

Dutch government resigns after critical report on Srebrenica massacre

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The Dutch government has resigned after the publication of *Dossier Srebrenica*, a report investigating the role of the Dutch Army during the massacre that occurred in the Bosnian town in 1995.

In 1996, the newly elected government of Wim Kok asked the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation to investigate “the events before, during and after the fall of Srebrenica”, when Dutch troops in the United Nations Protection Force (Unprofor) failed to prevent the killing of up to 7,000 Muslims by the Bosnian Serb Army (VRS). The authors claim that the report is an “historical-analytical investigation”, which “does not attempt to arrive at political conclusions or to pass a judgement”.

However, *Dossier Srebrenica* does arrive at both conclusions and judgements. The press summary says that Srebrenica was a result of Yugoslavia’s disintegration caused by nationalist leaders—chiefly Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, but also Croatian President Franjo Tudjman. It claims the West had only a “limited influence” (although elsewhere it states “international intervention played a significant part”) and its intervention was characterised by “muddling through”. The European Union’s recognition of Slovenia and Croatia under German insistence, it claims, was only incidental in provoking civil war between the various nationalities that constituted the old Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The Netherlands government is said to have been driven by “humanitarian motivation and political ambitions” and is rebuked for forcing “an ill-conceived and virtually impossible peace mission” on the overwhelmed Dutch Army soldiers—“shutting themselves off from the world around them.”

According to the report, Srebrenica was one of the few enclaves in VRS controlled eastern Bosnia that the Bosnian Muslim Army (ABiH) still occupied, after previous fighting in 1992. The following year French Unprofor General Philippe Morillon, escorted by a small contingent of Canadian troops, was taken hostage in the town. He was only allowed to leave, after he promised in front of the world’s media that Srebrenica would become a UN protected “safe area”.

After the Canadian government announced its attention to withdraw from Srebrenica, the Dutch government offered to send in its newly created rapid response unit—made up of Air Mobile Brigade Special Forces. The intervention was promoted as a humanitarian mission and “critics ran the risk of being disqualified by the rest for their lack of moral fibre.”

Behind the scenes, however, the Dutch ruling class were

debating how not to be left behind as its imperialist rivals intervened in order to divide up the strategically important Balkan region into various spheres of influence. The report acknowledges, “The Netherlands could use this to show its worth and Dutch prestige would be enhanced in the world”. In addition, *Dossier Srebrenica* states that sections of the Dutch Army wanted to demonstrate the capabilities of its elite new unit.

At the time of the massacre, about 200 “Dutchbat” troops under, the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Karremans, were stationed in Srebrenica.

Dossier Srebrenica says that one consequence of designating Srebrenica a safe area was that it became a protected base, from which the ABiH launched attacks against the besieging VRS. (In fact, the report says most of the 7,000 killed were members of the ABiH, though this is disputed).

For the VRS commanders under General Ratko Mladic, Srebrenica was seen as something of a diversion from their main target, the siege of the Bosnian capital Sarajevo. However, on July 7, 1995, the VRS started a limited offensive and to their surprise met with little resistance from the ABiH or Dutchbat. As a result they pushed on to conquer the entire enclave. On July 11, Mladic entered the town declaring he was giving Srebrenica “as a gift to the Serbian people for all the many humiliations they had suffered down the centuries at the hands of the Turks”. Thousands of Muslim women and children headed for the United Nations compound in the nearby village of Potocari, whilst a column mainly comprised of men tried to escape to Tuzla, particularly after Karremans indicated that large scale air attacks were imminent. The men in the column were “slaughtered like beasts”, according to the report, with no distinction made between soldiers and civilians.

Dossier Srebrenica claims the massacre was a surprise to everyone. “It is more plausible to suppose that the Bosnian Serbs had counted on a surrender of the ABiH and a deportation of the population from the enclave after ‘screening for war criminals’ and transfer of the troops to prisoner-of-war camps”. It assumes the belated order for the mass murder came from the Bosnian Serb Army high command. The report states that there is no evidence that Milosevic and his government in Belgrade was involved, an important admission given the ongoing trial at The Hague.

News of the massacre came out from survivors who reached Tuzla. Dutch Development and Cooperation Minister Pronk first used the word genocide on July 18. The Army began a cover-up.

Commander of the Dutch Army General Couzy replied that it was “not as bad as some made out”, the report states, in “a desire to protect the image of the battalion and the army”. It later became apparent that he had already authorised a “strictly confidential” debriefing of the Dutchbat soldiers, who had reported killings before the main massacre.

