1. The commission

On 11 July 1995 the Bosnian-Serb army seized the Safe Area of Srebrenica. In the days that followed, several thousand Muslims met their death in the vicinity of the enclave. When these events took place Dutch troops (Dutchbat) were stationed in this ‘safe area’ as part of the United Nations Protection Force operating under the auspices of the UN peace mission in Bosnia-Hercegovina. The UN intervention had prevented neither the fall of Srebrenica nor the mass murder. These shocking events stirred up considerable debate, also in the Netherlands. In this debate the question of what exactly had happened became enmeshed with the issue of the responsibility of the troops and the politicians who played a role in the events. These questions were not laid to rest by a Dutch ‘debriefing report’ of Dutchbat or what was intended as a closing parliamentary debate in December 1995. On the contrary, they continued to figure prominently in the press and on the political scene.

In the summer of 1996 the Dutch Government concluded that a broad-based international investigation was needed in order to get a clearer insight into the state of affairs. Though this idea received strong backing from Parliament, it met with a lukewarm response from the other countries in question and from the relevant international organizations. The Government then started to look for ways in which the investigation could be conducted from the Netherlands. Accordingly, it took up contact with what was then the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie (now the Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, the NIOD).¹

In November 1996, after gaining parliamentary approval, the Government commissioned the NIOD to conduct an investigation into “the events before, during and after the fall of Srebrenica”.² The information accompanying the commission listed a series of aspects that

¹ Hereafter the institute will be consistently referred to as the NIOD, the abbreviation for its present name.

² For the exact wording of the commission and the accompanying conditions and regulations see Proceedings of the Dutch Parliament 1996-1997, 23069, no.1 (Parliamentary Reports, 1996-1997, 20569); which is also appended to this report. The commission to the NIOD was supported by a parliamentary majority. A minority favoured a parliamentary inquiry for an investigation from the Netherlands.
needed, at any rate, to be addressed, but this list was not exhaustive. The NIOD would itself be free to decide on further elements that it considered relevant to the investigation. The explicit aim to realize a broad-based and multifaceted investigation is articulated in the following quotation:

"The RIOD is requested to record to and organize the relevant factual material. It is the intention that this material provide historical insight from a national and international perspective into the causes and events that led to the fall of Srebrenica and the dramatic developments that followed."

The terms of the commission stipulated the conditions under which this independent historical-analytical investigation was to take place and stated explicitly that the Government would do everything possible to give the NIOD researchers access to the sources within its control. Public servants were discharged of their pledge of secrecy for interviews with the NIOD. Rules were drawn up in relation to, amongst others, national security, personal privacy and the disclosure of information and sources. Agreement was reached on an arbitration procedure to settle any differences in the interpretation of these rules. A committee from the Council of State would issue binding recommendations. As the scope and specific problems of the investigation and the amount of sources were unknown at the time of commission, no deadline was set.

Besides its ability to fulfil the minimum conditions, what clinched the NIOD’s decision to accept this assignment was the belief that a strong public desire existed for scrupulous and independent research to clarify the sometimes highly contradictory flow of information, reports, suspicions and allegations. There was a need for knowledge in a circle that extended far beyond the political domain alone. In this situation, the then NIOD Supervisory Board and Directorate considered it their public duty, being a scientific institute, to respond to the Government’s request to conduct this investigation.

2. The research questions and the structure of the report

Obviously, the central questions of the investigation have been directly derived from the terms of the commission: to describe and analyze the fall of Srebrenica and the mass murders that followed. In other words, what happened exactly and how could it have happened as it did? It was therefore imperative that the account be detailed as well as accurate. It is precisely the detailed descriptions that clarify the internal dynamics of events as they unfold day by day. Many of the

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3 See section 3 of this prologue for a closer examination of the problems connected with the sources.
pressing questions posed by the public and the relevant parties can only be satisfactorily answered at this level.

That said, a thorough understanding of the events can only be achieved by placing them in a broader context. The fall of Srebrenica is one event in the war in Bosnia, which, in turn, forms part of the violent conflicts accompanying the integration of Yugoslavia. It is therefore necessary to trace the development of these conflicts, also by exploring the previous history. The tensions and events that occurred during the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation form the main background to the tragic occurrences of July 1995. This is where the problems originated and were fought out. This is also where the determination lay to pursue the objectives at the expense of large-scale and flagrant violence.

The nature and level of international intervention – or the absence thereof – also influenced the circumstances under which the conflicts unfolded. On the international stage, individual nations operated independently and as a part of international organizations. Various European nations and the European Community, later followed by the USA and diverse international organizations, – notably the UN and NATO – decided that they could not remain neutral.

It is vital that the Dutch involvement in the events in the Balkans be seen within this framework of international interventions; hence, in interaction with other countries and organizations. The Netherlands was closely involved and played an active role in the international developments. Amongst other things, it contributed troops to the UN international peacekeeping force (UNPROFOR), some of which were stationed in Srebrenica when it fell. Needless to say, as far as decision-making in the Netherlands is concerned, it is essential to examine the Dutch context in all its facets as well. It should, however, be borne in mind that decisions taken in the Netherlands sometimes had only a marginal influence internationally.

