

## **The entire Balkans is not worth the bones of a single Western soldier<sup>1</sup>**

In 1991, slightly over a decade after the end of the Cold War and only one year after the stunning US-led Coalition victory in the Second Gulf War, Yugoslavia imploded. First in Croatia, then in Bosnia, Serbian minorities fought the creation of the breakaway republics, often with tacit support from the Serbian rump of what remained of Yugoslavia (see timeline at the end of paper). As the situation went from bad to worse, several UN mediation efforts and humanitarian interventions proved ineffective. Crimes against humanity, including wanton slaughter of civilians, became well-honed tools in campaigns of “ethnic cleansing,” a phrase which was coined specifically to describe these atrocities. Bosnia suffered the most, due to the ironic fact that its pre-war ethnic make-up was the most interwoven and multicultural. Bosnia in 1991 had been a relatively prosperous, quiet, and “civilized” place, in which a Muslim majority lived side by side with sizeable Serb and Croat minorities. Bosnia in 1995 was a devastated, partitioned and ethnically separated place, which had witnessed tremendous human suffering. It had been turned into a battlefield where nationalism and fanaticism defeated multiculturalism and tolerance, a battlefield which revealed the weaknesses of post-WWII apparatuses of collective security and international cooperation. The events that took place in Bosnia put the lie to Bush’s freshly-declared “New World Order.” It was the first conflict in the post Cold-War era in which the world’s superpower and its allies faced ethical and moral choices that demanded thinking outside of the Cold War paradigm which had shaped

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<sup>1</sup> Paraphrased from a comment by Otto von Bismarck, German chancellor during the Congress of Berlin (1878). The actual comment is “The entire Balkans is not worth the bones of a single Pomeranian Grenadier”.

their foreign policy making patterns and failed. This paper aims to explain why and how this debacle happened.

One myth which needs to be decisively dealt with from the start is Bismarck's famous quote paraphrased in the title to this work, which is taken literally to mean that the Balkans are a problematic, strife-ridden area that outside (Western) powers should not get involved in. Many superficial analyses of the Bosnian conflict (see for example<sup>2,13</sup> among many others) categorically state this as a fact, based on little more than Bismarck's aphorism. This concept of the Balkans resonates in Western consciousness even today, perhaps because it is a comfortable means of overlooking what Bosnia actually was: "the greatest security failure of the West since the 1930s"<sup>3</sup>. Delving deeper, Bismarck's public statement is revealed as a part of his strategy of misdirection. His main aim, revealed in his private comment (one which by the way that is rarely quoted), was to distract the other powers by keeping them occupied over the Balkans: "It would be a triumph for our statesmanship if we succeeded in keeping the Eastern ulcer open and thus jarred the harmony of the other Great Powers in order to secure our own peace."<sup>4</sup> Bismarck was quite happy to keep the conflict in the Balkans unresolved as a source of tension between Russia, Austria-Hungary and Turkey while Germany profited from their distraction; his public comment was meant to provide a means to disengage Germany from the Balkans. He obviously cared very much for the Balkans as a policy tool. It should also be obvious that with its multiple ethnicities living together, sometimes in

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Vaknin, "The Bones of the Grenadier - Endgame in the Balkans", online at <http://samvak.tripod.com/pp12.html>

<sup>3</sup> Richard Holbrooke, "America, a European Power", *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 1995, p.40

<sup>4</sup> Private comment by Otto von Bismarck to his aide, during the Congress of Berlin. Quoted from Gerhard Rempel's online lecture at <http://mars.vnet.wnec.edu/~grempe/courses/berlin/lectures/13CreationofCapital.html>.

strife, often peacefully, the Balkans are really not that different from other regions of the world.

