

Understanding Failures in Intelligence Estimates - UNPROFOR, the Dutch, and the Bosnian-Serb Attack on Srebrenica¹

M.V. METSELAAR

'Urgent, urgent, urgent. BSA is entering the town of Srebrenica. Will someone stop this immediately and save these people. Thousands of them are gathering around the hospital. Please help!'

Alarm signal sent by a UN officer in Srebrenica to his leaders in Geneva during the afternoon of July 10, quoted in: New York Times, 29 October 1995

'Intelligence did not prepare us adequately for the attacks on Srebrenica.'
Richard Holbrooke, US Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs, quoted in: Newsday, 29 May 1996

'How is it possible that UNPROFOR was not aware of the real character of the Serbian intentions? I can hardly believe that it was not possible to provide an earlier warning!'

Kofi Annan, the then UN Undersecretary for Peacekeeping in an angry letter to Akashi, quoted in a Channel 4 documentary, May 1996

'The fall of Srebrenica and the ensuing bloodbath was the result of a "failure of intelligence."'

Kofi Annan, the then UN Undersecretary for Peacekeeping in: Newsday, 29 May 1996

23

1. Introduction

At 03.15 on the morning of Thursday 6 July 1995, the Bosnian-Serb army (BSA) started its attack on Srebrenica, the Muslim enclave that had been declared a 'safe area' by the United Nations (UN) Security Council on April 16, 1993.² A Multiple Launch Rocket System stationed in the north of the enclave hit Srebrenica with six rockets. Forty-five minutes later Dutch observation posts (OPs) in the south-eastern part of the enclave reported that fighting had erupted all around them. Artillery, 20 to 30 tanks, mortars, machine guns and small arms produced a cacophony of firing noise. It became the start of a two-day pounding of several targets by Bosnian-Serb tanks and artillery. The UN military observers in the enclave - a Dutchman, a Ghanian, and a Kenyan - reported at least 250 artillery and mortar rounds and six 120mm rockets, causing two deaths and six casualties. The BSA, with an attacking force of 8,000 to 12,000, up to 3,000 of them from

Serbia, outgunned the Bosnian Army (BIH) that was only 3,000 men strong. The Dutch UN battalion was no real contender, handicapped as it was by the fact that some 150 of its members were unable to return to the enclave as a result of a well-planned blockade of the BSA, that only 16% of the operational requirement for ammunition was available, that its fuel supplies were almost exhausted, that there was a structural lack of fresh food, drinking water, and (partly as a consequence of all these problems) that the morale of the battalion had become low (Debriefing Report, 1995: 17-18). Within a few days the BSA overran five of the thirteen Dutch observation posts. On July 11, at about 16.30 hours, UNMOs reported that the BSA had overrun the enclave as well as the Dutch compound. The enclave surrendered five days after the attack had begun.

24

The Bosnian-Serb attack caught the international community, including the Netherlands, off guard.³ Despite the fact that both the strategic and the tactical command levels of UNPROFOR had been more or less aware, since April, of indications that an attack on Srebrenica could be forthcoming, they were still surprised when the attack actually came (cf. Honig and Both, 1996: 175). Moreover, many in the UNPROFOR chain of command and on the national level (including the Dutch political and military top in The Hague) continued to misread the objectives of the attack even after its initial phase. After the BSA attack had begun, most observers (including most of the officers and soldiers of the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica itself) still saw no clear indications that the Serbs had higher ambitions than just to fulfil their long-standing wish to increase control over the south-east corner of the enclave including the important road there. Many of them began to recognize that the BSA attack was intended to conquer the whole enclave no earlier than the morning of Tuesday, July 11.⁴ The UN/NATO reactions that finally came, were simply too little, too late.⁵

As we all know now, the attack had dramatic consequences. The massacre that followed the take-over of Srebrenica became the largest single war crime in Europe since the Second World War. Between 6 and 16 July the Bosnian-Serbs expelled 23,000 Bosnian-Muslim women and children and captured thousands of Muslim men. Some 8,000 Muslims were murdered.⁶ Many of them were killed by the Bosnian-Serbs after having surrendered and hoped that the United Nations could protect them. Others were hunted down in the woods. Some Muslims were so desperate that they committed suicide. The United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), which included the Dutch battalion that had been given the task to protect the safe area, failed to prevent this nightmare. The fall of Srebrenica, and, more in particular, the genocide of the Bosnian-Muslims that followed became the darkest page in the history of UN peacekeeping operations. It became a tragic, and in many ways, traumatic failure in the eyes of the

international community. The conquest of Srebrenica marked the end of the United Nation's biggest and costliest peacekeeping mission. The debacle and the resulting massacre finally galvanized the United States. It resulted in peace enforcing actions on the ground and in the air, in the Dayton Peace Accords and in the introduction of the Implementation Force (IFOR) and, later, the Stabilization Force (SFOR) in the former Yugoslavia.

In retrospect, it is rather easy to conclude that the attack on Srebrenica as well as its horrible aftermath were the result of a coincidental chain of tragic events, misperceptions, decisions and actions that simply happened. Indeed, already at a rather early stage during the UNPROFOR operation, many observers and participants claimed that the implementation of the safe-area concept in Bosnia-Herzegovina was doomed to fail.⁷ In the Netherlands, it was regularly claimed in 1993 and 1994 that the task of the Dutch UN battalion in Srebrenica was a mission impossible.⁸ With the benefit of hindsight one can say that there was an increasing number of warnings indicating that Dutchbat and the other battalions in Bosnia-Herzegovina were entrapped in a mission impossible. Moreover, one might emphasize that there were increasing indications that the possibility of NATO air attacks as a serious deterrent and 'life insurance' in case something went wrong became more and more obsolete in the eyes of UNPROFOR commanders in the field, UN officials in New York as well as the Bosnian-Serbs. Afterwards, newspapers, journalists, political scientists and historians all over the world started to underline each of these indications. Increasingly, the attack tended to be seen as a tragic consequence of a combination of failures in intelligence estimates, of failing anticipation, or, perhaps even worse, as a 'cynical chess game' in international *Realpolitik*.⁹

25

This article re-examines a case that may have been a failure in intelligence estimates. Moreover, it tries to put the case in another, and maybe more appropriate, perspective. My analysis will therefore focus on the initial stage before the fall of the enclave. I will try to introduce a different perspective on the way key decision-makers of UNPROFOR in Srebrenica (Karremans), Sarajevo (Smith, Nicolai) and Zagreb (Janvier), as well as key decision-makers in the Netherlands reacted to warning signals that might have said something about the probability, the timing, the character and the objectives of a Bosnian-Serb attack on the enclave. A perspective that has been absent in most, if not all, analyses and comments up to today. To what extent could the BSA attack have been foreseen, given the warning signals that *could* be observed before and during the start of the attack? And, to what extent can specific conditions (e.g. interactions between the potential sources of danger, the warners, the warning systems, and the key decision-makers; as well as several factors that may have affected the so-

called signal-to-noise ratio) explain the reactions to the warning signals?

I will explore two directions of explanation in order to obtain more insight in these intriguing questions. Each of these directions is based on more or less 'classical' perspectives regarding the way people cope with (strategic and tactical) warnings, as well as the way military surprise attacks can be achieved. Given the recentness of the case study, and more in particular, its political sensitivity, it will not come as a surprise that the findings presented in this article will be only tentative in nature. I have tried to analyze and use as many 'open sources' as possible for the present analysis, including classified documents that were published in newspapers and books. Nevertheless, we will have to wait until many archives are opened and many of the key participants feel freer to reveal more 'ins' and 'outs' before we can compile a more definitive, realistic, and complete picture of the complex puzzle that will be discussed - at least initially - in this article. At the same time there are strong disadvantages in waiting until all the facts are on the table. We might be sailing a disastrous course if we decide to wait "for Godot" before we permit ourselves to draw some *lessons learned*.¹⁰ Moreover, a good analysis, based on well-proven theoretical perspectives and questions may help us to make sense of what kind of facts may be relevant or not. It may help us to bring some order to the facts and to give them meaning.

26

The outline of this article is as follows: section 2 provides a brief summary of the warnings that can be found in the period before the Bosnian-Serb attack. Section 3 will centre on two possible directions of explanation. The article ends with several tentative conclusions.

2. A Summary of Warnings (1993 - 6 July 1995)

When, how, in what form, and to what extent were the key decision-makers confronted with warnings, and what was the content of these warnings? This crucial question is easy to ask, yet, it is rather difficult to answer. First, it is necessary to define what 'warnings' actually are. Under which conditions can one speak of a warning? Most of the studies on warnings tend to define warnings as 'signs of a potential danger that might be forthcoming' (e.g. Janis, 1972: 57). It concerns the prediction of a potentially unwelcome event (e.g. an enemy attack). Whether or not the prediction will come to pass is partly dependent on the actions of the intended recipients of the warnings as well as the subject of the forecast (the adversary) (Chan, 1979: 171). With this rough description in mind, one can make a summary of small, relatively insignificant as well as significant warnings. I will try to provide a brief summary of the most significant of these warnings.

