



Safe Area?

Srebrenica in Dutch educational materials

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Colophon

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Preface

In June 2015, a survey showed that Dutch young people know almost nothing about the genocide of Srebrenica. A survey among 52 history students of the teacher training college at the University of Applied Sciences of Arnhem and Nijmegen in December 2019 yielded a similar picture: 95% of the students had hardly heard about 'Srebrenica'; half of them had even "never heard" of this historical event.

The identity of a country is partly determined by the way in which it remembers or commemorates its past. Exposure to and disclosure of historical conflicts is often painful and usually involves guilt, shame or controversy with regard to responsibilities. In the Netherlands, textbook authors and teachers have a relatively large degree of freedom: the history curriculum is formulated in very broad terms. The 25th anniversary of the genocide of Srebrenica, in July 2020, prompted peace organization PAX to commission an investigation into the way in which 'Srebrenica' is treated in Dutch history education. The full report (76 pages, published in Dutch in April 2020) first of all provides a brief historical introduction to war and conflict in former Yugoslavia and the tragic events in and around Srebrenica, with special focus on the aftermath in the Netherlands. Furthermore, the report offers an analysis of the representation of 'Srebrenica' in the history curriculum as well as in some 24 textbooks and other teaching materials (all published between 2007 and 2020), used in primary and secondary education. This is the summary of the report, in English.

Srebrenica: Historical Context

After President Tito's death in 1980, nationalism flared up in Yugoslavia. There were serious economic problems and it seemed the nationality question had simmered below the surface of the fragile Titoist equilibrium. The figurehead of nationalism among the Serbs became Slobodan Milošević, the communist party leader in Belgrade. Slovenia and Croatia in particular felt threatened in their autonomy by the growing power of Serbia. In June 1991 Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence, after which the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) intervened. Skirmishes in Slovenia lasted ten days, while the war against Croatia was accompanied by a lot of violence. Both states became independent, as did Macedonia, in September 1991.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina the situation was more complicated. The multi-ethnic republic was mainly inhabited by (predominantly Muslim) Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats. In a referendum held in March 1992, a majority of voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina opted for independence. Following the declaration of independence, Bosnian Serb militias, backed by the Serbian government of Milošević and the Yugoslav People's Army, took up arms to "unite and secure" Serbian territory. A fierce fight for control started, accompanied by ethnic cleansing of the non-Serbian population from areas soon under Serbian control. This 'Bosnian War' would last until November 1995, when the Dayton Peace Accords were signed. Since then, the country has been divided into two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosnian Serb Republic (Republika Srpska).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In May 1992, the political leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Radovan Karadžić, launched a plan to physically separate the Bosnian populations from each other. Several Bosnian towns and villages were subsequently attacked by the Bosnian Serb army led by General Ratko Mladić. In many cases, the non-Serbian population was murdered, locked up in prison camps or expelled. One of the most tragic events in the region was the siege of Sarajevo, which led to the deaths of nearly 14,000 people.



Image 1: Milošević at Kosovo Polje, Kosovo, in 1989. Photo ANP



Image 2: Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1992

The region around Srebrenica was of strategic importance to the Serbs, as without it territorial unity could not be realized in the new Serbian political entity Republika Srpska. Therefore, the Bosniaks were forcibly expelled from their living areas in Eastern Bosnia and their homes and mosques were destroyed. The siege of Srebrenica started. Subsequently, in spring 1993, Srebrenica was declared a UN Safe Area: an area where civilians could be safe under the protection of UN forces. The Canadians took the first shift, and in early 1994 the Netherlands sent a peace-keeping battalion to Bosnia. A year later, Dutchbat 3 arrived in Srebrenica. Their commander, Karremans, later said that it was important not to upset the Serbs too much. Dutchbat was not properly armed during the siege of Srebrenica; furthermore, a mere 429 Dutch soldiers were present in the enclave.