To derive a clear understanding it is also necessary to consider the wide-ranging dimensions of the events. The military, political and societal aspects were certainly important; these influenced one another constantly. Strategic, tactical and logistical aspects were important from the military perspective. In international diplomacy and politics the domestic and foreign policy of the various states each played its own role, usually interactively. In societal terms, a crucial role was played by the relationships between the various population groups in the Balkans, defined socially, culturally, constitutionally, religiously or ethnically according to the circumstances. The role of the media as social players in modern society was also important both nationally and internationally.
 Needless to say, these considerations have produced a voluminous report. As a predominantly historical account, this report is organized chronologically. The prologue, the introduction and the notes on the sources will first be followed by an account of the history of Yugoslavia, dating relatively far into the past in order to elucidate the regional context and developments. This will then be followed by four parts, each covering a specific aspect of the report. In each part, passages of a more thematic nature will be incorporated in the chronological narrative. The perspective from which the events are described will shift if this is necessary for a good understanding. For, a specific situation may be experienced and assessed in a totally different way depending on whether it is viewed from the vantage point of, say, UN headquarters in New York, the Force Commander of UNPROFOR in Zagreb, or the Dutchbat command post in Srebrenica. Where necessary for a good understanding, the chronological-thematic account will be interrupted for interim reflections, analyses or conclusions in an attempt to present the complex and multifaceted story of the sometimes dramatic events in a clear and comprehensible manner.

Part I deals with the events that took place between 1991, the year in which multi-ethnic Yugoslavia disintegrated, and the decision to send Dutch troops to the Srebrenica enclave, which had in the meantime been declared a Safe Area by the UN (1993). The main purport of this account raises the question of whether the ‘outside world’ had the means to end or contain the conflict after it had erupted and started to turn violent. In the context of Dutch foreign policy it also questions how the Netherlands came to make such a relatively large contribution to the peacekeeping force in former Yugoslavia and why it accordingly arrived in Srebrenica of all places.

Part II focuses on the presence and actions of Dutchbat in the enclave between February 1994 and the summer of 1995. This account also dates further back in time in order to clarify the regional and local background to the conflict in Eastern Bosnia. The same applies to the preparation and training of the Dutch troops placed at the disposal of the UN. A particularly relevant question is to what extent this preparation was geared to the ‘blue’ peace mission. The situation in the enclave, including the relationship between Dutchbat and the local population, also evolved against the background of the changing position of UNPROFOR in Bosnia. This will therefore be addressed, along with the position of the Netherlands in relation to the UN and otherwise.

Part III deals with the fall of the enclave (11 July 1995), and is therefore mainly of a military and diplomatic nature. It begins by describing the complicated dynamics in which
UNPROFOR, and hence Dutchbat, had to operate on the eve of the attack and the fall of Srebrenica. The events are then traced in meticulous detail with attention to the different parties involved and the levels at which they operated. This is necessary because of the ever-present question lurking in the background to this account of whether, at any stage in the developments, other ways out of the delicate situation offered realistic options. And if so, why were they not adopted or tested? Detailed scrutiny is also required in order to adequately answer certain recurring urgently asked questions on, for example, the use of air power.

Part IV discusses the consequences and aftermath of the fall of Srebrenica in broad terms. The first section focuses on the plight of the population who were in the enclave at the time (inhabitants of the town, displaced persons and soldiers from the Bosnian army): the journey that most of the male Muslims attempted to make to Tuzla; the events in and around the Dutchbat compound in Potocari, where the rest of the population had gathered; and the segregated transportation of men and women from this compound. Thousands were murdered during these operations. One pressing question in the light of this catastrophe is which options were open to the political and military officials in charge and what choices they made in these difficult circumstances. The section continues with a description and analysis of the closure to the Dutchbat actions, first in the UN context in Zagreb and then in a purely Dutch context (debriefing, political debate, publicity). As a result, ‘Srebrenica’ became a cause célèbre in the Netherlands as well as a tragedy in the Balkans. The second section ends with an exposition of the consequences on the international stage up to the Dayton Accord in the autumn of 1995.

The epilogue contains a summary of the main findings and the conclusions. Different types of appendices have been attached to the report. First of all, there are background studies conducted by third parties at the NIOD’s request. Second, some aspects of the investigation are more exhaustively explored or contextualized in separate appendices than was necessary or possible in the main body of the report. Third, there are complete overviews of sources with a more technical slant. And fourth, a limited number of documents have been appended which have a bearing on the investigation.