During 1992 and 1993 one can observe a growing consensus in large parts of the media, public opinion and the parliaments of many Western countries that the international community (i.e. the UN) has to send troops in order to prevent further conflict escalation and genocide in the former Yugoslavia. Moreover, it was seen as a moral duty, but also as in the national interest to prevent the further destabilization in 'Central Europe' and to manage the increasing streams of refugees (Boode, 1993; Berghout, 1996; Brabander, 1997). At the same time many politicians and military professionals were more or less reluctant because they foresaw many difficulties and risks. In other words, the whole operation can be seen as a trade-off between the risks of doing something and the risks of doing nothing.

All the time the Dutch government was considering whether or not it should send Dutch ground troops to support the tasks of UNPROFOR in the former Yugoslavia (in 1992-1993), several retired as well as serving senior Dutch officers voiced their misgivings. General Van der Vlis, at that moment the highest-placed general and military adviser of the Dutch Defence Secretary, strongly warned against it. Lieutenant General Hans Couzy, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Netherlands Army, was also quite sceptical. On January 14, 1993 he openly called an international military intervention in the former Yugoslavia 'an absolute impossibility.' He declared that such an action might easily become 'a second Vietnam.' For a number of reasons, the Dutch Chief-of-Staff, Lieutenant General Van der Vlis, and Lieutenant General Couzy strongly agreed that the whole operation (including the role that would be assigned to the Dutch) looked like a "mission impossible" (cf. Couzy, 1996: 138; Ter Beek, 1996). However, after a lot of deliberations in the period May-November 1993, they reluctantly accepted the - to quote Van der Vlis - 'honourable, difficult, but do-able task.'¹¹ Yet, even after the Dutch Cabinet made its first formal commitments to send a Dutch battalion to Bosnia-Herzegovina, some of the (former) Dutch generals still revealed that they had strong reservations on several occasions.¹²

The number of warnings referring to the weaknesses in the safe area strategy and the vulnerability of the enclave gradually increased during 1994. The warnings were given by international as well as domestic sources. For instance, a report of Secretary-General Boutros Ghali of 16 March 1994 warned that UNPROFOR was not equipped to fight. It did not have enough means, even if it got support from the air, to protect the safe areas against a deliberate attack. The report concluded that the protecting role of UNPROFOR only relied on its (symbolic) presence as a representative of the United Nations.¹³ In other words, it was admitted that there was full awareness of the minimal power basis of the UN troops vis-à-vis the warring parties. In fact, since the only alternative on the so-called escalation scales in case of an attack was the use of air power, everyone realized that Dutchbat and the citizens in the enclave were more or less permanently at the mercy of the Bosnian-Serbs.

From the arrival of the third Dutch battalion under Lieutenant-Colonel Ton Karremans in Srebrenica in January 1995 there was an increasing stream of warning signals about Dutchbat's position and morale through the regular daily contacts by telephone and coded messages to the crisis centre of the Dutch Army. Much of the warnings were made public via Dutch television programmes, newspapers and magazines. The so-called 'Retired Generals' Network' was an important source and sometimes channel for such warnings.

On the one hand, it seems plausible that (among others) the Dutch Secretary of Defence, Joris Voorhoeve, and the Dutch Foreign Secretary, Hans van Mierlo, were right in their arguments that the safe-area concept, at least for a while, helped to prevent a much higher number of victims of murder, genocide, imprisonment, and hunger or sickness. On the other hand, however, it became unmistakably clear to all parties that the safe area in Srebrenica, as well as the other ones (Gorazde, Sarajevo, Bihac), would evolve from isolated open-air prisons to the unsafest areas of the world unless some drastic measures were taken (Leurdijk, 1996: 33-58). And then, on 1 May 1995, the cessation of hostilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina ended, making the fragile situation even more precarious. UNPROFOR predicted serious fighting for June (Owen, 1996: 345). Once again, almost every part of the former Yugoslavia was in a state of tension.

Meanwhile, the opinion within the UNPROFOR countries that something had to be done was steadily gaining strength (Honig and Both, 1996; Leurdijk, 1995a and b; Leurdijk 1996; Smith, 1996; Rohde, 1997). The French warned the international community that a new French government, after the presidential elections, which Chirac looked likely to win, would favour withdrawal from UNPROFOR if their two conditions - renewal of the cessation of hostilities and strengthening of UNPROFOR in terms of its assets and its rules of engagement - were not met. The situation became even more precarious after the total diminishment of the NATO air strikes as a reliable deterrent and compensation for the vulnerable position of Dutch and other UNPROFOR soldiers on the ground on May 31.¹⁴

The period between the end of May and July 6 can be characterized as a period of steadily increasing tensions around the enclave. There were growing tensions between Dutchbat and the Bosnian-Serbs. Mladic demanded free access to the road in front of OP Echo in the south-eastern corner of the enclave. The Bosnian-Serb Army gradually started to intimidate the Dutch by firing close to the OP. On June 3, about 70 BSA soldiers approached OP Echo with hand-held weapons, heavy machine guns, mortars and anti-tank weapons. The BSA demanded that the ten Dutch soldiers withdrew from the OP (Dutchbat III, 1996: 180-181). The Serbs opened fire when the ten soldiers failed to comply quickly enough. Thereafter, the OP was abandoned (Debriefing Report, 1995: 15).

Other warnings came from the Dutch commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Ton Karremans (cf. Westerman and Rijs, 1997; Honig and Both, 1997; Couzy, 1996: 152). He had phoned as well as written several times to the UN Command Centre of Sector North-East at Tuzla, the Crisis Situation Centre (SITCEN) of the Royal Netherlands Army and the Dutch Defence Crisis Management Centre (DCBC) in the Hague to complain and warn about the deteriorating situation in Srebrenica.¹⁵ Karremans had warned his senior UN commanders as well as his superiors in the Hague that he and his staff had indications that the Serbs were preparing an attack on the enclave (New York Times, 29 October 1995). On June 5, 1995 - two days after the loss of OP Echo - Karremans had sent a long classified letter to the Hague in which he gave a quite pessimistic and in some ways alarming evaluation of the situation in the enclave.¹⁶ Karremans stressed that he became more and more frustrated and worried about the situation. He made clear that UN humanitarian convoys were no longer reaching the enclave and that the battalion was short on medical supplies. Since the end of May the Serbs had cut off the smuggling routes to Zepa. Heavy rainfall had washed away many crops from the fields as well as the improvised river power generator. Drinking-water equipment was no longer functioning, because the system had been blocked. Karremans underlined that Dutchbat was completely cut off from the rest of the world and that the men and women of his battalion felt like hostages. He warned that the total lack of supplies meant that the battalion 'as things stand, will be confronted with an emergency situation similar to the one the civilian population has experienced for some time.'¹⁷ The Dutch battalion commander concluded his letter with another warning to make clear that something had to be done as soon as possible:

29

The circumstances on the southern flank of the enclave as well as the condition of the population and the battalion, both at the operational and humanitarian levels, are becoming so serious that the battalion on the one hand, and the civil and military authorities on the other are no longer able to turn around the critical situation... It is now up to the higher echelons to create the parameters which will enable the infantry battalion in the enclave of Srebrenica to carry out, in full, its assigned tasks.

At the same time Karremans emphasized that he did not expect a 'large-scale offensive' against the enclave because he was convinced that the Serbs lacked the manpower to accomplish this.