Image 3: Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, during the war. Photo ANP

In early July 1995, the Bosnian Serbs launched their attack on Srebrenica, and the town fell on 11 July. More than 20,000 refugees arrived that day in and around the main Dutch compound, in Potočari, a few kilometres from the town of Srebrenica. The Serbs started deporting all people in the vicinity of the compound in the morning of 12 July, separating the men and boys from the women, children and elderly. All the men and boys were executed in the hours and days that followed. The people in the compound, some 5,000, were handed over by Dutchbat to the Bosnian Serbs a day later, in the afternoon of 13 July. The separation of men and women continued. These men too were killed. On their way to areas under the control of the Army of Bosnia of Herzegovina, numerous women and girls were raped, and some of them were killed as well.

In 2019, the Dutch Supreme Court ruled that the Dutch were partly responsible for the violent deaths of 350 men who had sought protection in the UN compound. According to the court, Dutchbat soldiers had acted “unlawfully” by cooperating with this deportation and the military leadership ought to have known that the 350 men “were likely to be treated inhumanely or even executed”.

Dutchbat’s failure to protect the refugees of Srebrenica became a national trauma in the Netherlands and caused many heated debates. An official investigation by the NIOD Institute into the events in Srebrenica and the background was published in 2002. The conclusions were, among other things, that the military mission had been badly conceived and that the Dutch had not been adequately trained. Some believed the conclusions to be “excusing” the Dutch and that basic questions regarding responsibilities had been avoided. Nevertheless, the Dutch government accepted political co-responsibility for the failure of the international community in Srebrenica and resigned a few weeks later. Parliament wanted to dig deeper into specific responsibilities and initiated a Parliamentary Inquiry Commission, but the conclusions a year later were for the most part the same.

