

Facing Srebrenica and the Future of Memory in Europe

In the context of the 25th commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide on 11 July 2020, as a joint effort of the Facing Srebrenica Foundation (in formation), Amsterdam Centre for European Studies (ACES) of the University of Amsterdam, the Faculty of Military Studies of the Netherlands Defence Academy and the Post-Conflict Research Center Sarajevo (PCRC), we facilitate an interdisciplinary research and database project on the visual memory of the Srebrenica genocide and its future in Europe. In collaboration with our partners, including the Srebrenica-Potocari Memorial Center, Netherlands Veterans Institute (VI), Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH), we explore the visual legacy of Srebrenica and the UN peacekeeping mission and the importance of its conservation for the future of the “never again” promise in Europe.

A collection of private photos made by Dutchbat soldiers of the people of Srebrenica will be part of a multiple artist exhibition commemorating the 25th Srebrenica genocide anniversary at Framer Framed in Amsterdam. The exhibition and a symposium will be the start-up for the longer term research project (2020-2025). The project will be materialised in a public accessible photo database, an academic edited volume and an educational programme.



Photo made by unknown Dutchbat soldier of Anera and Alaga Osmanović
in Srebrenica 1994 (courtesy Azir Osmanović)

“Everything is known about that death, or at least we now pretend that we want to know everything. We violate their death in newspaper columns, never asking ourselves questions about their life. We do not know anything about all those people who were not any less or more wonderful, good or bad than anyone else. Wonderful in so far they were human and in so far as I knew them (Emir Suljagic, Postcards from the Grave, 2005).”

Azir's request

The proposed project is a response to a request by Azir Osmanović, a tour guide at the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center. In May 2019, while visiting the Memorial Center, he showed us a photo of his brother and sister sitting on a bed in their refugee house in Srebrenica. The photo was taken in 1994 by a Dutchbat soldier who gave the photo to Azir's mother. Azir, twelve years old at the time of the photo, remembered that he and his family had been in contact with that Dutchbat soldier who was stationed at a nearby observations post, but he could not remember his name. He asked us whether it would be possible to find out who the Dutchbat photographer was, because he wanted to know whether there were more photos of his family. Most of all, he hoped to find a photo of his elder brother, who did not survive the Srebrenica genocide. We showed the photo to two former Dutchbat soldiers, who posted it on their Dutchbat Facebook accounts. The post was shared many times and some photos were posted in response and were sent to Azir.

We started a further and more general search for photos of the Srebrenica population made by Dutchbat soldiers, and we found that, during their stay from 1994 to 1995 in the UN "Safe Area" Srebrenica, Dutchbat soldiers took large numbers of photos to send home or for their personal photo albums. Moreover, the Dutchbat soldiers whom we approached for our project showed a great interest and willingness to share their collections and to make it possible to bring those photos home to those they have portrayed.

Rationale of the project

On 11 July 2020, it will be 25 years since the Srebrenica genocide. Extensive historical reports have been published, verdicts have been delivered on the most prominent perpetrators, the identification of victims is largely completed and resolutions to commemorate the genocide have been adopted by the European Parliament and the US House of Representatives. Nevertheless, the question how to commemorate Srebrenica and the broken "never again" again promise, is still subject to a political struggle that extends far beyond the borders of Bosnia. The assumption that factual reconstructions would lead to closure and reconciliation, underestimates the political power and fluidity of traumatic memory. Until now the debates in Europe have merely focused on questions of (co-)responsibility of the failed UN peacekeeping mission and on political and military leadership representing collective identities as "Serbs", "Muslims" and "Dutchbat". Much less attention has been paid to how the Bosnian war is reflected in the memory of individuals, and, more importantly, how this memory is an active process of remembering *and* forgetting which has the power to reinforce or transform present social relations in Europe far beyond those directly involved in the war.

Narratives of the past are often grounded in visual records and photography plays a prominent role in the memory of Srebrenica. Over the last twenty-five years, most photos and videos related to Srebrenica have been published as *evidence* of crimes. Notwithstanding the tremendous importance of the evidential role of these visual records in the truth finding of the Srebrenica genocide, this material is only a very limited representation of the experiences of living in the UN enclave. It *does* however play a dominant role in how Srebrenica is currently being remembered and, more importantly, in how it *can* be remembered. At the beginning of the nineties, digital photography had not yet reached the consumer market and the besieged population of Srebrenica lacked the resources and means for analogue photography and film. Moreover, when the population was forced out of the enclave they had to leave behind most of their personal belongings, including their personal photos. Azir Osmanović's request is as a wake-up call to see the importance of Dutchbat's photo collections for the memory of Srebrenica. The photos and the connected narratives serve as

personal memory sites that may help to get “a grip” on trauma histories for both survivors and veterans. With the publication of the photos and making them accessible in a database, we aim to contribute to facing Srebrenica in an international context and to open up the dialogic potential of photography as a field of research for the future of memory of Srebrenica.

Ethical considerations

Since photography of the local population of Srebrenica was mainly in the hands of Dutchbat soldiers, we are aware of the profoundly unbalanced visual framing of life in the UN enclave. We will address this problem in our publications and aim to add the voice and narratives of the people of Srebrenica to the photos. To this end, we collaborate with the Bosnian based Post-Conflict Research Center. We will strive to make the project texts available in Bosnian, English and Dutch.

Considering the political sensitivity of the project and its direct relation to traumatic memories, we have invested, and will invest, much effort into consulting those involved and/or their representatives, as well as experts on various aspects of our project - Bosnian and Dutch parties alike (see list of advisors). Two prominent representatives of both parties have stated their support for this project. The director of the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial Center Emir Suljagić, has confirmed the importance of the photos for preserving the memory of Srebrenica’s fallen and supports our project. He has appointed Azir Osmanović of the Memorial Center as our contact person. The director of the Netherlands Veteran Institute Ludy the Vos, who served as a company commander in Dutchbat II, supports the project as well. We may call upon the expertise of the Veteran Institute in the areas of veteran care and oral history.

We as organisers of this project adhere to the *Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity* (2018). The views and opinions expressed in this project do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any agency of the Dutch government or other funding parties.

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