Intelligence services must be a crucial source of warnings. This simple wisdom is even more true when you are surrounded by potential enemies (like, for instance, Israel in the Middle East) or when you are in an extremely vulnerable position wherein almost everything you can do depends on the goodwill and intentions of potential adversaries. The British Lieutenant General Rupert Smith must have had this truism in

mind when he took over as UN commander in Sarajevo. Smith almost immediately decided to set up an intelligence cell. The cell contained experienced officers from the United States and seven other countries. By early April 1995, Smith's intelligence cell had assessed that the military leader of the BSA, Ratko Mladic, would make a major push by summer in order to seize Srebrenica as well as the two other safe areas near the Serbian border, Zepa and Gorazde (Gutman, 1996). They estimated that Mladic would try this push sometime in June (Gutman, 1996; Rohde, 1997). As always, a lot of rumours were going around in Bosnia-Herzegovina that something might be happening. The *Weekly Infosum* (29 May) of three UNMOs mentioned that Arkan's elite troops had moved in the direction of Bratunac on June 2, 1995.¹⁸ They commented that 'any attempt to clear the enclave would probably [...] require commitment as well as less salubrious qualities. The BSA soldiers are not showing these qualities and so a unit like the Arkan Brigade would be necessary.'¹⁹ General Rupert Smith's Chief-of-Staff in Sarajevo, the Dutch Brigadier Kees Nicolai, recalled afterwards that his reaction to these rumours and intelligence messages was that 'they [Arkan's Tigers] always showed up at places where something was about to happen. That was an indication that Srebrenica was on their [the Bosnian-Serb] wish list' (quoted in Gutman, 1996 and in a Channel 4 documentary, May 1996). Later reports from several international intelligence services also contained indications that could lead one to surmise that an attack on Srebrenica was being prepared. As of June 17, three weeks prior to the fall of the enclave, the American National Security Agency listened in to the daily telephone conversations of General Mladic and the actual director of the entire operation, General Momcilo Perisic, the Chief-of-Staff of the Yugoslav army. (Gutman, 1996; *Tageszeitung*, 12 October 1995). US Intelligence sources insisted that armoured units from the Yugoslav Army were involved in the preparations (cf. Honig and Both, 1996: 179). Since the Yugoslav Army participated in all earlier major Bosnian-Serb offensives, this could have been regarded as another indication that a major attack on Srebrenica was forthcoming. With hindsight, a NATO intelligence officer on Smith's staff remembered that they had 'clear indications' that Mladic frequently went to Belgrade for consultations with Perisic, and that 'Perisic and his top generals travelled to Bosnia all the time. [...] To them there was no border....' (Gutman, 1996). The fact that Yugoslavia had officially suspended military aid to the Bosnian-Serbs seemed to be just a ruse to cover the operation.²⁰ The CIA interceptions of daily telephone calls between the Chief-of-Staff of the National Yugoslav Army at Beograd, General Perisic, and the Commander-in-Chief of the BSA, General Mladic revealed several seemingly unambiguous indications that Mladic and the BSA had clear intentions to attack Srebrenica as well as Gorazde and Zepa. One of these interceptions, for example, seems to speak for itself: 'By the way, Mladic, you are not going to Srebrenica, are you?' 'Of course I am. [...]

And I will also go to Gorazde and Zepa.' (*Parool*, 15 May 1996). Moreover, at the end of June and the start of July, US intelligence services provided satellite pictures made from unmanned spy planes, which made clear that tanks and guns were being concentrated around Srebrenica.²¹ Yet, despite indications like these, there still were many ambiguities and uncertainties that may have obscured what was actually happening. A US intelligence officer who was interviewed afterwards declared that there was too little convincing evidence to jump to alarming conclusions:

We had indications in June that the Serbs might be concentrating on the enclave ... but it was unclear what the scope of the action was. (New York Times, 29 October 1995)

A later UNMO daily situation report (July 7) contained messages that said there had been movements of BSA tanks, artillery and infantry south of Zvornik on 4 and 5 July. That same report also mentioned unconfirmed reports of reinforcements from Serbia. The UNMO report concluded with a more or less optimistic reassurance: 'Although the BSA wants to neutralise the enclave, it is unlikely that it will start a large-scale offensive,' On July 7, UNMOs appealed to the United Nations to 'stop this carnage and damage to this civilian property in a UN declared safe zone' (quoted in Gutman, 1996).

31

It is important to realize that this review of more or less significant warning signals may only be the tip of the iceberg. It is also important to realize that there are still many uncertainties with regard to crucial questions like who has been exposed to which kind of warnings, when, where and how. For example, it is probable that US intelligence services were relatively better informed than most of the Dutch commanders in the UNPROFOR chain of command and the Dutch decision-makers in the Hague. Nevertheless, one may conclude that even the Dutch decision-makers must have been somewhat aware of a number of more or less convincing indications that a BSA attack might be forthcoming. At the same time it can hardly be denied that the warning cues are somewhat ambiguous. It is difficult to trace if, to what extent, when, and in what form a possible BSA attack would take place. Many of the warning cues were based on rumours, guessing and the words of sources that were not regarded, for several reasons, as highly reliable. But, given the combination of quite different factors (e.g. the quickly weakening position of the UN, the disappearance of NATO air strikes as a deterrent, the timing of the arrival of the Rapid Reaction Force, the pattern one could trace in the preparations of the BSA, the information about the intense contacts between the BSA and the top of the Yugoslav army, and the entrance of the Arkan brigade) one could have predicted what was forthcoming. Moreover, given the way the BSA had attacked in previous cases one could even have predicted -

with of course some benefit of a doubt - *how* the BSA would attack (cf. Honig and Both, 1996; Rohde, 1997). However, at that moment there was still a lot of room for justified scepticism, doubts and uncertainties.

3. Coping with Warnings: Two Explanatory Directions

To what extent were key decision-makers in Dutch, in the UN command lines, and in the Netherlands aware of the warning signals summarized above? And, more in particular, what factors and mechanisms may have played a role in the way they reacted to them? Studies on strategic surprise attacks, intelligence failures, coping with disasters and coping with warnings offer many different theories that may help us to answer these questions. Moreover, these theories open the possibility to place events that at first sight may be defined as “intelligence failures” in a broader, comparative perspective. The analysis in this article will be based on two of these theories: (1) the ‘cry wolf theory,’ and (2) the ‘noise barrier theory.’

3.1 CRY WOLF THEORY AS A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

32 Given their ‘bad news’ nature, warnings tend to trigger strong psychological motivations to find alternative explanations that may refute the information which leads to issuing warnings and thus to denying the probable occurrence of the unwanted event (Bobrow, 1973: 17-18; Chan, 1979: 172). One of the well-studied theoretical approaches in which such mechanisms play a key role is called Cry Wolf Theory or Cry Wolf Syndrome. The cry wolf syndrome is a well-known intelligence trap that can be recognized in almost every historical case of strategic surprise. It emphasizes two specific psychological traps in the interaction between a (potential) danger (e.g. a military attack or a disaster), the warning signals that may provide some information about certain aspects of the danger, the (warning) system that may transmit the warnings to one or more receiver(s) (e.g. specific alarm procedures and alarm systems, the receiver’s intelligence agents, his staff, or organization), and the receiver(s) (see Figure 1). The traps are encapsulated in the following two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The more alarms that will be perceived as false, the lower the credibility of both the warning messages and the messengers will become and the higher the chance that warnings about a forthcoming danger will not be taken seriously so that the actual materialization of the danger will come as a surprise (cf. Breznitz, 1984: 14-15).

Hypothesis 2: The more (more or less) similar alarms about the same danger will be repeated, the higher the chance that a clearly detectable danger will lose its threatening message due to a systematic desensitization of the warning system (Breznitz, 1984: 15).

Repeated warnings which are not followed up by consistent action have the effect of eroding the alertness of the threatened party. Moreover, they can have devastating effects on the credibility of the warner, and his messages. Repeated warnings that turn out to have been unnecessary tend to obscure the signals that herald the advent of a real danger (Breznitz, 1984; Kahn, 1958: 257; Whaley, 1969: 187-188; Handel, 1977: 478-479). It is this symptom of cry wolf that the former Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir had in mind when she said plaintively about the Arab surprise attack that started the Yom Kippur War in October 1973 that:

*No one in this country realises how many times during the past year we received information from the same source that war would break out on this or that day, without war breaking out. I will not say this was good enough. I do say it was fatal.*²²

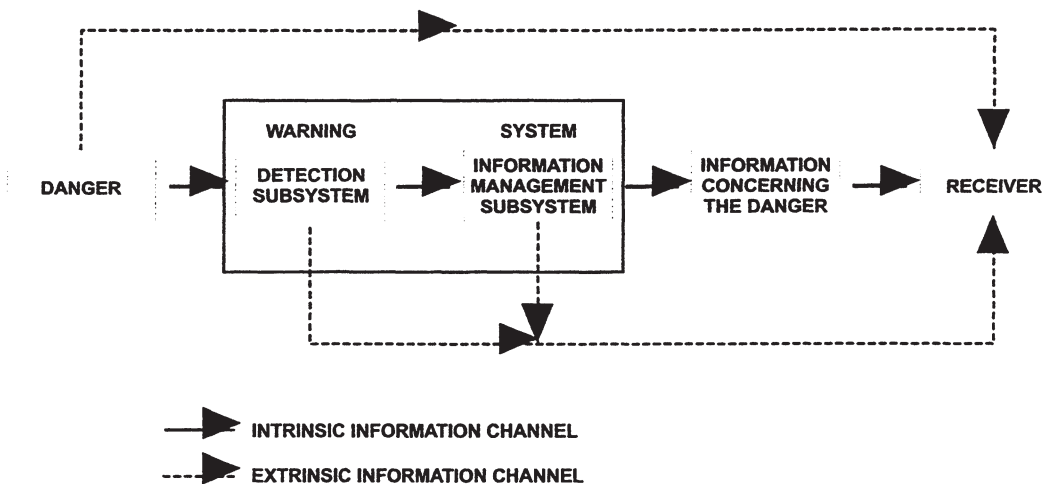


Figure 1: Information Flow in a Warning System. Based on Breznitz, 1984: 12.