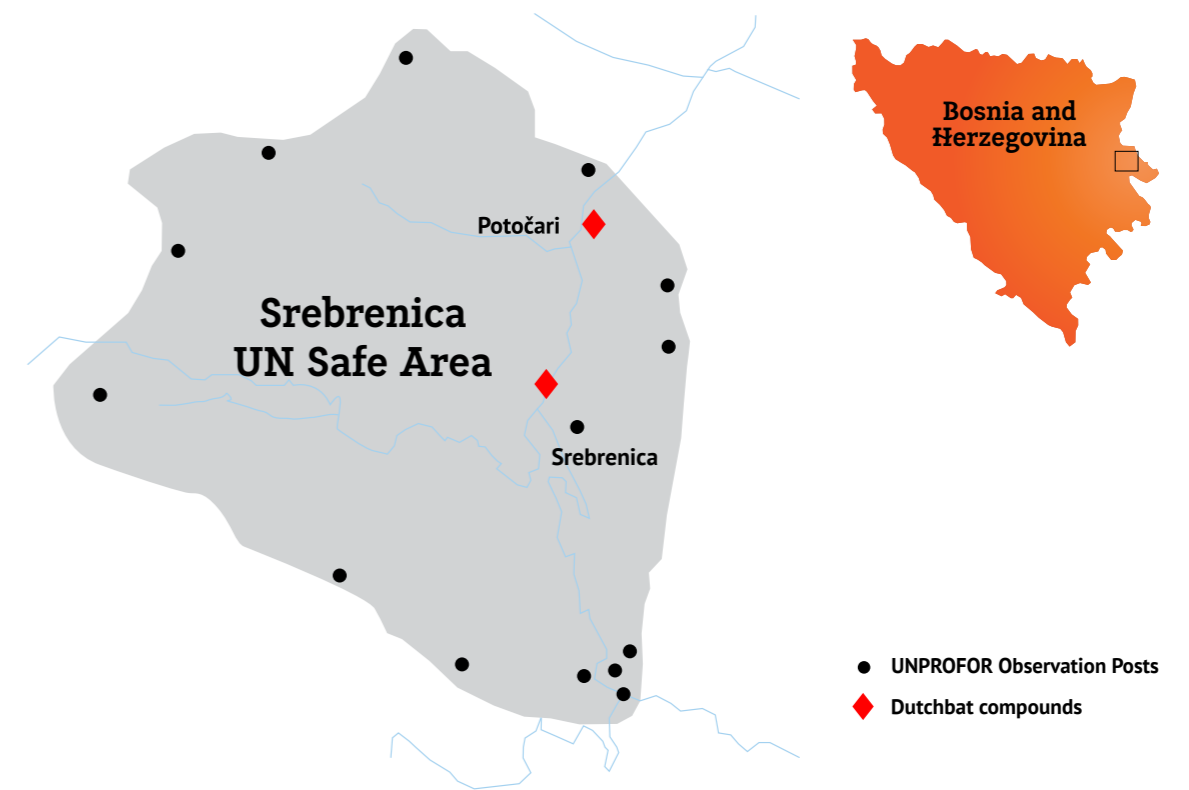


Image 4: UN Safe Area Srebrenica

Bosnia and Herzegovina

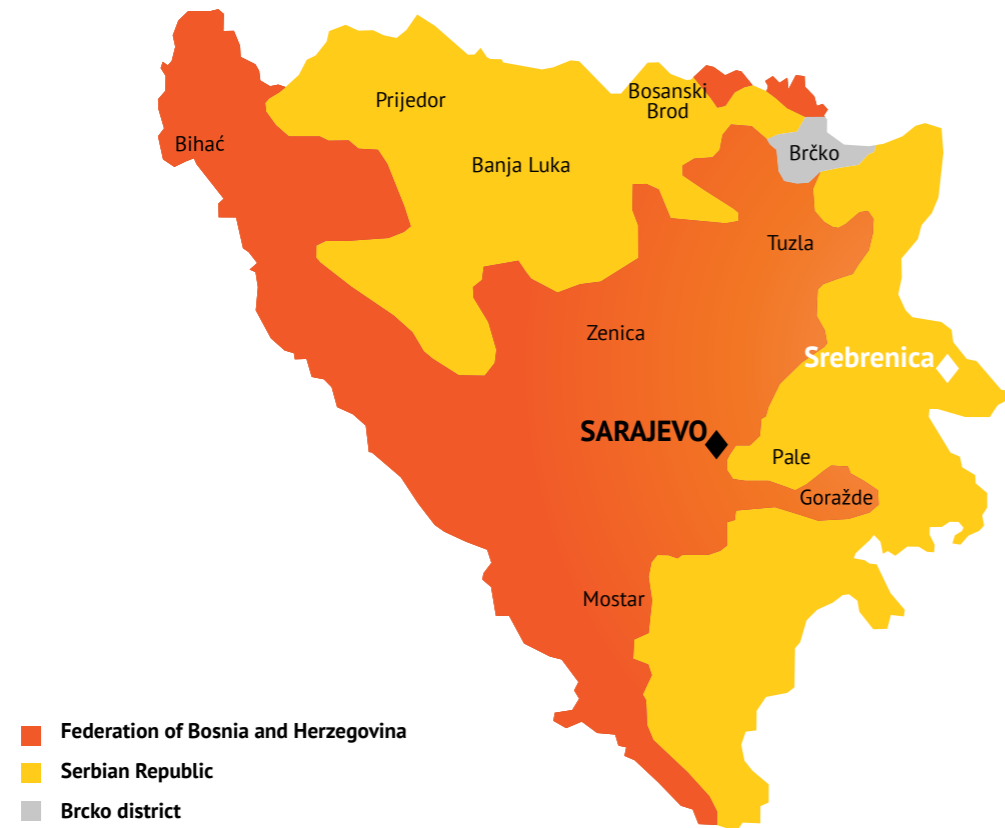


Image 5: With the Dayton Peace Accords (November 1995) two entities are formalized in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Srebrenica is located in the Serbian entity, Republika Srpska



Image 6: Every year on July 11, the mortal remains identified in the previous twelve months were buried at a special cemetery in Potocari. Photo PAX

History Education

A key concept in Dutch school history education is 'historical reasoning'. This is understood as the activity whereby students organise information about the past in order to describe, compare and/or explain historical phenomena. By doing so, they ask historical questions, contextualise and use historical concepts, and support claims with arguments that are based on evidence from sources.