Besides describing the structure of the report, it is also important to consider the terminology that is used. Language is not neutral. Concepts and terms can have political, legal or emotional undertones, sometimes without the user’s awareness. Moreover, concepts or pairs of concepts, which, strictly speaking, are unambiguously defined, can cause confusion if they are used indiscriminately (such as peacekeeping / peace enforcement; safe haven / Safe Area; and air strikes / Close Air Support). These cases will be discussed in detail where this is most relevant.
Suffice it to say here in advance that, given the sensitivity surrounding the nomenclature for ethnic groups in Bosnia, we have opted for: Bosnian Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats. The term ‘Bosnian’ is applied to everyone who lives in Bosnia. The term ‘Bosniac’ has also been suggested, but as this is a controversial appellation with political connotations, it is not used in this report. Similarly, ‘Serbian’ is used for everyone who lives in Serbia. In other words, ‘Bosnian Serbians’ do not exist in the chosen terminology (only the above-mentioned Bosnian Serbs). The use of the term ‘Muslim’ follows on from the custom that has existed in Yugoslavia since the 1960s to refer to this ‘recognized’ national ethnic group under the dominant religious term. The capital letter indicates the ethnic/national category. Lower case is used to indicate muslims in the religious sense.

As ‘genocide’, ‘war crimes’ and ‘crimes against humanity’ have a specific meaning in international law, these words demand the utmost caution. The brutal murder of thousands of Bosnian Muslims is therefore described as a ‘mass murder’. No misunderstandings can arise as to what this in fact refers to. The seriousness of the event is not being trivialized, but any intermingling with international criminal justice is avoided.

3. The sources of the investigation

Historical research is based on the literature that is available on the subject of the investigation and on sources that provide information on the relevant events. At the start of this investigation the researchers were already able to make use of numerous publications. These dealt with the history and the perception of the Balkans in general and the (previous) history of the current conflicts in (former) Yugoslavia in particular. Since the start of the investigation the volume of books and articles has only increased. Literature analyses by B. Naarden and N. Tromp are included as appendices to this report. These can help to provide insight into the literature and, more importantly, can sharpen the realization that this history and conflict can be viewed from many different perspectives, and that many factors need to be examined.

In the meantime, many publications have appeared on the events in Srebrenica itself. Some of those who were involved have recorded their experiences, usually in their memoirs covering a longer period or as part of a wider topic.4 In addition, publications by investigative

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4 R. ter Beek, H.A. Couzy and especially Th.J.P. Karremans in the Netherlands, and C. Bildt, Fr. Briquemont, Ph. Corwin, B. Boutros Ghali, R. Holbrooke, L. MacKenzie, Ph. Morillon, Lord Owen and M. Rose. See the literature list in the appendices to this report for the exact titles of their publications.
journalists and scientific analyses have been published which the NIOD researchers have been able to use to great effect. They have also held valuable interviews with various authors, most of whom showed great generosity in making their documentation available, including the parts they had not used in their publications. Among these were copies of documents, which could not be found elsewhere or were not released.

Normally, in the sources for historical research, a distinction is made between published documents and papers derived from archives or private individuals. In contemporary historical research, such as this, it is also possible to interview eye-witnesses or persons who were otherwise involved in the events. Complete overviews and lists of the consulted literature and (printed, archived and oral) sources are included in the appendices to this report with explanatory details where necessary.

Research into very recent events is often characterized by a remarkable and problematic combination of a scarcity and an abundance of sources at the same time. The abundance stems from modern society’s tendency to produce enormous amounts of printed matter, manuscripts, images and digital files. This trend is more often than not spearheaded by government agencies and the mass media. This also proved true for the subject of this investigation. The research team collected tens of thousands of documents of diverse character and origin.

The media were an important source in three respects. First, they provided analytical articles, sometimes hot from the press and sometimes written in retrospect. Strictly speaking, these fall into the same category as the above-mentioned literature. Second, the journalistic reports contain a lot of eye-witness information on specific events. The local and regional press in former Yugoslavia was particularly useful in this respect. Third, the mass media played an opinion-shaping and politicizing role in the events and tried to influence the decision-making processes in the relevant national states and international organizations. In modern western

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5 Among the reports that also shed light on many background situations and contain sharp analyses special mention can be made of: F. Westerman and B. Rijks, Srebrenica - Het zwartste scenario (Srebrenica, the nightmare scenario); D. Rohde, Endgame - The betrayal and fall of Srebrenica: Europe’s worst massacre since World War II; C. Sudetic, Blood and Vengeance - One Family’s Story of the War in Bosnia. The autumn of 1996 already saw the publication of Srebrenica. Record of a War Crime, a historical and politicological analysis by J.W. Honig and N. Both. This was very useful to the researchers at the start of the investigation, as was the publication of Both’s thesis, From Indifference to Entrapment. The Netherlands and the Yugoslav Crisis 1990-1995 in 2000. In the early stages Srebrenica – getuigen van een massamoord (Srebrenica – witnesses to a mass murder) (1996) by B. van Laerhoven also proved highly useful. Various other books and articles which have not been explicitly mentioned all provided support in the course of the investigation; see the literature list in the appendices to this report for the titles.
nations there is a constant interplay between the content and tone of the mass media, public opinion, the political debate and the political decision-making. Hence, the ‘press’ is just as much a source of information as it is a factor in the decision-making process. This relates, not only to the content of newspapers and broadcasts but also to the news service.⁶