To what extent did the cry wolf syndrome play a role during the initiation stage that finally resulted in the fall of Srebrenica? It is probable that overreactions from several participants - in the intelligence services as well as in the UN chain of command - in order to prevent cry wolf effects may have been a factor in intelligence estimates as well as the dissemination of this intelligence. Even for intelligence services like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) a reputation of being somewhat 'too alarmist' in the eyes of the key decision-makers can be disastrous. On the other hand, both agencies are well aware that being too late with their warnings can have really bad implications as well. Given the wealth of data they receive everyday about potential as well as actual crises, the danger of creating cry wolf effects by reacting too sensitively to potential warning cues is rather big. So, whether they like it or not they have to be rather cautious in translating the data they receive into significant warnings.

There will be a big chance that they will prefer a strategy of 'wait, see, and try to get more precise indications about probabilities, intentions, plans, and timing instead of a strategy of giving forewarnings (just in case) as long as they have the idea that they need to guess too much in combination with an estimation that national interests are not really threatened' (Wohlstetter, 1962: 302). Given the evidence that is available at this moment these kinds of considerations may explain the reactions of both the CIA and the DIA. Indeed, the DIA had indications that suggested the BSA had intentions to attack the enclave. But an overview of those indications - those they had before 1 July 1995, in other words, five days before the attack - may have led the United States to the conclusion that there was not enough hard evidence that the BSA wanted to attack the whole enclave. As a US intelligence officer said afterwards: 'We had indications in June that the Serbs might be concentrating on the enclave. [...] But it was unclear what the scope of the action was.' (New York Times, 29 October 1995) This may have led the intelligence agency, and perhaps US Secretary of Defence Perry and US Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, to the conclusion that these indications were not enough to disturb their Dutch colleagues unnecessarily (cf. *Parool*, 15 May 1996).

34

Another variant of coping with cry wolf or, to put it more precisely, a pathological drive in *avoiding* cry wolf syndromes that can be observed in this particular case, was the way politicians, and the military as well as intelligence members of the troop providing countries reacted to the warnings that were given by the Bosnian-Muslims. Bosnian-Muslim politicians like the Prime Minister and his Foreign Secretary as well as the Bosnian-Muslim intelligence agency and military became more and more active in giving warnings during the months of May and June and during the first week of July 1995. For instance, the Bosnian Prime Minister, Muratovic, said that 'we warned UN officials many times that troops of Serbia, Arkan were coming across the [Drina] river. We knew that Srebrenica would be attacked.'²³ Yet, the way the receivers of these warnings seem to have reacted looks remarkably similar to many earlier classic cases of intelligence failures and surprise attacks. Lack of source credibility in the eyes of the receivers played a significant role. The status of the warners as well as the receiver's perceptions of the warners' motivations tend to be an important factor, i.e. to the extent that the purveyors are expected to benefit from a change of policy as a consequence of their warnings, their forecasts tend to be suspect in the eyes of the receivers (cf. Chan, 1979: 171-172). In case of the Bosnian-Muslims such perceived benefits reflected national interests (cf. Stalin's and others reactions to warning signals of an impending German invasion of the Soviet Union that came from Churchill, Eden and Roosevelt) and, perhaps, to some extent they also reflected possible personal political gains. Whether it was always justified or not, many 'receivers' of the Bosnian-Muslim must have considered that the Muslims were anything but a neutral source of data.

Moreover, there was a high risk that reacting to such warnings would undermine one's own credibility. The *suggestion* that one was too uncritical in coping with warnings from the Bosnian-Muslims could in itself have been regarded as enough to create such an effect. Partly as a consequence of considerations and anxieties like these, many key decision-makers as well as intelligence officers tend to stereotype the Bosnian-Muslims as sources with a track record of (usually) false alarms. For example, it is no coincidence that someone like Toby Gati, US Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research, declared that his agency tends to be quite sceptical about warnings that came from the Bosnians because they were supposed to supply anything but neutral, objective facts and figures:

They [the Bosnians] wanted us in more.... Do you know how many times we heard this [that the BSA wanted to conquer the enclave]? They were getting bombed out. Which one do you respond to? The times they cried wolf in one month - the problem is, they were crying about a real wolf (Quoted in Gutman, 1996. Emphasis added by author).

UN representative Akashi revealed more or less the same tendency in an interview in the Channel 4 documentary:

They [the Bosnians] constantly gave us all kinds of warnings. Some were in the nature of false alarms, others turned out to be true. Perhaps not always on the same scale as they had warned us.²⁴

Another probable example of the cry wolf syndrome that can be observed concerns the role of the Dutch Lieutenant-Colonel, Ton Karremans, the commander of the Dutch battalion in Srebrenica. As a result of his repeated complaints about Dutchbat's deteriorating logistic situation, Karremans seems to have acquired a reputation of being 'somewhat alarmist' (Honig and Both, 1996: 175). This may have diminished his credibility as a warning source in the UN as well as the Dutch command circles. Moreover, it may have created a sort of boomerang effect at the start of July when Karremans was remarkably restrained in his official reports. Moreover, this form of (maybe unjustified) stereotyping of Karremans may have fostered the collective impression (or wishful thinking) that 'when even Karremans believes that the risks of an attack are not high, there is little to worry about' (cf. Honig and Both, 1996: 10-13). This variant of the cry wolf syndrome may have played an important role in (mistakenly) minimizing the sense of danger before and during the Bosnian-Serb attack.

In sum, the cry wolf syndrome seems to have had a more or less significant impact in this case. At the same time the number of false alarms does not seem to be as high and the extent of systematic desensitization does not seem to be as considerable as in other classic cases. For

instance, both tendencies seem to have played a much more crucial role in the strategic surprises and the failures of intelligence estimates before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hitler's attack on Russia in 1941 and the Arab attack on Israel during Yom Kippur in 1973.

3.2 NOISE BARRIER THEORY AS A POSSIBLE EXPLANATION

Another theory that can be used in order to understand intelligence failures in predicting surprise attacks is Michael Handel's Noise Barrier Theory (Handel, 1977). Both classical empirical studies and theoretical works on strategic surprise and deception agree that incorrect intelligence estimates and wrong judgements are often made in spite of the availability of all necessary signals and information. The problem is that the 'right' signals are frequently distorted if not overwhelmed by 'noise' (e.g. George and Smoke, 1974: 580-587; Wasserman, 1960: 156-169; Wohlstetter, 1962; Whaley, 1973). Handel, one of the experts on surprise attacks, assumes that many failures in intelligence estimates stem from the flow of information (signals and noise) through three 'noise barriers': 1. the enemy; 2. the international environment; and 3. self-generated noise (see Figure 2). Each of these barriers adds its own distortion to further complicate the perceptions and calculations of decision-makers. I will discuss and try to apply the leading hypotheses that can be derived from each of these barriers to the Srebrenica 'puzzle':

36

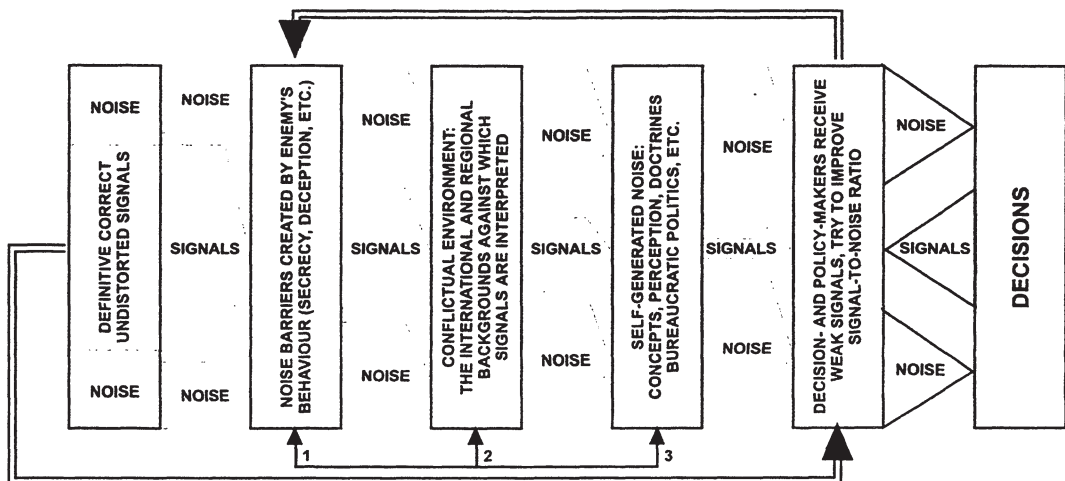


Figure 2: Three Barriers that Reduce the Signal-to-Noise Ratio. Based on Handel, 1977: 463.