Historical reasoning breaks down into several components. The first component is asking historical questions. This can be a useful part of historical reasoning: historical questioning functions as a motor for historical reasoning. It is important that young people are encouraged to ask such questions, not about who, what, where and when, but more 'evaluative questions', through which young people learn to argue and form their own opinions based on source analysis.

It is also important that the historical context—the second component— is known. This allows young people to establish meaningful relationships with their own society (or with the past). Contextualising knowledge is an important value for participation in pluralistic societies: understanding 'the other' is a precondition for cooperation and participation in public discourse. The third component is dealing critically with sources in order to avoid nostalgia or prevent young people from emotionally distancing themselves from the past. Appropriation is very important: history ought to be 'felt' to be personal and tangible.

Important social functions for history education are: explaining contemporary phenomena, assigning historical significance, and alerting young people to causes and consequences and to the controversial role of tradition. Young people should become aware through primary sources of factors that determine, construct and interpret the past. This includes different historical perspectives, always providing insight into the morality of mankind's actions.

Remembrance or Education?

Collective memory can be divided into 'communicative memory' and 'cultural memory'. 'Communicative memory' is the form of collective memory that is passed along by the three generations or so that 'witnessed' certain historical events. When these generations wither away, another form of collective remembering remains: 'cultural memory', the transmission of knowledge from the past through institutions, traditions, rituals, monuments and canonised texts, such as the texts used in education. History textbooks can thus act as national autobiographies.

Because of the formative age of the students and because of the textbooks' compulsory nature (at school), these texts are a very important source and often the first source through which people learn something about the past. By framing the national past in schematic narrative templates, different events from the past can be understood through a single narrative. For example, a particular nation's drive for freedom can appear as a motive in narrated interpretations of the past, as can the attempts to overcome an enemy or the need for recognition of victimhood.

Societies remember certain past events through such moralised stories. Young people often confuse this with objective information about the past. They are in reality often one-dimensional stories about dramatic phenomena in the history of the nation, centred around national and heroic events. Such 'national' narratives are important tools for creating common identities or fostering social, cultural or national cohesion in a world where processes of migration or globalisation take place. Especially with regard to controversial topics in history education, national-mythical stories seem to be persistent.

When the past is horrifying or traumatic—as in the case of Srebrenica—certain groups are burdened with emotional stress. The past cannot be kept at a distance, in part because it happened relatively recently. Education must therefore strike a balance between the *affective* and the *cognitive*: young people ought to develop feelings such as compassion or anger, but at the same time they need to learn factual 'truths'. Some distance from the past, however, is needed to develop 'historical empathy' (instead of identification with historical actors). The problem with empathy, however, is that it is often confused with 'sympathy', through which we mean the affective engagement with victim groups. Historical empathy, therefore, should not be viewed as 'sharing feelings with people in the past', but as gaining an understanding of how and why people acted the way they did. One of the problems with empathy in the case of Srebrenica is that the theme is highly politicised and still surrounded by conflicting emotions. It is therefore important to tell the 'story' about Srebrenica from multiple perspectives, in order to generate more historical distance.