There was not always an abundance of sources from the printed media. In the West we encountered no significant problems in gaining access to these sources, but it proved more difficult in former Yugoslavia, mainly because the circumstances had led to the loss of material. The consultation of visual and audio material also created some problems (the researchers were particularly interested in visual material because of its immediacy). This proved harder to find and more was lost than in the case of the printed media.⁷

As already mentioned, there was also a scarcity of sources: information on certain issues was rare or absent right up to the end. This can roughly be attributed to three main causes. Firstly, information was deliberately withheld. Some developments were deliberately left undocumented and those who were involved would not discuss them later. Sometimes, material that was actually produced was deliberately destroyed, perhaps to prevent it ending up in the wrong hands. This is why, for example, Dutchbat III destroyed documents before leaving the enclave. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that material relevant to this investigation was also deliberately destroyed with the aim of getting rid of it for good (whether or not in conspiracy). In practice, however, it proved very difficult to make all the information disappear. Usually, references to or parts of this information were found sooner or later. Even so, it still presented a problem for the researcher.

Secondly, information can simply get lost. The research team was confronted with wide-ranging causes such as fire, lack of insight into the importance of documents or e-mail traffic, and slovenly filing practices. During interviews, people can get things wrong because of misinterpreted or distorted memories, forgetfulness or repression. Finally, information can disappear or be withheld as a result of legislation or regulations, a case in point being the provisions for the selective destruction of archive material or for confidentiality (usually temporary) in questions of national security or protection of privacy.

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⁶ See also the research reports of O. Scholten, N. Ruigrok and P. Heerma and J. Wieten, which are among the appendices to this report.
⁷ The expertise of image researcher, G. Nijssen, was invaluable here.
At the start of the investigation agreements were reached with the Government on access to state documents. As a result, the access to documents in the possession of the Dutch Government was far greater than is usually allowed when the material is of such a recent nature. Most of the other Dutch organizations and the individuals over whom the Government had no (direct) authority went along with these relatively favourable arrangements.

However, the situation was not entirely without problems. At the start, the researchers were faced with archive neglect at many government agencies. It is understandable that low priority is given to archive maintenance or that there are even no archives at all when circumstances get difficult and hectic (as in the case of Dutchbat during the fall of Srebrenica). Even so, much of the material at the Dutch Government agencies was in a desperate state. This is all the more amazing, considering that in recent years, attention has been repeatedly drawn to the need for efficient archive practices. The Temporary Parliamentary Commission for Political Decision-Making on the Sending of Troops Abroad (the Bakker Commission) also identified this problem and formulated three findings and two recommendations. It pointed out the need for regulations governing the filing of e-mail messages in addition to traditional filing. This relates to an issue that extends further than the sources for this investigation alone. It is outside the scope of this report to explore the solutions, but attention should still be called to this problem.

In some cases further agreement had to be reached on specific sources. These concerned the ‘Unity of the Crown’, personal privacy and national security. It was agreed in connection with the Unity of the Crown that no references would be included in the report that could be traced to the interview with the Prince of Orange. It was also agreed with regard to the consultation of the minutes of the meetings of the Ministerial Council – highly irregular especially if they concern a government in office – that the research team would receive an ‘objectivized’ version, i.e. one which omitted the names of the ministers who spoke. The NIOD Director, who was also heading the investigation, was allowed to compare this version with the original. He did so and confirmed

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8 See paragraph 1 of this prologue and Appendix XXX.
that, apart from the omitted names of ministers, there was no intrinsic difference between the objetivized version and the original minutes.\textsuperscript{10} It was further agreed that no literal quotations would be taken from these minutes. This still left the possibility open for the researchers to speak with the individual ministers on their opinions and stance in the Ministerial Council.

Access to these minutes was crucial to the investigation. However, their significance must not be overestimated. They contain very little information that could not have been obtained in other ways. By far the most of it can also be found in official papers or in publicly available documents (e.g. parliamentary papers). Any divergent standpoints adopted by ministers were often published in the press at the same time or shortly afterwards. Finally, it is remarkable that, although differences of opinion are clearly recorded, the minutes are restrained and contain a strictly clinical account of what was said. For example, it is impossible to ascertain from them if, when, and to what extent the emotions in the Ministerial Council became heated.

Specific agreements on the protection of individual privacy were especially necessary for the ‘debriefing statements’. These are the statements made by Dutchbat soldiers during their debriefing in Assen in the autumn of 1995. At that time, the soldiers were promised that these statements would be subject to the strictest confidentiality. Third parties would only be allowed to peruse them with their explicit permission. The only exception was information on war crimes, which could be important to the Yugoslavia Tribunal. This undertaking was made in order to encourage the soldiers to speak freely, and it goes without saying that it should be respected. The NIOD had therefore to resign itself to the fact that these essentially important statements could not automatically be consulted. With the aid of the Dutch Army the NIOD wrote a letter to all concerned requesting that they release their statement for this investigation. Many agreed, some refused, and another group failed to respond. A few denied permission to read the statement but consented to an interview. A large part of the statements or the information they contained came to light in this way.\textsuperscript{11}

Initially, the NIOD had no objections to this procedure, given that it is crucial for the Government to honour its promises. This changed when it turned out that not only, at an early stage, were the passages on the war crimes placed at the disposal of the Yugoslavia Tribunal but

\textsuperscript{10} The same applies to the handwritten notes of the secretaries of the Ministerial Council insofar as these have been preserved.