In 1991, more than a century after the Berlin Congress, the world was not thinking about Pomeranian bones or distracting other Great Powers, but there was a general sense that the dissolution of Yugoslavia would end in disaster. Even before any conflict had started, U.N. Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar “wrote in the strongest terms to urge Germany not to give diplomatic recognition to Croatia.”<sup>5</sup> U.S. officials also “consistently reaffirmed their support for the survival of the Yugoslav Federation. On June 21, 1991, Secretary of State James Baker warned the leaders of Croatia and Slovenia that the United States would not recognize their states’ independence.”<sup>6</sup> Nationalism was on the rise everywhere in Yugoslavia, bringing the fragile unity of the federation under attack from all sides, but especially from the Serbian majority as they tried to preserve a *status quo* in which they were the dominant ethnic group. Germany then supported Croatia’s bid for independence, which put it directly at odds with US policy.

If there was already an atmosphere of trepidation, why did the world not take more concrete steps to stop the disaster *before*, or *just as* it began? Just as in Rwanda, the second (arguably even more serious) genocide of the post-Cold War era, in which “early reinforcement of UNAMIR...would have had a good chance of averting the genocide,”<sup>7</sup> an early and decisive effort in Yugoslavia would have had a noticeable effect. Several aspects of the Bosnian situation make it even more probable that early intervention would

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<sup>5</sup> Boutros Boutros-Gali, *Unvanquished: A US-UN Saga* (New York, NY:Random House, 1999), pp.37

<sup>6</sup> David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the failure of the West* (New York, NY:Simon&Schuster, 1995), pp.15

<sup>7</sup> Alan Kuperman, “Rwanda in Retrospect” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 79, No. 1 (January/February 2000), pp. 109

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 95

have succeeded. First, unlike in Rwanda where events unfolded with “remarkable speed”<sup>9</sup>, the Bosnian atrocities did not come as a surprise to anybody, Serbs (backed by former and current Yugoslav Army units) had already challenged the break-away Croatian Republic, taking a third of it under their control and declaring a “Serbian Republic of the Krajina” half a year before Bosnia declared its independence. In doing so, they revealed a strategy that was based on ethnic cleansing. The imbalance of forces between the Serbs and Bosnians was also painfully obvious. The Bosnian government had no standing army of its own, no trained soldiers. It was landlocked; and a UN arms embargo ensured that it would not be able to arm itself swiftly. On the other hand, most Bosnian Serbs had served in the Yugoslav Army; therefore they had superior training and also access to weaponry and ammunition from existing caches and neighbouring Serbia. Second, there was no “knowledge gap”<sup>10</sup> in the Bosnian slaughter. It unfolded over three and a half years, with the worst atrocities occurring in 1994 and 1995. Most of the atrocities are quite well documented; some, such as the debacle at Srebrenica, happened before the eyes of the press and UNPROFOR. Lastly, unlike in the Rwandan situation, there would be no need to press the Bosnian government, who asked for a UN presence even before they declared independence, to accept intervention.

Incidentally, it has been observed that “in Rwanda, Western officials failed to foresee the genocide, despite numerous warning signs, in part because the act was so immoral that it was difficult to picture.”<sup>11</sup> This statement cannot be entirely true, since the genocide in Bosnia had been going on for several years at the time, and indeed, horrendously immoral acts had occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The genocides in

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp.97

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp.109

WWII against the Jews, and in WWI against the Armenians are only the most cited examples. In Rwanda as in Bosnia, incredulity at the magnitude of genocide cannot be a defence of political short-sightedness and inaction.

Yet, when war came to Bosnia, the Bosnian government's calls for intervention (and later, for the lifting of the arms embargo at least) were repeatedly ignored. Why?

