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Srebrenica

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1995

## Srebrenica

### The dilemmas of peacekeeping

On 9 July 1995, the Bosnian Serb troops of General Mladic moved towards the Dutchbat III protected enclave of Srebrenica. Without too much resistance the attacking troops took control of this safe-haven for Muslims. The Serbs had the Muslims removed in buses, after first separating the men from the women and children with assistance from the Dutch forces. A short time later, the Serbs executed most of the men (at least 7000). The Dutch soldiers, some of whom suspected what was to come but none of whom witnessed the executions, were given safe passage to Zagreb, where they were welcomed by Prime Minister Kok and Crown Prince Willem-Alexander.

When news of the massacre that had taken place “under the very eyes of Dutchbat” reached the Netherlands, the question was raised as to whether the Dutch soldiers should have protected the enclave against the Bosnian Serb troops and so

avoided the slaughter. Initially, attention was largely focused on the troops, but it soon became clear that responsibility could not be laid at their feet. Their mandate prohibited them from participating in the war. In September 1996, the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) was commissioned by the government to investigate the exact circumstances of the incident. When the NIOD report was published in 2002, Prime Minister Kok accepted political responsibility for the massacre in Srebrenica and resigned.

Right from the outset, Dutch soldiers have participated in UN peacekeeping missions whereby, on behalf of the United Nations, troops supervise compliance with peace treaties and ceasefires in various troubled areas around the globe. The first mission was in 1948, in Israel. A recurring problem during these missions is the instruction on the use of force.

What are the peacekeepers allowed to do, and what is prohibited in these trouble spots? The Dutch Lower House has the ultimate say in instructing Dutch troops. The House has to endorse the agreements made between the government and the UN regarding the degree to which the troops are armed and the type of force they are permitted to use. This means that the balance between the duties of Dutch troops and the dangers they consequently run is ultimately struck in the Dutch Lower House. After the massacre at

Srebrenica, it was once again set down that the House must be kept as well informed as possible in this regard.

The aftershocks of Srebrenica were felt deeply in the Netherlands. It led to increased hesitation and more caution when deploying Dutch troops abroad. However, the incident did not result in the Netherlands sitting on the fence and rejecting international requests for military support, because the Netherlands desires to continue to play a role in international politics and peacekeeping.

N.B. The canon committee hesitated before including this window. Not so much because the underlying story is so complex, or unflattering, to put it mildly, to the Netherlands. We have faith in the capacity of primary school teachers to explain this to their pupils, and a canon has to pay its dues to the blacker moments of history too. It is, however, the case that thanks to the internet, the most horrific images of the drama in Srebrenica are only a mouse-click away. Although the truth is undoubtedly served by this, the committee would like to warn teachers and other staff about the attendant risks.

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## Sub-topics

### Primary education sector

The modern-day life of a soldier in the Dutch armed forces

The collapse of the former Yugoslavia

The work of the international tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague

### Secondary education sector

The end of the Cold War and the break up of the former Yugoslavia

The ethnic situation in the Balkans

The changing role of the Dutch armed forces since the end of the Cold War

The United States and the UN

The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) investigation and its political consequences

### Past and Present

Why do Dutch troops participate in UN peacekeeping actions?

Which is better, a professional army or an army with conscripts?

### In the Treasure Chest

A blue UN helmet

## References

### Places to Go

Delft: The Army Museum

### Books for young people

Jan Simoen, *Met mij gaat alles goed / En met Anna?* (14+)

### Background literature

Bob de Graaf, 'De val van Srebrenica (1995)', in Els Kloek (ed.), *Verzameld verleden: Veertig gedenkwaardige momenten en figuren uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*. (Verloren Verleden 24). Hilversum 2004

Emir Suljagic, Briefkaarten uit het graf, 2006. *Verhalen van Veteranen: Ingezet in dienst van de Vrede. Nederlandse veteranendag als onderwijsthema voor 10- tot 15-jarigen*, Enschede 2005

### Websites

[www.un.org/peace](http://www.un.org/peace)