3.2.1 THE FIRST NOISE BARRIER: THE ENEMY

Hypothesis 3: The enemy forms a serious noise barrier: the more changes an enemy makes in his attack plans and the more ambiguous his intentions and the better his deceptions and the more daring the risks he takes, the bigger the chance on failures in intelligence estimates.

Ambiguity, deception, and political and military bluff poker do have some explanative power when one applies this part of the noise barrier theory to the Srebrenica intelligence failure. They did indeed create a lot of noise.

General Mladic made clear on several occasions that he wanted to obtain more control over the southern corridor. Yet, it remained unclear how far he would go to reach this objective. Up to the moment the attack started and even during the attack, Mladic was successful in sustaining this veil of ambiguity, deception, surprise and bluff. For instance, on June 18 the Bosnian-Serbs announced the resumption of 'cooperation' with UNPROFOR provided there were 'no hostile acts' in the future (Gutman, 1996). Another example of oral deception and deceit was a satellite telephone talk of BSA-general Tolimir with the Dutch Brigadier Kees Nicolai (then UNPROFOR Chief-of-Staff under General Rupert Smith in Sarajevo). Nicolai received this telephone call on Monday evening, July 10. He demanded from Tolimir that the BSA troops and tanks would be withdrawn from the enclave before dawn. Tolimir interrupted Nicolai's ultimatum by saying:

What are you talking about? There are no Serbs in the enclave at all.... General, sir, you mustn't blindly trust the Muslim propaganda. (Interview with Brigadier Nicolai by Frank Westerman in NRC Handelsblad, 14 October 1995)

37

Continuous alterations, even at the last moment, in the enemy's intentions and attack plans tend to be another major form of noise barrier. In many classic cases of surprise attacks clear indications about the motivations, goals, plans, timing, and risks-calculations of the enemy were simply not obtained because just a few of such signals existed (cf. Handel, 1977: 464-468). Occasionally the enemy's plans do not crystallize until the final hours prior to an attack. Obviously, what an aggressor does not yet know himself can hardly be expected to be determined by one's own intelligence sources. Even the enemy's military and political elite itself is often, until the last moment, not completely certain about many of these elements. Hitler, for instance, tended to make changes in his attack plans at the very last moment.²⁵ In the case of Srebrenica, information from intercepted phone calls between Mladic and Perisic suggests that there may have been some alterations in the timing of the attack. However, given the scarce evidence that is available at this moment about this particular point, it remains unclear whether such alterations in the BSA plans of attack have been a factor in the successful achievement of strategic and tactical surprise.

The BSA attack itself can be seen as a successful form of deception. The attack followed the same pattern as earlier military attacks of the

BSA on Srebrenica in 1993, the safe area of Gorazde in 1994, and numerous attacks on Bihac in 1994 and 1995 (cf. Rohde, 1997: 354; Honig and Both, 1996: 4). BSA political and military commanders seem to be well-trained and determined to restrain a willingness to attain their operational objectives too swiftly. That is, BSA attacks rarely if ever unfold in a quick, massive and fluent way. Instead, they tend to unfold shockwise, in small cautious steps, as if in slow-motion. Their opening phases tend to be marked by periods of intense artillery shelling. Sometimes these artillery activities were suddenly stopped, suggesting that nothing more will follow and that the bombardments were executed randomly. This makes it difficult to predict whether or not the shelling might be the prelude to a serious offensive. Like earlier BSA attacks, however, the artillery attacks on Srebrenica were just a pause, to be followed by another hail of artillery. Just like on earlier occasions, the BSA cautiously built up the offensive. One by one Dutchbat's positions were systemically reduced by attacks that were spearheaded by just a small number of tanks and other armoured vehicles. Then the infantry moved in and took position. After this the Serbs invariably paused. These pauses enabled the Serbs to test and calculate the reactions of the international community. Moreover, the pauses tended to be good forms of deception, thereby creating small tactical military surprises: they tended to make the attack appear like a limited and isolated incident that was not meant to continue further. The stops were obviously enough to undermine the concerted willingness of politicians, UN civil servants, and UN military commanders to draw a determined line in the sand. Moreover, even if the UN or NATO had succeeded in doing so, the BSA might still have been in a quite favourable position: they could wait patiently for another, more advantageous opportunity.

3.2.2 THE SECOND NOISE BARRIER: THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Hypothesis 4: The international environment forms a serious noise barrier in the form of a paradox: the more conflictual an environment the bigger the chance that the attention of intelligence services and decision-makers will be diverted to other areas of tension; on the other hand, the more relaxed the environment, the bigger the chance that observers will be conditioned by peaceful routines, thereby forming a background noise that covers the enemy's preparations for an attack (Handel, 1977: 468-469).

A second barrier that may have increased the impact of noise and therefore may have made it more difficult to develop accurate anticipations and judgements on the Srebrenica case is related to the impact of the international environment. The attention of, for example, the foreign policy desks of the Clinton presidency may have been distracted by other simultaneously happening international developments. For the UNPROFOR command lines and the Netherlands, however, it

was not so much other areas of tension that distracted their attention - apart from, perhaps, the situations in Rwanda and Angola. To them it may have been the dependency on the international environment in improving the position of UNPROFOR and Dutchbat that may have distracted their attention in several ways. They were investing much energy in improving the situation on the ground, providing food and fuel support to Dutchbat by air or over land, and finding another nation (the Ukraine?) willing to take over Dutchbat's mission in Srebrenica so that Dutchbat could go home in July (Rohde, 1997). The thought that Dutchbat's mission in Srebrenica was almost over may have led to several forms of wishful thinking and defensive avoidance (Janis and Mann, 1977). As a consequence, signals (including warning cues about a possible BSA attack) that had the potential to undermine such hopes may have received less attention than they should have.

Signals that a BSA attack on the southside or on the entire enclave of Srebrenica might be forthcoming may have been overlooked because the span of attention of key decision-makers like Janvier and Smith was fixed on other things with a more strategic character. In particular during March to July 1995, Janvier and Smith as well as their staff members invested a lot of time in getting a better picture of the actual situation and improving the position of UNPROFOR. From May onwards they started to impress upon others in the UN and in the national command lines that something needed to be changed in order to improve the rapidly deteriorating position of the UN. One of the problems they were puzzling about was: how do we get rid of the vulnerable enclave positions? The time they invested in trying to accomplish this strategic change was substantial and this, perhaps, was one of the underlying causes for the subsequent underestimation and down-playing of warning signals that a BSA attack could be forthcoming.

39

3.2.3 THE THIRD NOISE BARRIER: SELF-GENERATED NOISE

Hypothesis 5: Self-generated noise forms a serious barrier: the more decision-makers are incapable of adapting their set of hypotheses about the adversary's intentions and capabilities (measured against their own) to the (changing) objective reality, the bigger the chance of serious failures in intelligence estimates. On the other hand, the more readily adaptable the decision-maker's set of hypotheses to a dynamic environment, the more useless the conceptual model will be as an accurate guide for intelligence estimates and decision-making.

A third barrier that tends to be a significant source of permanent noise is the conceptual model or set of hypotheses about the adversary's intentions and capabilities that decision-makers consciously or unconsciously have in mind. This type of noise, also called self-generated noise, has certainly played a significant role in the Srebrenica case.

Members of Dutchbat, UNPROFOR commanders, as well as decision-makers in the Hague *did* had a set of hypotheses about the BSA which obscured 'objective reality' in several ways. The reactions of Dutchbat commander Karremans, his superiors in the UNPROFOR command lines and those in the Hague show how strong the impact of this set of hypotheses was and to what extent they may have resulted in serious failures in intelligence estimates.

On the evening of Friday 7 July, Lieutenant-Colonel Karremans still did not believe that the safe area was under serious threat. He made this clear in his assessment of the situation on Friday evening, wherein he stated that the Serb activities were just 'attempts to provoke and intimidate ABiH (the Bosnian Army) and Dutchbat.' He stressed that he did not expect 'the seizure of OPs and/or parts of the enclave.' Karremans motivated this prediction with the words: 'The Bosnian-Serb Army (BSA) will try to "neutralize" the Bosnian Army in the long term, but due to a shortage of infantry the BSA will not be able to seize the enclave in the short term.' (Debriefing Report, 1995: 25) His UN superiors at Tuzla, Sarajevo and Zagreb seem to have accepted this assessment. Karremans' assessment may also have reassured the key political and military decision-makers in the Hague (cf. Honig and Both, 1996: 9). Twenty-four hours later, Karremans made no significant changes in his assessment. Despite the loss of two of his observation posts, Karremans still did not expect the BSA to go after the whole safe area. Karremans regarded the shelling of Srebrenica as 'a diversion and an attempt at intimidation.' He wrote that 'the attacks on OP Foxtrot and OP Uniform must be regarded as part of an attempt to take possession of the Jadar valley. The fact that there are no attacks on the rest of the enclave perimeter reinforces this view.' (Debriefing Report, 1995: 27) Even on July 10 there was still disbelief amongst members of Dutchbat:

*We still could not believe that the BSA wanted to conquer the entire enclave, after all, we were there with their permission too. So why would they attack us? I couldn't really believe what was happening, and many of my comrades could not either.*²⁶

The Dutch Colonel Harm de Jonge, Chief of Operations at UN Headquarters Zagreb (and therefore advisor of UNPROFOR Commander Janvier and UN representative Yasuski Akashi) declared shortly after the fall of Srebrenica that until Tuesday morning July 11 he had thought that there was no real danger (cf. Rohde, 1997: 403). On the evening of July 10 he and UN Command in Zagreb:

were still under the impression that we were dealing with a relatively small Bosnian-Serb unit. That, at least, was our assessment. Not until Tuesday morning did it become clear that we were dealing with a major

offensive intended to conquer the entire enclave. Within five minutes we then had Akashi's signature on our request for air support. (Interview with Colonel de Jonge, published in Trouw, 28 July 1995)

De Jonge was not alone in miscalculating the real plans of the BSA. For instance, on the morning of the fall of Srebrenica (11 July), his Zagreb-based UN intelligence officials and even US intelligence experts were still deliberating whether Mladic intended to eliminate the enclave or that he was only seeking to take direct control (Gutman, 1996; Rohde, 1997: 148, 403).