One reason, though not a major one, is that there *was* a general unwillingness in Western countries to get involved in a "Balkan adventure." As the misuse of Bismarck's quote shows, many policy makers probably did think that the region was not worth getting involved in. It must have occurred to many that WWI was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 by a Serb nationalist in Sarajevo. The analogical explanation framework<sup>12</sup> explains this quite well: the rationale for assuming a disengaged position on Bosnia seems to derive from the (wrong) lessons drawn from history. Holbrooke calls this "Bad History, or the Rebecca West Factor:"<sup>13</sup>

Many books and articles about Yugoslavia have left the impression that war was inevitable. The most famous of all English-language books on the region was Rebecca West's monumental travel book *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*... West's openly pro-Serb attitudes and her view that Muslims were racially inferior had influenced two generations of readers and policy makers. Some of her themes were revisited in modern dress in Robert Kaplan's... *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History*, which left most of its readers with the sense that nothing could be done by outsiders in a region so steeped in ancient hatreds.

Another reason that may account for American indifference is the "sphere of influence" argument. The US and Europeans felt that since Yugoslavia was a European country, Europeans were supposed to take care of it. In fact, the official US point of view

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<sup>12</sup> Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at war: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 3-18

<sup>13</sup> Richard Holbrooke, *To End a War* (New York, NY: Random House, 1998), pp.22

still continues to be that the Europeans asked to handle the crisis on their own. According to an article in the US Army War College Quarterly, "...Western Europe--proud, prosperous, and united--could not stop the fighting. In 1991, the leading European powers told Washington they would handle this problem in their own backyard."<sup>14</sup> It is true that the Europeans were eager to handle this on their own, but they were unprepared. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) did not have even a fraction of NATO's resources, so there was no mechanism to back European peacemaking efforts with military force. Furthermore, there was no unified European agenda or plan. France and Britain, who had been allies with the Serbs through two World Wars, were ambiguous in their approach to Serbian aggression in Bosnia. Greece and Russia felt a common bond with their fellow Orthodox Christians, the Serbs. The European reaction was thus limited to enforcing the arms embargo in order to contain the crisis and trying to mediate between the two sides. The first three mediation efforts were not successful because none of the mediators had leverage. All sides in the conflict knew that there would be no intervention<sup>15</sup>. The role of Russia was "ambiguous...the West's sensitivity to Russia's internal politics, such as rising national movements, [put] significant constraints...on implementing a peaceful solution."<sup>16</sup> The European failure thus was "closely related to unproductive sets of multilateral and bilateral negotiations of the outsiders involved in working out an undeclared agenda."<sup>17</sup> The Europeans did,

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Roskin, "The Emerging Europe: Power Configurations for the Next Century", *Parameters*, Winter 1999-2000, pp. 86-97

<sup>15</sup> Slaughterhouse, pp.14

<sup>16</sup> Nimet Beriker Atiyas, "Mediating Regional Conflicts and Negotiating Flexibility: Peace efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Annals, AAPSS*, November 1995, pp.200

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid* pp.201

however, manage to provide the Bush administration with an adequate excuse to stay disengaged.

The U.S. is not bereft of guilt in the creation of Western apathy either. The US willingly disengaged themselves from Yugoslavia, instead of being kept away from it by Europeans. President George Bush and his Secretary of State Baker were eminently against getting involved. “Questioned about this [US inactivity in Bosnia during the Bush administration] in 1995, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft said, “The President and Baker were furthest on the other side. Baker would say ‘We don’t have a dog in this fight.’ The President would say to me once a week ‘Tell me again what this is all about’”<sup>18</sup>. Holbrooke attributes this to fatigue: “...dealing with both Desert Storm and the death throes of the Soviet Union had exhausted Washington.”<sup>19</sup> The fatigue argument does not bear close scrutiny. In dealing with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the U.S. had shown that it could take a leadership role with great efficiency and expediency when it desired. If another crisis had arisen in the Persian Gulf in mid 1992, odds are the US response would have been just as swift and terrible as it had been two years previous. The plain truth is that the vast majority of the US public did not want American soldiers dying in Bosnia – which is a reasonable response from a public which is located far away and content to remain blissfully ignorant of such a horrible place. Unlike in Korea, Vietnam, and many other interventions throughout the Third World, this time there was no monolithic Communist threat to scare the American public into compliance with a position of engagement. Serb animosity was narrowly and directly aimed at Bosnian Muslims and Croats. There were no dominoes to fall after Yugoslavia. Bosnia’s strategic

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<sup>18</sup> To End a War, pp.27

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp.26

value was diminutive as well. Its small, landlocked mass was not in any geopolitically important zone. The US did not need crucial access rights in its territory, nor were there vital US interests buried in its mountains and valleys. In Bosnia, there would be no “lines drawn in the sand” or on any other type of soil for that matter.