\textsuperscript{11} The notes contain name references to these debriefing statements subject to the consent of those involved. If they wished to remain anonymous, the reference is to confidential information.
later also a set of copies of all the statements in full. The Ministry of Defence, however, rejected a request to still allow the NIOD access to all the statements in order to ascertain whether there was any reason to approach those who had refused permission.\textsuperscript{12} It is open to question whether this is in tune with the Government’s promise to do all in its power to allow the researchers access to the sources. Why was this not possible for the NIOD while it was possible for the Tribunal?

National security played a role mainly with regard to the sources for the activities of the domestic and foreign intelligence and security services. The identity of the informants, their sources of information and the relationship of trust with (foreign) sister services needed to be safeguarded. Accordingly, agreements were reached on (non-)quotations, special forms of annotation and anonymity for discussion partners from these services. The special appendix on intelligence will address this further and discuss the problems in relation to the verification of sources.\textsuperscript{13} This will also be tackled later when we discuss the interview as a source of information. Suffice it to say for the time being that, aside from the ways in which these sources could be used in the text, despite the constraints, the information thus obtained also made a significant indirect contribution to the credence of some of the analyses and insights in this report.

In-depth interviews were also held with the parties who were involved. This followed more or less the same pattern as that of access to the archives. In the Netherlands the agreements reached with the Dutch Government at the start of the investigation led to a good relationship with the interviewees. No-one refused an interview. The attitude in these interviews was usually cooperative. In many cases personal notes, documentation and sometimes even diaries were placed at the disposal of the researchers.

At this point it should be noted that questioning under oath is not one of the tools of the contemporary historian. Questioning under oath has its own specific place and merits in (criminal) justice investigations and parliamentary inquiries. What matters in the case of (criminal) justice investigations is to establish behaviour or facts in accordance with the law and specific procedural rules. The principal aim is to reach a verdict on a violation of the law. A

\textsuperscript{12} The correspondence between the NIOD and the Ministry of Defence is included in the appendices. NIOD Archive: letter to the Minister of Defence 12/10 99; reply 28/10 99. The doubt as to whether everything possible had been done in this matter was further reinforced when it transpired that officials at the department had apparently consulted the debriefing statements, also without the permission of the interviewees. Interview with H.H. Hulshof 06/12/01. Interview with J. de Winter 20/07/00. The ‘Kreemers Collection’ contains copies of debriefing statements.

\textsuperscript{13} C. Wiebes, Intelligence and the War in Bosnia 1992-1995, Appendix to this report.
parliamentary inquiry, on the other hand, is a key investigative tool in politics, which is regulated by law and intended mainly to evaluate political policy and to establish the responsibility for political choices. Historical research pursues different and usually (far) broader aims, namely to derive the clearest possible picture of a particular episode. This requires a balanced consideration of the importance of the relationship and interaction between the greatest possible number of parties. The aim of historical research is not to reach a (criminal) verdict or to make a political statement but to gain insight into the events. This does not mean that (criminal) justice investigations and parliamentary inquiries have nothing to do with historical research. On the contrary, there are interfaces and areas of overlap, and there may be reciprocal support. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the historian is neither a judge nor a delegate of the people. His interests and questions are neither those of the lawyer, nor the politician.  

In this light, one might justifiably ask whether the absence of the option to question under oath placed this investigation at a disadvantage. What the investigation primarily amounts to is the questions asked and the (background) knowledge of the investigative historians. However, the conditions under which historical interviews are held are also important. Normally, questioning under oath takes place in public, and hence under the – sometimes – threatening glare of publicity and the apportionment of blame. These conditions are hardly conducive to a productive interview, one that delivers maximum information. The research team applied a variety of interview techniques (several interviewers, one interviewer, with and without a tape recorder, at people’s homes, at the NIOD, in ‘neutral surroundings’, by telephone and so on). But each time the main purpose was to create a businesslike, research-oriented atmosphere, which was not dominated by


15 Cf. the comment and finding of the Temporary Parliamentary Commission on the Decision-Making Process on the Sending of Troops Abroad (Bakker Commission) on the (exclusion of) questioning under oath (*Vertrekpunt Den Haag*, p. 17 and 491). Finding 79 reads: “The Commission has not been able to conclude that the absence of the possibility to question under oath and the obligation to appear has had any influence on the results of the investigation”.
interrogation, but rather by an attempt to exchange thoughts on what exactly happened and how it should be analysed. This took place in the firm belief that this approach would promote trust in the researchers and thus encourage openness on the part of the interviewee. The research team therefore prefers the term ‘interview’ or ‘discussion’ to ‘interrogation’. This kind of approach still dug deep, however, preferably with the relevant information on the table.