It is important to realize that part of these self-generated noise mechanisms can be seen as a logical consequence of a steadily evolving entrapment situation that had been developing since the arrival of the first Dutchbat battalion in Srebrenica in January 1994.²⁷ All the participants had been more or less aware from the beginning that the BSA could conquer the enclave anytime they wanted. For instance, the former Dutch Secretary of Defence, Relus ter Beek declared that:

The soldiers then in Srebrenica, Zepa and Gorazde were outnumbered and had little equipment. And still the Serbs did not conquer these enclaves. Military arguments weren't decisive. We knew from the beginning: if the Serbs wanted to take the enclave with military means they could. (Relus ter Beek, interview in Parool, 6 January 1996)

41

It is quite probable that certain forms of desensitization and defensive avoidance had come into play since it is rather difficult to function adequately all the time in the full realization that an adversary can attack and defeat you anytime he wants (cf. Breznitz, 1984: 15; Janis and Mann, 1977; Janis, 1971 and 1962).

Besides these tendencies of desensitization there were also other forms of self-generated noise at work which distorted the intelligence estimates and the judgements of the participants in the UNPROFOR and the Dutch decision-making process. These forms of self-generated noise were the result of a set of rather strong hypotheses. The empirical evidence that is available at this moment strongly suggests that this set of hypotheses was more or less shared by most of the participants in Srebrenica, Tuzla, Sarajevo, Zagreb and New York as well as in the Hague. Let us look at some of the most influential of these hypotheses:

1. The BSA will not dare to attack the enclave, because they know that the international community will not accept such a provocation.

As General Janvier stated in a meeting in Split with Akashi and General Rupert Smith on June 9:

The Serbs need two things: international recognition, and a softening of the blockade on the Drina... I think the Serbs are aware of how favourable the situation is to them - I don't think they want to go to an extreme crisis. On the contrary, they want to modify their behaviour, be good interlocutors. It is for this that we must speak to them - not negotiate, but to show them how important it is to have a normal attitude.' (From the Internet)

2. The BSA are only interested in the southeast side of the Srebrenica enclave because this will gave them access to the bauxite mines (cf. Dutchbat III, 1996).
3. Due to a shortage of infantry, the BSA will not be able to seize the enclave in the short term (cf. Karremans' situation assessment of the evening of July 7, 1995).
4. It is very unlikely that the BSA intend to launch a full-scale attack because it will be impossible for them to liquidate a registered population of this size and because removal of this population without UN cooperation would be impossible.

42

This last hypothesis originates from a report (7 July) of the observers' commander in Tuzla (Gutman, 1996). This rosy view was shared by US intelligence experts (Gutman, 1996).²⁸

5. The BSA does not intend to eliminate the enclave, they 'only' want to have direct control over it.

Hypothesis number 5 became more or less dominant in the minds and assessments of many during the days *after* the start of the BSA attacks on July 6 and the morning of July 11.²⁹

Most of the hypotheses summarized above can be seen as a variation on the idea that something 'cannot be done.' The idea that something 'cannot be done' can be regarded as one of the main forms of self-generated noise and therefore one of the main aids of strategic and tactical surprise. (Handel, 1977: 469-480) Options considered extremely risky, difficult or even impossible can thus be attempted, in part because nobody suspects that they will be implemented. At the same time, an aggressor may undertake greater risks than expected because he underestimates or lacks information about the reactions of his opponents and the consequences in the middle and long term. For instance, Saddam Hussein seriously underestimated the reactions of the United States and others when he attacked Kuwait in August 1990, just like Khrushchev underestimated the risks involved in placing missiles in Cuba and hence touched off one of the most dangerous crises this century. It is probable that the intelligence estimates on BSA intentions were partly undermined by a specific form of 'this cannot be

done.' In this particular case the belief that something could not be done was not so much related to the action (i.e. a BSA military attack on the enclave) itself. The self-generated noise was produced by dominant (but false) *projections* of the enemy's calculations with regard to the 'follow-up' of the attack (the transport problem) and the political and military sanctions from the international community (e.g. the US, NATO and UNPROFOR) that a BSA attack would probably provoke. Most of the decision-makers in the UNPROFOR command lines and the Hague seem to have more or less convinced themselves that the BSA would not dare to go to such brutality and thereby provoke the whole international community.

With the wisdom of hindsight the hypotheses that seem to have a more or less dominant impact on the perceptions, estimates and judgements of key decision-makers in the UNPROFOR chain of command as well as the decision-makers in the Hague can also be seen as a product of (understandable) wishful thinking and defensive avoidance (e.g. Janis and Mann, 1977; Janis, 1962). Each of these two mechanisms seems to have been responsible for a lot of self-generated noise. There were several factors at work that fostered wishful thinking: the employment of the Rapid Reaction Force, the increasing willingness of Western countries to improve the weak and vulnerable position of UNPROFOR, and, for the Netherlands, the reasonable hope that Dutchbat could (at last) withdraw because the Ukraine was willing to take over Dutchbat's tasks in the enclave in July. The 'this cannot happen or cannot be done' element in most hypotheses can be seen as a form of wishful thinking as well.

The aforementioned hypotheses seem to have reinforced several forms of defensive avoidance. For instance, each of the levels of decision-making that was involved seems to have neglected or underestimated warning signals that contradicted one or more of the hypotheses (cf. Gutman, 1996; Rohde, 1997). At the same time (ambiguous) signals that the BSA would not attack (such as promises of BSA commanders) were applied to push aside inner doubts and uncertainties about possible worst-case scenarios. Other forms of defensive avoidance that seem to have been widespread even at the most crucial moments before and during the BSA attack were procrastination (such as the decision-making on air attacks, close air support and withdrawal scenarios) and buck-passing (the tendencies to shift responsibilities to others upwards, sideways, or downwards in the chain of command. (cf. Janis and Mann, 1977; Metselaar, 1993)

One of the most devastating forms of self-generated noise seems to have been the structural underestimation of the lessons that, for example, Mladic may have drawn from the responses to his earlier statements and actions. Mladic had experienced time and again that BSA brutality *did* pay. The willingness of the international community to

prevent or punish such brutalities that were 'implemented' in a form of a salami strategy seems to have gone from bad to worse. Thus, with hindsight, one might say that his calculations up to then had been quite accurate. Later, however, the international community showed that their willingness to take the brutalities for granted was not endless: there was the London declaration of July 25 and there were the NATO air attacks and the ground actions of the Rapid Reaction Force in September 1995. It remains to be seen, though, possibly forever, what would have happened if Mladic and the BSA had shown more patience and self-restraint in taking over the safe areas and if he had first prepared himself for the Croatian summer attack.

4. Conclusions

44 This article has examined a case that is called a failure in intelligence estimates by several observers as well as some of the key participants themselves. I have tried to apply two theoretical directions of explanation in order to gain more insight into these failures. To what extent could the BSA attack have been foreseen and to what extent can specific conditions like the existence of false alarms and the difficulties in distinguishing real signals from noise explain possible underreactions? As I made clear in my introduction, drawing conclusions with regard to shortcomings in the way decision-makers have reacted to warning signals will remain difficult as long as many facts and figures about the BSA attack and the fall of Srebrenica are unavailable. The limited number of pieces from the puzzle that are available at this moment may easily lead us in the wrong direction. They could make us ask the wrong questions and jump to the wrong conclusions and lessons learned. We must therefore be cautious in interpreting the scarce and sometimes contradictory and perhaps misleading data we now have.