Image 7: In June 2009, PAX organized a joint visit to the ICTY in The Hague for survivors of Srebrenica and Dutchbat veterans. Photo PAX

'Srebrenica' in Dutch History Education

In both primary and secondary education in the Netherlands, history education is divided into ten periods. In the final period ('Television and Computers', 1950 to the present day), Srebrenica is mentioned explicitly. The topic is mainly represented from the perspective of the Dutch peacekeeping mission in former Yugoslavia and the 'deep marks' it has left in the Netherlands. 'Srebrenica' has also been included in the official canon of Dutch history commissioned by the Dutch government, which is mainly used in primary education. In 2021, 'Srebrenica' will appear—for the first time—in one of the national history exams. In all cases, the theme is presented from a Dutch perspective: it concerns the dilemmas of the Dutch military in particular and of peacekeeping in general. We must also state that in the Netherlands most pupils (65 per cent) no longer have history education after the age of 15.

The amount of attention given to 'Srebrenica' in teaching materials in Dutch history education is very limited. Compared to other historical topics, Srebrenica is almost completely neglected. When included at all in teaching materials, Srebrenica is discussed mainly within the context of the history of the United Nations, the wars in former Yugoslavia or the end of the Cold War. The ethnic cleansing, the violations of international law or the genocide are mentioned only briefly, if at all, in most teaching methods. Our analysis also shows that most educational resources hardly discuss the broad historical context of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, or the run-up to 'Srebrenica' and the events during the fall of the enclave. The question of who the perpetrators were of the atrocities in Srebrenica—the word 'genocide' is hardly mentioned at all—is clear according to textbooks: the (Bosnian) Serbs were the instigators and perpetrators of the mass murder of the Muslim population. As bystanders, Dutch peacekeepers could do little to prevent the drama. The Dutch are rarely criticised: most of the textbooks portray them as victims of a failing international community and an ill-prepared Dutch government.

Some studies have shown a hierarchy in victimisation of suffering and violence in war. Why are some war victims easily remembered in the collective memory, while others remain hidden for decades? The German scholar Aleida Assmann has distinguished between two categories of victims, using the Latin terms *sacrificium* and *victima*. Victims of the first category were people who made sacrifices for an alleged 'good cause': they died for their country, for progress or peace, for democracy or civilisation. These victims are likely to be remembered quickly and publicly, for example through monuments or during official ceremonies. The other category, the *victima*, is seen



Image 8: School poster that is part of the Canon window about Srebrenica.



Image 9: Bosnian Muslim refugees wait for transport from Srebrenica after the city has been taken by Bosnian Serbs (photo from 1995)

as a passive group of victims who had no freedom of choice and who are believed to have died 'in vain'. These victims cannot be part of the heroic stories and are surrounded by a sense of traumatic memory. Cultural or political recognition of this victim group seems almost impossible. This memory is too traumatic for the in-group collective, too elusive for outsiders.

These two victim categories appear to be useful as models for the analysis of victimisation with regard to 'Srebrenica' in Dutch educational resources. In public discourses, some were surprised about the lack of attention in the Netherlands for the victims of the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This analysis of Dutch history education, however, also shows that the focus in teaching materials about 'Srebrenica' is on the functioning of the Dutch government, the Dutch peacekeepers and the international community. The Bosnian victims are hardly mentioned in the Dutch educational resources. Where they are, the men and boys who were victims of the genocide are presented as a unified group.

This group is thematically linked to only one event: the Srebrenica massacre. Moreover, they are without exception referred to as 'Muslims', without doing justice to the religious and cultural stratification of these inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The teaching materials therefore give young people no idea whatsoever about the personal circumstances of the Muslim community in Srebrenica; they are portrayed as victims and not as 'real people' with lives, families, history and culture.



Image 10: Meeting of Dutchbat commander Karremans with Bosnian Serb general Mladic, in Bratunac, in July 1995. Photo ANP

The Dutch peacekeepers, however, are discussed much more extensively and sometimes quoted. The consequences of the genocide for the survivors in Bosnia are hardly covered in Dutch educational resources. These people thus appear to be the *victima* of the drama, and the Dutch military are presented as men and women who, in their attempts to protect the inhabitants of Srebrenica, served a higher goal at the expense of serious post-traumatic disorders (*sacrificium*).