Problems in gaining access to information abroad

On the whole, the special cooperation afforded to the investigation in the Netherlands was lacking abroad. In other countries ‘Srebrenica’ had not become an internal political controversy, as it had in the Netherlands. Moreover, the strictly analytical aim of the investigation was not immediately clear to everyone abroad. Was this not a government-commissioned project that had been assigned in a politically charged climate? In other words, was it a political investigation? Through time these suspicions could often be partly or entirely removed, and cooperation improved. In some cases cooperation abroad even surpassed expectations. But at other times it proved difficult, perhaps because people were afraid of creating a precedent or, more importantly, feared the personal adverse effects of an in-depth investigation. In most countries the regulations and procedures for consulting recent archives are stricter than in the Netherlands and the secrecy regime for public servants is more stringent. In some cases, direct references to documents and interviews were not allowed.

A two-track policy was pursued in the attempts to consult foreign archives and interview people. Depending on the situational assessment in each individual case, agencies and persons were approached directly or with the aid of Dutch diplomatic representatives, or a combination of the two. In general, the international organizations were the ones who were most prepared to cooperate. The United Nations was far more obliging after it had commissioned its own investigation into the fall of Srebrenica. The researchers were allowed access to the coded traffic between New York and Zagreb. At the UN headquarters in Geneva research was carried out in the archives of UNPROFOR and the International Conference on Former Yugoslavia. The United
Nations High Commissioner for Refugees also allowed access to the archives. It must, however, be said that the archives of various sectors of the UN and its affiliated organizations are in a dismal state, especially those of UNPROFOR. Considering the difficult working circumstances, the many personnel rotations and the financial problems, it is understandable that this material was either lost or left in an unorganized state.

Cooperation by the Dutch UN and NATO partners who took the lead in the international intervention in the Balkans was minimal in a number of cases. There were differences in what could be achieved in each country. The Canadian authorities were the most obliging. They granted access to archive material, though not quite to the extent that was requested. Various Canadians who were involved in the events were permitted to talk with the NIOD researchers. The United States refused access to the archives, but it did allow interviews. A fairly large amount of declassified government documents was also released under the American Freedom of Information Act and the Canadian Access to Information Act. Diverse government agencies in Denmark, Norway and Sweden helped by providing background briefings and by allowing access to archives and to Scandinavian soldiers who had served with UNPROFOR.

The French Government was scarcely prepared to lend any cooperation either by permitting interviews with key figures or access to archives. Agreement was, however, reached with the French Government that it would respond candidly to a NIOD questionnaire. This was not a particularly attractive alternative to an archive study and interviews with relevant witnesses or experts. Moreover, the results of the questionnaire were disappointing. Only very brief, superficial answers were given in the form of already well-known public standpoints. None of the questions on the background and origins of these standpoints were answered. The French Parliamentary Commission, which investigated the events surrounding the fall of Srebrenica, did however make its confidential interview reports available in private before they were published in the Commission’s report in the autumn of 2001.

The results vary widely in the case of former Yugoslavia. On the one hand, the researchers were sometimes viewed with suspicion because, coming from the Netherlands, they were mistakenly associated with the Yugoslavia Tribunal in The Hague. On the other hand, attempts were sometimes made to use NIOD researchers for political or humanitarian ends, for example, to draw attention to war crimes committed by the ‘others’, to identify (alleged) guilty parties or to

16 The questionnaire with the answers is appended to this report.
trace missing persons or the bodies of victims. Additionally, the collapse of the old state machinery was not conducive to securing documents. A clear institutional structure had not yet been fully established in the newly created state. The government records were either not quite organized or caught up in an ongoing process of change. This did not bode well for the archives in any of the cases. Add to this that, in the conflict situation, the persons involved had sometimes appropriated or destroyed documents, and the term ‘chaos’ would not be misplaced. All things considered, one could almost say that it is a miracle that documentation could still be collected through government agencies and private individuals.

The willingness to cooperate on the part of the authorities in these new states also changed according to the circumstances. Access to Republika Srpska was problematic during certain periods; access to Serbia during the Kosovo War was even impossible. As time passed, cooperation improved but reticence still had the upper hand. All in all, it is understandable, given the subject of the investigation, that for a long time the Bosnian authorities were more obliging than the authorities of Serbia and Republika Srpska. However, in certain phases of the investigation good contacts were also established in both these areas, which delivered some material and information.

In 2001, during the final phase of the investigation, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, set up in Belgrade, approached the NIOD. The situation in Serbia had changed radically since the fall of Milosevic. The Commission offered to cooperate with the investigation. This led to several useful contacts and interviews in the summer and autumn of 2001, although some key figures still refused assistance or were unreachable at that time. Access to the archives was still denied. Indeed, the archives were (still) closed to the Commission itself, which was clearly in the process of starting up its activities and beset by all sorts of difficulties. If some or all of the archives are eventually opened, this will unfortunately be too late for the NIOD investigation. The Commission did help us to get extra information from what were essentially open sources, which until then could only be consulted in dribs and drabs, if indeed at all. These mainly comprised printed material in libraries.