Section 2 of this article has discussed several of the warning signals which, at least potentially, might have caught the attention of commanders in the UNPROFOR chain of command as well as (some of) the national leaders of the troop delivering countries. At first sight, it may seem that there were a lot of indications, revealing a clear pattern that could hardly have been misjudged. Yet, making intelligence estimates without the so-called wisdom of hindsight is not as easy as it may seem. With hindsight it is so much easier to distinguish (sometimes overwhelming) forms of noise and false alarms from accurate warning signals. It is so much easier to make the right predictions without all the noise barriers that constantly tend to distort intelligence estimates and the judgements of political and military leaders as well as their advisers in every possible way. Indeed, using hindsight may result in rather unfair judgements of which signals could and should have been noticed and if, when and how decision-makers should have reacted to them.

<i>Theoretical Perspective</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>The BSA Surprise Attack Puzzle</i>	<i>Explanative Power</i>
<i>a. The cry wolf theory</i>	1. False alarms decrease credibility	- Many alarms by BIH and Bosnian politicians - 'Alarmist' reputation of Karremans because of other problems	+(+) +
	2. More or less repeating	- Desensitization of the 'warning systems' of Dutchbat, UNPROFOR, and the Hague because of the realization of permanent danger and false feelings of security. The BSA could start the attack every time they want	
<i>b. The noise barrier theory</i>	3. The more deceptive, risk-daring, and unpredictable the enemy, the bigger the chance at wrong estimates	- Successful deception and deceit	++
	4. The more conflictual or the more relaxed the international environment, the higher the chance at wrong estimates	- Distractions in the form of other logistical problems as well as the take over by the Ukraine - Distractions in the form of working on a new situation in the nearby future with a less vulnerable position on the ground - Collective wishful thinking, defensive avoidance, and symbolic politics - Bystanders or audience effects	+
	5. The more rigid or the more flexible one's set of assumptions about the adversary's intentions and capabilities, the higher the chance at wrong estimates	- Dominant misleading theories about the intentions, the risk willingness, and the capabilities of the BSA - Little capabilities and willingness to do something in case 'something might go wrong'	+++

Legend: 0 = unclear/don't know + = relatively small impact
 - = no impact at all; ++ = moderate impact
 +++ = strong impact

Figure 3: A Comparison of Tentative Findings with Regard to the Explanative Power of the Two Theories.

The impressive interdisciplinary body of knowledge with regard to more or less similar subjects like 'strategic surprise,' 'early warnings' and 'misperceptions' has shown that one can hardly underestimate the number of noise barriers and cognitive and organizational biases that tend to distort intelligence estimates about anything that might probably happen in the near future. The tentative analysis in section 3 has been based on just a few of the directions that may help to understand why, at first sight perhaps, 'overwhelming' warning signals did not result in the 'appropriate' judgements and reactions. By doing so, this article tries to do more justice to the 'noisy' contexts wherein decision-makers are forced to make their sometimes tragic estimates and decisions. Moreover, putting the intelligence dimension of the BSA attack on Srebrenica in a broader, more comparative perspective may help to place the scarce facts, figures and experiences in a more realistic context. As long as we treat (and perceive) the Srebrenica puzzle as a unique, single case in itself, we run the risk that facts are blown out of proportion. For instance, the warning signals that were summarized in section 2 can hardly be compared with the warning signals that (at least potentially) could have been seen by the key decision-makers in classic cases of (strategic) surprise attacks like the Japanese attack on

Pearl Harbor (1941), Hitler's attack on Russia (1941) and the attack on Israel at Yom Kippur (1973). As far as one can judge at this moment, the warning signals that (could) have caught the attention of key decision-makers in the Srebrenica-case look so much vaguer, so much more ambiguous than the warning signals that were found to have been present in each of these classic cases.

Both theories that are applied in section 3 seem to be helpful in order to understand a little more of the failures in intelligence estimates that were made. (See also Figure 3 in which the most important tendencies are summarized and weighted). The analysis in section 3 as well as the summarized findings in Figure 3 demonstrate that all of the key elements in both theoretical perspectives had an impact. The application of the Cry Wolf Theory may help us to understand why several of the warning cues were not taken seriously enough and why actors who did feel inclined to take them seriously were cautious in disseminating them because of the risk of losing credibility. The application of Noise Barrier Theory made clear that there were several strong noise-generating biases at work which more or less distorted the estimates and judgements of Dutchbat command, commanders in the UNPROFOR lines of command as well as in the Hague. Successful deception by the BSA as well as the distracting noise of the international environment (i.e. the change of strategy that was initiated by generals Smith and Janvier) as well as other forms of self-generated noise seriously undermined the intelligence estimates.

The data that is available at this moment suggests that the way warning signals about the BSA attack on Srebrenica were treated can be regarded as an intelligence failure. This painful conclusion of former UN Undersecretary for Peacekeeping and now Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan (cf. quote at the start of this article) seems to be justified. At the same time one may question how big this intelligence failure actually was in comparison with other failures. Moreover, one may seriously question to what extent this failure actually explains the tragic outcome. Would the outcome have been different if the right signals and intelligence had been taken more seriously, given all the other factors that were at work? Could it be possible that the lack of capabilities and (probably even more importantly) the lack of willingness of (most if not all) members of the international community (at least until the end of July 1995) were more crucial factors? These are painful 'if only' and 'what if' questions. Their answers we can only guess about.

Notes

1. This article reflects the personal ideas and opinions of the author. His views do not necessarily reflect those of the Dutch Ministry of Defence. The author would like to thank Sjo Soeters and Sjaak Rovers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.
2. This was done in Resolution 819, with the UN acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, after a rushed decision-making process in order to prevent the Serbs from ethnically cleansing the enclave and creating a massacre amongst the 25,000 Muslim citizens and refugees. The resolution does not specify what the 'area' was. How the safety of the area would be achieved is also poorly described (cf. Leurdijk, 1997: 33-37; Honig and Both, 1996: 104-105).
3. The fact that the BSA attack caught political and military decision-makers in the UNPROFOR chain of command and in the Netherlands off-guard will be elaborated later in this article. As far as the evidence reveals to me at this moment, each of the UN/UNPROFOR command centres was more or less surprised by the action itself, its timing, as well as the direction and objectives of the Bosnian-Serb offensive.
4. This process of continuing tactical surprise (and successful deception of the BSA) can, for instance, be observed if one studies the behaviour and reactions of the key Dutch decision-makers, Voorhoeve, Van Mierlo, Van den Breemen, as well as most of their senior advisors in the Hague (see for instance Westerman and Rijs, 1997; Couzy, 1996; Honig and Both, 1997; Remarks by General Van den Breemen in *Hollands Dagboek* [Dutch Diary] in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 22 July 1995. This was confirmed later in several interviews by the author with several members of the Dutch Foreign Office and Ministry of General Affairs.
5. Most of the observers and participants declared after the attack that they assumed that BSA General Ratko Mladic would stop the Bosnian-Serb offensive on Srebrenica as soon as they had conquered the strategically important route near the southside of the enclave.
6. The exact number of victims is still not clear.
7. See, for example, for an overview of several such warnings during the Dutch decision-making process with regard to the sending of a battalion to Bosnia-Herzegovina: Couzy, 1996; Ter Beek, 1996; Berghorst, 1995 and 1996. See for warnings that came from several circles in the international community Silber and Little, 1993; Leurdijk, 1996; Honig and Both, 1996.
8. See, for instance, Honig and Both, 1996; Brabander, 1997; Berghorst, 1995 and 1996; Boode, 1993; see also Couzy, 1996; Ter Beek, 1996.
9. See, for instance, articles about the 'plot theory' in which the French, in particular UNPROFOR commander Janvier and the French president Chirac, were supposed to play key roles. *NRC Handelsblad*, 14 October 1995; 29 May 1996. For reactions to the plausibility of this 'plot theory': Westerman and Rijs, 1997; Honig and Both, 1997; Rohde, 1997.
10. Even now, after so many thorough studies on them, there still appear new ones in which crucial pieces of the complex puzzles, that 'classical' surprise attacks are, are added and re-interpreted. The last words on classical surprise attacks and intelligence failures like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941; Hitler's attack on Russia ('Operation Barbarossa') in 1941; the Tet-offensive of North Vietnam and the Vietcong in January 1968; the Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian attack on Israel (the Yom Kippur War) in October 1973 have still to be said. It is even possible that such last words will never be spoken (see for some illustrations of this point: Handel, 1976; 1977; 1981; Kam, 1988; Levite, 1987; Schlaim, 1976; Oberdorfer, 1974; Whaley, 1973; Wirtz 1991; Ford, 1995).
11. Van der Vlis, quoted in Berghorst, 1996: 10. The Chief-of-Staff at that moment, Lieutenant General Van der Vlis, spoke these words in front of the Parliamentary Commission for Foreign Affairs and Defence of the Dutch House of Commons in order to convince the Parliament Members that the mission involved "acceptable risks" (Minutes, 1993-1994, 22181). However, Van der Vlis himself had uttered a lot of misgivings and doubts about the mission. He had to be convinced that this mission was necessary. (See Ter Beek, 1996; Berghorst, 1996 and 1997).