In most teaching materials the Dutch peacekeepers are therefore portrayed as powerless spectators who were unable to resist the military superiority of the Bosnian Serbs. The analysis of the teaching materials shows that the lack of air support, the light armament of Dutchbat, an inadequate mandate ("they were not allowed to use force") and "lack of support from the UN or NATO" are deemed to be the main causes of the failure of this mission. Only occasionally are the Dutch peacekeepers (implicitly) criticised in the textbooks, e.g. for "helping the Serbs to separate the men from the women and children". Such representations tend to generate empathy with the Dutch military in order to create a positive image of the Dutch. The Bosnian victims, by contrast, are hardly mentioned; the genocide itself is not contextualised or discussed. In the textbooks, Srebrenica is shown as an isolated event that only seems to be relevant through the experiences of Dutch soldiers.



Image 11: Most frequently used names in secondary school education materials.

Illustrations also play a significant role in narrative presentations in teaching materials. Photos or other images tell a story and are sometimes used to reduce the empathetic distance of students from a group of historical actors (such as victims). Few illustrations of the situation in Srebrenica, however, are included in the textbooks, and those that are often do not have explanatory text. Such isolated images without any context will therefore have little to add to the already poor historical context. By using primary resources in history teaching, students can experience different perspectives on important historical processes and events. Sources are therefore an important addition to the authors' text in textbooks, in which in almost all cases a single interpretation of the past is offered that students usually regard as 'factual'. By studying and analysing different viewpoints, young people learn to read and debate critically. Such exercises are intended to stimulate opinion formation and sometimes offer conflicting perspectives on the past. Unfortunately, we found few primary sources with regard to the theme 'Srebrenica' in the analysed textbooks.

Conclusions

This research aims to explore the representation of 'Srebrenica' in Dutch history education. We analysed the current history curricula in primary and secondary education, as well as over 20 commonly used teaching materials and teaching packages. Over 50 history students at the teacher training university in Nijmegen were also interviewed.

The topic of Srebrenica is scarcely covered in the history curricula in primary and secondary education in the Netherlands. Relatively little attention is paid in the analysed teaching materials to the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the fall of the enclave or the genocide of Srebrenica. There is also hardly any explicit attention paid to the causes of the genocide itself and how it took place; what exactly happened in July 1995 in Srebrenica remains underexposed. The word 'genocide' is rarely used in the teaching materials. Furthermore, they focus mainly on the position of the Dutch military and the involvement of the Netherlands in the (failed) peace mission: what dilemmas did the UN and Dutchbat experience in the context of the mission in Bosnia? It becomes clear that according to the teaching materials not Dutchbat, but the international community and in particular the United Nations failed.

Clearly defined perpetrator and victim roles emerge in the teaching materials. The (Bosnian) Serbs were perpetrators of the genocide; the Bosnian Muslim population were victims of violence and mass murder. The Dutch peacekeepers (Dutchbat) could do little to prevent this genocide. Some textbooks also report violent crimes committed by Bosniaks. The Bosniak perspective is lacking in the teaching materials. Dutch soldiers are regarded as victims of the failing international community or of a lack of support from the Dutch government. This implicitly calls for empathy and appreciation for Dutchbat's peacekeeping mission. Naturally, this perspective should not be lacking in educational materials in Dutch history education: the Dutch soldiers were eyewitnesses and protagonists in the events in Bosnia. Nevertheless, multiperspectivity is very important in an educational context: it enables students to recognise, articulate and contextualise the different perspectives of persons past and present. Otherwise there is the danger that narrative representations of controversial historical themes are used to make moral judgments, demarcate group boundaries or justify collective actions.