Another argument which accounts for the world’s disengagement from the conflict was that of the UN Secretary General, Boutros-Gali Bouros-Ghali: “The West seemed to regard the Serbs as the only wrongdoers, whereas I felt that no party in Bosnia was free of at least some of the blame.”<sup>20</sup> On his first and only trip to Sarajevo, Boutros-Gali then went on to say to an astonished Bosnian public: “You have a situation that is better than ten other places in the world...I can give you a list.”<sup>22</sup> In this way, the world’s inaction in Bosnia was somehow be justified by pointing out that there were also other places in the world where terror and slaughter raged (there were) and no party in Bosnia was entirely free of guilt (they were not). This argument is extremely fallacious and morally dubious. If intervention is only contemplated or warranted in those conflicts in which a party is entirely blameless of guilt, so rare would be the event that there should be no need for a global collective security apparatus. Assuming that the UN approached every conflict with this mentality, not intervening in one conflict would not make the situation in others any better. In fact, there is no solid evidence that what was going on in Bosnia had anything to do with why the response in Rwanda was so ineffectual.

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<sup>20</sup> Unvanquished, pp.42

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pp.53

<sup>24</sup> To End a War, pp.41

What about the Clinton administration? Aware of previous Democratic candidates' errors in not challenging the Republicans in foreign policy issues<sup>24</sup>, candidate Clinton made Bosnia the centrepiece of his campaign strategy. Tellingly, his criticism of Bush's Bosnian policy, his calls for "real leadership and air strikes," and his promises to "make the United States the catalyst for a collective stand against aggression" had little impact on the American electorate<sup>25</sup>. After the election, Clinton was faced with the reality that 1) US troops had already been committed to Somalia by the outgoing Bush administration and 2) The US public and military, especially Colin Powell, were opposed to deploying US ground troops in Bosnia. "We do deserts, we don't do mountains," was the message the Pentagon sent to the White House.<sup>26</sup> The Clinton administration also wanted to distance itself from being associated with the continuation of the Bush administration's policies. They immediately withdrew US support from the so-called Vance-Owen Plan, labelling it as appeasement of the Serbs. Boutros-Ghali criticised this decision severely: "They were wrong. The plan... would reflect all groups fairly, reconstituting Bosnia as a multiethnic and progressively demilitarized state. It would have blocked the Serb goal of creating a 'Greater Serbia'."<sup>27</sup> Whether the Vance-Owen plan would have worked or not is perhaps not relevant. Its fate is just an example to highlight the risk-averse attitude that had come to typify the Clinton administration's attitude towards Bosnia. Tim Wirth (counsellor to Clinton) was reported to have remarked "We can't let Bosnia endanger the best liberal hope for a generation."<sup>28</sup> This avoidance behaviour on the part of a would-be demagogue led to "an absolutely visceral

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp.42

<sup>26</sup> Aryeh Neier, War Crimes: brutality, genocide, terror and the struggle for justice (New York, NY:Times Books, 1998), pp.128

<sup>27</sup> Unvanquished, pp.69

<sup>28</sup> Slaughterhouse, pp.29

reluctance [on the Clinton administration's part] to expend the political capital necessary to rescue Bosnia."<sup>29</sup> In order to be seen as doing something, Clinton settled on trying to sell a "carefully circumscribed program for intervention called 'lift and strike'"<sup>31</sup> as well as calling for an international War Crimes tribunal in the UN security council (S/RES/808)<sup>32</sup>. The deaths of US rangers in Mogadishu in 1993 "gave Washington an additional reason not to deploy Americans in Bosnia."<sup>33</sup>