12. For instance, Major General Van Vuren gave strong warnings via the media to the Cabinet and the Dutch parliament.
13. The text of this report by Boutros Ghali is quoted in a letter of the Dutch Foreign Secretary, Van Mierlo, to the speaker of the Dutch House of Commons, 4 March 1996 (Minutes 1995-1996, 22181, 149: 14).
14. See, for example, the letter that was sent to the UNPF Commander in Zagreb, General Janvier, by General Rupert Rose on 29 May 1995. Quoted by Leonard Ornstein, in *Vrij Nederland*, July 13, 1996: 8.
15. There is no evidence available that suggests that Dutch key decision-makers were not aware of most, if not all, the warning cues that are summarized in this section. Yet, I do know little at this moment about things like when, in what form and under which circumstances the warnings were received by them.
16. Parts of Karremans' letter are quoted in Honig and Both, 1996: 135-136.
17. Ibidem; Westerman and Rijs, 1997; Debriefing Report, 1995.
18. The (UN restricted) UNMO report was addressed to UNMO BHC and UNMO HQ Zagreb.
19. *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 May 1996.
20. According to a Western intelligence source quoted in Gutman (1996), Mladic spent most of his time during the attack (July 6-July 11) with General Perisic, the Yugoslav Chief-of-Staff, at the Yugoslav army's Tara command centre across the Drina river in Serbia: 'The two of them monitored the planning and the attack.'
21. This data was confirmed by the American government to the Washington Post and the New York Times who had received this information via the British American Security Information Council (BASIC). Cf. Colijn and Rusman, *Vrij Nederland*, 5 June 1996; *Tageszeitung*, 12 October 1995.
22. Quote from an interview with Golda Meir in Jerusalem Post Weekly, 11 December 1973. Cited by Shlaim, 1976: 356.
23. Interview in the Channel 4 documentary, May 1996.
24. Interview with Akashi as recorded in a documentary on the fall of Srebrenica produced by Channel 4 in May 1996. The makers of the documentary commented that they had seen several files of the UN top decision-makers in New York, and that they had found no evidence at all that Akashi transmitted the warnings he received to his superior Kofi Annan.
25. Most classic cases of strategic surprise show that making changes at the last moment in the plans of attack may be a deliberate instrument in creating cry wolf effects (Handel, 1977).
26. Dutchbat III platoon commander interviewed by the author in 1995.
27. The situation had, in fact, already been created with the arrival of UNPROFOR and the creation of the safe areas.
28. According to Gutman (1996) this report must have reached the UN headquarters in Zagreb but, according to the same article, officials in New York said they never saw the report.
29. With the wisdom of hindsight it is, for example, striking to 'see' that US intelligence experts, as well as (Dutch) UNPROFOR commanders, and political, civil and military decision-makers in the Hague seem to still have been affected by this hypothesis on the morning of July 11, 1995 when the BSA was ready to start the final attack in order to conquer the entire enclave (Gutman, 1996; Westerman and Rijs, 1997; Rohde, 1997; as well as interviews by the author).

References

Atlantic News, 1994 and 1995, Nos. 2670-2741.

Berghorst, D., 'Een eervolle, niet eenvoudige, maar uitvoerbare opdracht: De uitzending van Dutchbat naar Srebrenica,' [An honourable, difficult, but do-able task: The deployment of Dutchbat in Srebrenica], *Atlantisch Perspectief*, Vol. 20, 2, 1996, pp. 8-12.

Berghorst, D., *Very Good News: De besluitvorming over de uitzending van een luchtmobiel bataljon naar Bosnië-Herzegovina*, Doctoraalscriptie Politicologie en Bestuurskunde, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 1995.

Ben-Zvi, A., 'Hindsight and Foresight: A Conceptual Framework for the Analysis of Surprise Attacks,' *World Politics*, Vol. XXVIII, October 1976, pp. 381-395.

Boode, S., 'Meningen in de media: Het debat over militair ingrijpen in Bosnië/Joegoslavië,' *Transactie*, Vol. 22, 1993, pp. 362-369.

Brabander, J.A.M., *De Tweede Kamer en UNPROFOR: Was er een weg terug?* Doctoraalscriptie Bestuurskunde, Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, 1997.

Breznitz, S., *Cry Wolf: The Psychology of False Alarms*, Hillsdale (New Jersey): Lawrence Erlbaum, 1984.

Chan, S., 'The Intelligence of Stupidity,' *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 73, 1979, pp. 171-180.

Cohen, J. and E.A. Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War*, New York: Vintage Books, 1991.

Couzy, H., *Mijn jaren als bevelhebber*, Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 1996.

Dutchbat III, *Dutchbat in vredesnaam*, Rijswijk: Uitgeverij Début, 1996.

Engelberg, S. et al., 'Srebrenica,' *New York Times*, 29 October 1995.

Ford, R.E., *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise*, London: Frank Cass and Co, 1995.

Gutman, R., 'UN's Deadly Deal: How Troop-Hostage Talks Led to Slaughter of Srebrenica,' *Newsday*, 29 May 1996.

Handel, M.I., *The Diplomacy of Surprise: Hitler, Nixon, Sadat*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

Handel, M.I., 'The Yom Kippur War and the Inevitability of Surprise,' *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1977.

Handel, M.I., 'Perception, Deception and Surprise: The Case of the Yom Kippur War,' in: *Jerusalem Journal on Peace Problems*, No. 19, Jeruzalem: Hebrew University, 1976.

Honig, J.W. and N. Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime*, London: Penguin Books, 1996.

Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, 'Bosnia-Herzegovina: The Fall of Srebrenica and the Failure of UN Peacekeeping Mission,' Vol. 7, no. 13., October 1995.

Janis, I.L., 'Psychological Effects of Warnings,' in: G.W. Baker and D.W. Chapman (Eds.), *Man and Society in Disaster*, New York: Basic Books, 1962. Reprinted in I.L. Janis, *Stress, Attitudes, and Decisions*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982, pp. 57-91.

Janis, I.L., *Stress and Frustration*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1971.

- Janis, I.L. and L. Mann, *Decision-Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment*, New York: Free Press, 1977.
- Kam, E., *Surprise Attack: The Victim's Perspective*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.
- Kahn, H., *On Thermonuclear War*, Princeton University Press, 1958.
- Leurdijk, D.A. (Ed.), *A UN Rapid Deployment Brigade: Strengthening the Capacity for Quick Response*, The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations *Clingendael*, 1995a.
- Leurdijk, D.A., 'The Rapid Reaction Force: The Extension of UNPROFOR's Peacekeeping Mission and a Model for the Future,' *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 2, No. 6, October-November 1995b.
- Leurdijk, D.A., *The United Nations and NATO in the Former Yugoslavia: Limits to Diplomacy and Force*, The Hague: Netherlands Atlantic Commission/Netherlands Institute of International Relations *Clingendael*, 1996.
- Levite, A., *Intelligence and Strategic Surprises*, New York: Colombia University Press, 1987.
- Metselaar, M.V., 'Crises and Information Strategies in a Changing Political Setting: An Institutional Dissonance Perspective,' conference paper prepared for and presented at the annual Conference of the European Consortium of Political Research (ECPR), Leyden, 1993.
- Ministry of Defence of the Netherlands, *Report Based on the Srebrenica Debriefing* [quoted in this article as 'Debriefing Report'], The Hague, 1995.
- Rohde, D., *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica, Europe's Worst Massacre Since World War II*, The European edition was published under the title: *A Safe Area: Srebrenica Europe's Worst Massacre Since the Second World War*, London: Pocket Books, 1997.
- Shlaim, A., 'Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War,' *World Politics*, April 1976, pp. 348-380.
- Silber, L. and A. Little, *The Death of Yugoslavia*, London/New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
- Smith, Admiral Leighton W., 'The Pillars of Peace in Bosnia,' *NATO Review*, 1996.
- Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal [Dutch House of Commons], *Handelingen* [Minutes], 1993-1994; 1994-1995; 1995-1996.
- Oberdorfer, D., *Tet!*, New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- Owen, D., *Balkan Odyssey*, London: Indigo, 1996.
- Ter Beek, R., *Manoeuvreren*, Uitgeverij Balans, 1996.
- United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General Pursuant to Security Council Resolutions 982 and 987*, Document S/1995/444, 30 May 1995.
- Wasserman, B., 'The Failure of Intelligence Prediction,' *Political Studies* 8, June 1960, pp. 156-169.
- Westerman, F. and B. Rijs, *Srebrenica: Het zwartste scenario*, Amsterdam/Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Atlas, 1997.
- Wirtz, J.J., *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Whaley, B., *Codeword Barbarossa*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973.
- Wohlstetter, R., *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962.