Under these circumstances, it was more important in former Yugoslavia than anywhere else to talk with those who had been involved. This took place on a large scale. But, like

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17 For this proposal see the procedural progress report by the NIOD to the Government of 23 May 2001.
18 In isolated cases a large amount of cash was asked for an interview with the NIOD because of the risk to the prospective interviewee. The NIOD did not respond to such requests.
everywhere else, the reliability of the information proved a complex problem. Not only did some of the discussion partners have their own agenda or want to ‘whitewash’ themselves or others, the NIOD was also faced with the ever-present question of whether information given in good faith was indeed accurate.

On the other hand, the interviews sometimes led to documents and, all in all, many people from the region were prepared to talk, sometimes after hesitation, which was only logical in view of the traumatic experiences. Some may also have feared repercussions, as the researchers’ movements were being closely monitored by the local authorities. The combination of many interviews, documents and open sources from former Yugoslavia made it possible – despite the difficulties – to build up enough well-founded reconstructions in relation to many aspects or at least to offer plausible scenarios. In several cases these could be more firmly underpinned by material that was released for the trials at the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Other reasons may also have influenced people’s decision on whether or not to cooperate in the investigation by taking part in an interview. They may have asked themselves – certainly not only those in the Balkans – whether cooperation might compromise them personally (in their career or in a possible future judicial inquiry). They may also have wondered what these Dutch researchers were really after (whitewashing Dutchbat perhaps?). Some could not comprehend what they interpreted as a sort of ‘national self-torture’. Fortunately, many were willing to be interviewed, or else could be persuaded to do so. Some people from countries where the authorities had been uncooperative were extremely communicative in these discussions. In a few cases the interviewees even agreed to develop their insights by further study of the sources and to record the results in writing for the investigation.

This discussion must now, however, address the refusal of certain key figures to talk to the NIOD researchers. The most prominent among them are the French Generals Janvier, Morillon and De Lapresle, the Bosnian-Serb President Karadzic, General Mladic and various others in Republika Srpska and Serbia. This is highly regrettable and definitely a serious handicap for the investigation. The NIOD used various channels in an attempt to speak to them. The fore-mentioned French generals refused in compliance with the line taken by their government. Some said they had nothing to add to what they had already said or written elsewhere. Their refusal is rendered extra painful, given that they did cooperate with the UN
investigation and that General Janvier, for one, has also given press interviews. They also made statements to the French Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry, set up in 2000. President Karadzic and General Mladic could only be approached through indirect channels. As is generally known, they have gone into hiding, so these attempts to approach them were unsuccessful. It is equally regrettable that most of the heads of government and some Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Defence of the countries concerned were not prepared to be interviewed. However, the effect of this is less serious than it appears, as in many cases information on their role could be obtained through close assistants, some of whom were better informed, or from documents.

Other problems regarding the sources for the investigation

Some interviews presented complications concerning the use of the information. References were not allowed in the case of some documents. Obviously, this was not the preference of the researchers: after all, scientific norms require that the source of information be identified so that the information itself may be verified. When confronted with the choice between an interview under certain conditions and no interview at all, the NIOD opted for the former, despite potential problems regarding the verifiability of sources.

The protection of sources is, in itself, not an uncommon problem. In this investigation the easiest cases to solve were those in which the person did not want his name mentioned in the report. It is then acceptable to refer the information to an anonymous source. Not especially difficult, albeit laborious, were situations in which the interviewee demanded to see beforehand how quotes would be extracted or how the discussion would be paraphrased. More complicated were cases in which the informant refused under any circumstances to allow certain parts of his information to be directly or indirectly accredited to him. Some people would not even consent to an anonymous listing in the list of interviewees. This applied, amongst others, to a few people from Eastern Bosnia whose willingness to cooperate could endanger them personally. It also applied to officials from the western intelligence and security services.

This applied likewise to documents where a source reference was not allowed. In all these cases the nub of the problem was that the information had no directly verifiable source.

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19 In a note on page 326 of Tim Ripley, Operation Deliberate Force (Lancaster, 1999) General Janvier is expressly thanked for the large amount of time he was prepared to devote to interviews.
Fortunately, it was possible on occasion to document this information (once provided) in another way or to base the subsequent conclusions on other sources. If this failed, however, a few possibilities remained, all of which have been applied. First, in several cases the information could be formulated with a reference to an anonymous source in such a way that it was not clear, even indirectly, who had supplied it. Hence, the reader is asked to trust the researchers. Second, the inferences of the information could be included without a (verifiable) source, but as the result of a plausible hypothesis or assumption. This is done on the assumption that the reader is prepared to follow the whole argument in which such a step forms a part. The third option was to desist from making direct use of the information. It then figured indirectly in the analysis and interpretation of research data that could, in fact, be used. This can resonate in the degree of conviction in the presentation of the conclusions.

As far as the reliability of a source is concerned – a key problem for historians – a distinction can be drawn between the reliability of the informant (is the document he has drawn up authentic and is he honest?) and the accuracy of the supplied information. Essentially, this boils down to the same problem, and both these elements are sometimes intertwined. It is self-evident that a plethora of propaganda and disinformation appeared in the Balkans conflict. Documents can be the bearers of such incorrect information. Discussion partners can pass it on unintentionally and memories may be coloured by information acquired after the event.