All these factors came together to contribute to continued inaction on the part of the world community. The UN was pushed further and further into a role where it was reduced to being no more than an eyewitness to the escalating series of horrors taking place in Bosnia. The magnitude and specific details of these brutal atrocities and crimes against humanity reached astonishing proportions, yet still these were not enough reason for a sizeable fraction of Western policymakers to justify getting involved in Bosnia to their public. For example, as the noose around Srebrenica tightened, the French commander of UNPROFOR Lieutenant General Philippe Morillon was personally reprimanded by Boutros-Ghali when he "decided to go to Srebrenica and by remaining there try to compel the Serbs to stop shelling."<sup>34</sup> He was relieved of his duties after a few months from the incident<sup>35</sup>. After the fall of Srebrenica and the massacres that followed, house speaker Gingrich judged it the "worst humiliation for the Western democracies

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> War Crimes, pp.128

<sup>32</sup> UN website, <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm>, under link for Resolution 808.

<sup>33</sup> War Crimes, pp.129

<sup>34</sup> Slaughterhouse, pp.169

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

since the 1930s,” but then stated: “There are twenty ways to solve this problem without involving a single American directly in this thing.”<sup>36</sup>

In 1995, the war finally ended with the signing of the Dayton agreement. Its humanitarian cost had been enormous: two hundred thousand dead, and over two million refugees. Bosnia is now divided into ethnically separate groups, with a Serbian area comprising 49% of its pre-war area and a federation of Muslims and Croats in the remaining 51%. Perhaps, most ironically one of the more tragic outcomes of the war was the realization of pre-war Serbian aims, a result that has been confirmed and accepted by the world community. In fact, by first failing to defend, and then by evacuating Muslim cities in order to save the civilians, the UN found itself in the awkward position of having abetted ethnic cleansing<sup>37</sup>. Endorsing the now evacuated cities’ new homoethnic status in Serbian controlled land in the Dayton agreement has only rubbed salt into the wound.

The larger costs of the war impact on the credibility of Western institutions of collective security and to Western countries’ commitment to the values that they claim to stand for. A very short time after Bush’s repeated declaration that “naked aggression shall not stand” in Kuwait, naked aggression and worse were allowed to stand in Bosnia. I have focussed on trying to explain how and why this happened.

To summarize: it happened because no Western country had any self-interest in preventing the atrocities in Bosnia, so it was allowed to happen. It happened because the global security apparatus that had been formed on mighty principles after WWII, but crippled in the playground of post WWII superpower struggles. It happened because all the rhetoric which has been used to justify all the interventions (by either side) in the

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<sup>36</sup> To Stop a War, pp.71

<sup>37</sup> Slaughterhouse, pp.208

Cold War has been mainly just that: rhetoric. For decades, the Cold War provided cover to the reality that the UN had principally served as an excuse for endorsing Great Power actions. With the Cold War over, the excuse was gone, and UN's ineffectuality in the face of a crisis where there was no Great Power self-interest was exposed.

One may wonder, in the light of all that has been discussed, whether it should have happened? Is this just an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of nationalism and ethnic strife? Was there anything that could be done to avert the disaster? Even from a purely moral perspective, a model was already in place if one were to only look for it. The Reagan Doctrine's reasoning makes a clear-cut case for intervention<sup>38</sup>:

Article 2.4 [of the UN Charter] enjoins all member states to "refrain in the international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state."

But, it is clear that this prohibition of force was never intended to stand on its own, but to be seen in the context of the entire Charter, as complementary to Article 51 (which affirms the inherent right to individuals or collective self-defence) and to all provisions of the Charter concerning guarantees of human rights.

Moreover, the charter of the United Nations clearly states that member states will be democratic, peace loving and committed to the maintenance of world peace...

