentiments of the Sarajevan people, it can be deduced that the citizens, too, were frustrated by the UN’s intervention in the region and greatly questioned how effective these strategies were. UN intervention in Bosnia is often classified by the international community as a failure or simply less than successful, but these political cartoons assist us in perceiving the magnitude of this failure and contextualize it for us in human terms.

With only seven of the 288 cartoons sampled for this research actually portrayed here, there is considerable potential for more work to be done on UN-related issues presented in these political cartoons. Beyond those 288, the Oslobodenje’s archives hold over a 1,000 cartoons printed during the siege that pertain to an array of interventional and conflict related issues of the time. This research lays important groundwork for further research into these issues. Further research could include studies of similar conflicts and respective political cartoon representations of the UN, or other international bodies, and even more general assessments of humanitarian intervention in other troubled regions to see if a universal pattern exists.
Bibliography