The aftermath of 'Srebrenica' in the Netherlands or in the international community receives little attention. Comparisons with (failed or problematic) peacekeeping missions elsewhere are not made. The political consequences of the failed peacekeeping mission, or the fact that there is now a large Bosnian community in the Netherlands, are not mentioned either. The legal consequences of the genocide are not presented in the teaching materials: that a tribunal was established in The Hague to try war criminals, for example, or the rulings of Dutch judges in cases brought by relatives, with success, against the State of the Netherlands. Moral or ethical issues related to political or military responsibility for the events leading up to July 1995 are not part of the representation of 'Srebrenica' in the teaching materials either.



Image 12: The cemetery for the victims of the genocide in Potocari. There are now 6652 victims buried. Photo PAX

Recommendations

This research reveals a number of gaps in the treatment of the topic of 'Srebrenica' in the curriculum and teaching methods for school history education in the Netherlands. Here are some of the key recommendations:

1. Pay more attention to the genocide in Srebrenica and its historical context

'Srebrenica' deserves more attention in Dutch history education. Particularly in secondary education, in secondary vocational education and in higher education, the topic has not yet been given a solid position in the Dutch curriculum. In addition, 'Srebrenica' needs to be properly contextualised, both historically and transnationally.

Expected outcome:

- ◆ Record of the long-term and short-term causes of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia;
- ◆ Process the aftermath of the conflict in Dutch domestic politics, in the attitude of the Netherlands and the international community with regard to peacekeeping missions, and in the legal consequences of the issue with regard to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the court cases initiated by survivors;
- ◆ Process discussions and perceptions regarding 'Srebrenica' in Dutch public opinion, including debates after the publications of the NIOD reports and discussions about the role of Dutchbat;
- ◆ Process the political decision-making in The Hague and in the context of the UN with regard to the deployment of the Dutch military and the position of Dutchbat in the enclave;
- ◆ Invest in cooperation with researchers and representatives of remembrance centres and other stakeholders in the in-service training and professionalisation of teachers, teacher trainers and learning resource authors.

2. Pay more attention to the perspective of the Bosnian victims

It is important that the different perspectives of the victims of the genocide in Srebrenica are represented in Dutch history education, explicitly contextualising the complexity of this history, the violations of fundamental human rights, the position of survivors and the migration as a result of war and violence.

Expected outcome:

- ◆ Provide source materials with individual testimonies of Bosniaks and other stakeholders with regard to the history of the genocide and the preceding conflicts;
- ◆ Pay attention to the violation of civil rights in war situations in general, and in Bosnia and Srebrenica in particular;
- ◆ Pay attention to analogies between refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and current migration flows.

3. Acknowledge the genocide, and provide insight into genocidal behaviour

Expected outcome:

- ◆ Provide source material on the individual testimonies of Bosniaks and other stakeholders with regard to the history of the genocide and the preceding conflicts;
- ◆ Include relevant information on the genocide rulings of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and ICTY, and of denial of the genocide in regional, national and geopolitical contexts;
- ◆ Provide historical analogies between Srebrenica and other genocides in order to provide insight into genocidal behaviour;
- ◆ Process results of new academic research with regard to 'Srebrenica';
- ◆ Organise partnerships, exhibitions and/or educational projects with memorials, museums, commemoration and remembrance institutions in the Netherlands and in former Yugoslavia.

4. Be clear about the role of the Dutch government and the military in the violence of war and during the peace mission

Pay explicit attention to the political and personal responsibilities and involvement of the Dutch government, Dutch politicians and civil servants, and Dutch military with regard to 'Srebrenica'. In the context of citizenship education, it is of great importance that young people gain insight into the political and/or military decision-making processes that took place during the peace mission.

Expected outcome:

- ◆ Provide better insight into the position, decisions and attitudes of key protagonists with regard to political decision-making and the peacekeeping mission;
- ◆ Relate these decision-making processes to current political events in the world, including moral and legal aspects of peacekeeping missions and the position of the UN, as well as to the individual memories of soldiers.



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