Defence Minister Joris Voorhoeve ordered an investigation, but it was under the control of the Military Intelligence Department and Royal Netherlands Military Constabulary. There was a secret agreement that criminal behaviour would not be prosecuted. The sanitised final report was written by the army and praised by Voorhoeve. It tried to put the blame on to the United Nations for not providing air support.

By the end of the year, parliament had finished debating the issue and Voorhoeve emerged relatively unscathed. However, further reports emerged. The most damning was that Dutch troops had offered no resistance and instead supervised the exodus of refugees, which *Dossier Srebrenica* calls “tantamount to collaborating with ethnic cleansing”. Pictures were published in the press of drunken Dutchbat soldiers and of Karremans himself raising a toast to Mladic. (*Dossier Srebrenica* claims Karremans was intimidated by Mladic and a victim of a media set up, whereby “someone put a glass in his hand”).

The result was a bitter blow to the Dutch bourgeoisie. Having provided the biggest contingent of troops, it suffered a military debacle. Far from showing its worth and enhancing its prestige in the world, the report states that the Netherlands “played no role at all” in the Dayton agreement that partitioned Bosnia: “It was even banned from the conference table.”

With the election of new government in 1996, a second investigation was ordered by Voorhoeve’s successor as defence minister, Frank de Grave. He asked a former politician and administrator Professor van Kemenade to see if there was any “systematic cover-up”. Whilst criticising “blunders” and “carelessness” in communications between the ministry of defence and the army, he concluded there had not been. *Dossier Srebrenica* criticises van Kemenade’s investigation for having lacked “a certain cogency of argument” and states that there was enough evidence to suggest “obstructiveness on the part of the Army” and for him to have continued his investigation.

Many Dutch organisations claim *Dossier Srebrenica* produces little new evidence and continues the cover up. The Ecumenical Peace Council—a supporter of Dutchbat intervention in the early 1990s—called the report “a bitter disappointment”, adding, “once again Dutch responsibility is denied and others are to blame for the fall of Srebrenica and the genocide that followed.”

Dossier Srebrenica may continue the cover up of events to some extent, but it nevertheless prompted the government’s resignation. The gesture is symbolic, given that there is a general election on May 15 and the resigned ministers will stay on as caretakers until then. But the political embarrassment the report has caused is real. The Netherlands Army Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Ad van Baal has also resigned.

The government could have and did for many years survive the anger over the massacre itself. But what made things much worse is that the 7,000-page report is framed as a critique of the

government and the army’s military preparedness. Far from being a humanitarian expose, it is intended as a warning to the Dutch bourgeoisie that it must get its house in order and not allow another military cock-up to stain the Netherlands’ international reputation and humiliate it in the face of its European and American rivals.

Dossier Srebrenica provides an object lesson for those contemplating further imperialist-style interventions and gunboat diplomacy. The failure of the Vance-Owen plan in 1993 to stabilise Bosnia is attributed to “the lack of international willingness to impose [it] ... by means of military intervention”. The report adds that although military interventions may be promoted on moral or humanitarian grounds, it must be remembered that they involve extremely complex issues “tied up in international politics and national problems”. The document argues for a far more aggressive military policy on the part of all the major powers. It criticises governments and international organisations “that have a marked tendency to ‘wait and see’, postponing any actual decision as they carefully weigh up their own interests and determine their own positions.”

The Military Intelligence Department (MID), it states, was too small and unprepared. “A systematic, concerted information-gathering effort would have placed Dutchbat in a far better position with regard to intelligence”, which is imperative for sending in a large contingent of ground troops. “The US had the strongest intelligence position in Bosnia. The Netherlands could have benefited from this, but lack of interest and the negative attitude of the military and political leadership stood in the way.”

The report is often quite candid on the underlying tensions between the major powers, and above all between the US and Europe as a whole. It states that the United Nations “safe areas” were a new and undefined concept, that had “less to do with the reality of Bosnia-Herzegovina than with the need to achieve a compromise in the Security Council and with the wish to diminish the tensions that had arisen between the United States and Europe concerning the right approach.”

The report also seeks to claim back the moral high ground for the Netherlands in any future military ventures, complaining that “the special cooperation afforded to the investigation in the Netherlands was lacking abroad”. It continues, “cooperation by the Dutch United Nations and NATO partners ... was minimal in a number of cases.” The French government was “scarcely prepared to lend any cooperation”, French Generals in the Balkans, including Morillon, refused to talk to the researchers—as did most heads of governments and foreign ministers.



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