Some assert that it is inconsistent for the U.S. to support an insurgency against a government in Nicaragua and a government against an insurgency in El Salvador.

The answer is that in both cases we are supporting legitimate democracy against those who would base their powers on force.

If the Reagan Doctrine as articulated above is to be taken at face value, the ethical case for intervening against "those who would base their powers on force" existed for Bosnia. The government of Bosnia was far more democratic, far more in line with "American values" than any of the petty dictators who had enjoyed (and continue to

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<sup>38</sup> "The Reagan Doctrine II" in Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick, *Legitimacy and Force, Volume One, Political and Moral Dimensions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), pp. 435-437.

enjoy to this day) staunch US support. Where, then, was US support for it? In reality, Bosnia exposed this call “for supporting legitimate democracy” as a facetious principle stated on dubious and cynical grounds to justify direct and indirect US interventions in Central America and elsewhere, according to US global interests.

In Bosnia a democracy was attacked by an armed insurgency, which committed human rights abuses of tremendous seriousness. Many abuses and crimes against humanity had to happen over the course of three years before any serious effort to stop the conflict was undertaken. Intervention efforts which were first made at the European level, and then under the auspices of the UN were shown to be ineffective. If anything, the magnitude of the crimes alone should have prompted swift and decisive military intervention by the US.

What instead happened is explained eloquently by David Rieff<sup>39</sup>: “What is certain is that a lot of dreams have died in Bosnia...the dream that the world has a conscience; the dream that Europe is a civilized place; the dream that there is justice for the weak as well as for the strong. It should come as no surprise that the old millenarian dream that the truth shall set us free should die there as well. And this reality is better apprehended in the ruined town centre of Gorazde...than in the UN secretariat building in New York, much as we might have wished it otherwise. The defeat is total, the disgrace is complete.”

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<sup>39</sup> Slaughterhouse, pp.225

**Yugoslavia Timeline<sup>40</sup>:**

1980: Josip Broz Tito dies.

1987: Slobodan Milosevic takes power in Serbia.

28 June, 1989: Milosevic delivers inflammatory rally to one million Serbs on the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Kosovo, identifying Muslim Albanians and Muslim Bosnians with Muslim Turks<sup>41</sup>.

21 June 1991: Secretary of State James Baker visits Croatia and Slovenia, warns leaders of non-recognition by the US.

28 June 1991: Fighting in Croatia begins.

25 September 1991: UN Security Council passes an arms embargo resolution against all parties in the former Yugoslavia.

20 December 1991: Izzetbegovic (president of the Bosnian assembly) asks for EC recognition and US troops.

3 January 1992: Cease-fire in Croatia; Serbs control the Krajina region. UN troops dispatched to enforce, headquarters in Sarajevo, Bosnia.

29 February 1992: Referendum on independence held in Bosnia on EC insistence. Croat & Muslims vote overwhelmingly for, Serbs boycott.

3 March 1992: Bosnia declares its independence. Fighting breaks out soon thereafter.

6 April 1992: Siege of Sarajevo commences.

7 April 1992: EC & US recognize Bosnia-Herzegovina.

22 May 1992: The UN recognizes Bosnia-Herzegovina.

4 February 1994: Infamous marketplace shell in Sarajevo kills 68, seen live on TV.

10-12 July 1995: "Safe-area" Srebrenica overrun.

21 November 1995: Dayton agreement signed, ending the war.

**U.S. & World Timeline:**

Summer and Fall 1992: Clinton promises "swift action" in Bosnia during campaign. Defeats Bush in presidential elections.

January 1993: Clinton administration balks at Balkan involvement.

8 October 1993: 18 US soldiers killed in Somalia.

April 1994: Rwandan genocide.

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<sup>40</sup> Mainly culled from online timelines and also Slaughterhouse, pp. 16-25 except where noted

<sup>41</sup> War Crimes, p.117