This is especially true of the mass murder, which came to light later. Memories of what happened prior to this event may be inadvertently influenced by later knowledge, and a shift could occur in the perspective of certain observations and experiences. This is specifically relevant to the memories of everyone who was involved in the events during and after the fall of Srebrenica: the residents of the enclave, the Dutchbat soldiers, officials of organizations in Bosnia, Zagreb, and New York, and in The Hague and other centres of government.

Many of the interviewees questioned by the researchers have an interest in the research findings. Hence, the possibility of deliberate or unconscious distortions or even lies had to be constantly taken into consideration. Conversely, too much suspicion can lead a researcher down the wrong track. All these factors were addressed by consistently applying critical historical standards to the sources of this investigation, also to those without explicit references.20

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20 It is neither customary nor feasible to provide separate notes for each document and interview. However, at a few crucial moments, the question as to the reliability of the sources will be explicitly addressed.
On balance, it must be concluded that the sources did, to some extent, present (serious) problems. The reader should realize that these problems imposed just as many constraints on the investigation. On the other hand, there were also many opportunities. Despite the previously-mentioned scarcity, there was an abundance of material for virtually every key aspect of the investigation. The Dutch Government’s generosity in releasing sources gives this investigation a headstart on all others on the same subject. The diverse international organizations were more cooperative than is customary. In short, despite the fact that discretion was necessitated on occasion, the sources nonetheless offered an ample basis for the investigation and for a well-founded report.

4. The research team and the circumstances of the investigation

The investigation was conducted under the direct responsibility of the NIOD Director, J.C.H. Blom, and the Head of Research at the institute, P. Romijn. In 1996 a research team was formed of experienced historians: A.E. Kersten, specialist in the history of international relations; P.C.M. Koedijk, investigative journalist and media historian; and D.C.L. Schoonoord, military historian. In 1997 a contemporary historian, T. Frankfort, was appointed as research assistant. Later, she joined the team as a researcher in line with her actual activities.

After a phase of administrative and logistical preparation, the investigation began in earnest at the start of 1997. As was expected, it soon proved to be multi-faceted, extensive and complicated. It also transpired before long that the necessary groundwork was incomplete because the events had taken place so recently. Accordingly, additional members were added to the research team in the course of time and parts of the investigation were outsourced to third parties.

Three extra researchers were appointed at the start of 1999: N. Bajalica, specialist in Slavonic Studies and regional expert for the Balkans; B.G.J. de Graaff, specialist in political and administrative history; and C. Wiebes, expert in (the history of) the operating methods of (inter)national intelligence and security services. At the end of 2000, R. van Uye was appointed regional expert on the basis of years of direct experience of the Balkans which he acquired working for an international organization. At the same time, P. Bootsma was appointed editor to bring continuity to the finished text. Innumerable support activities were carried out by M. van Kessel, E. Meents and J. Vermolen.
A number of specialized aspects of the research were outsourced. B. Naarden and N. Tromp of the Eastern Europe Institute at the University of Amsterdam were asked to bring out literature reports to provide more insight into the copious international literature on the history and perception of the Balkans and the current problems in the region (especially former Yugoslavia). Agreement was reached with the London School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) that G. Duijzings would write a report that concentrated specifically on the history of socio-cultural relations in Eastern Bosnia and Srebrenica. As this research was so crucial to core questions in the investigation, it was later decided that this separate report would be restricted to the moment that Srebrenica was designated a Safe Area in 1993. The part of this research that deals with the period that followed is incorporated in the final report. Duijzings joined the research team in 1999 for this purpose. In addition, shorter research tasks were assigned to investigate the role of some international aid agencies in the region.

Interpreters/translator from the region itself and from the Netherlands, and placement students reading Slavonic languages at the University of Amsterdam were called in to assist with the study of sources in Serbo-Croat. Some interviewees were also asked to write down their knowledge and insights for the NIOD. These documents are appended to the interview reports or are documented separately at the NIOD. Given the significance of the media in the events, the Amsterdam School for Communication Research (ASCOR) of the University of Amsterdam carried out a study of the content of various Dutch media (P. Heerma, N. Ruigrok and O.

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21 B. Naarden, Beeld en Balkan. Waarneming en Werkelijkheid in Zuid-Oost Europa (The Balkans, a question of image. Perception and reality in South-East Europe; N. Tromp, Achtergronden van de Joegoslavische crisis. Literatuuroverzicht (The background of the Yugoslav crisis – A review of the literature). Both are appended to this report.

22 G. Duijzings, History, Memory and Politics in Eastern Bosnia. An historical-anthropological background account to the events in Srebrenica, July 1995, appended to this report.

Scholten) and of the process of news collection and formulation (J. Wieten). The support of image researcher G. Nijssen was enlisted to track down and select moving images.

In terms of subject matter, the research assignment and the available sources, the research team faced a ‘routine’ contemporary historical investigation with all the usual characteristics and problems. That said, the circumstances under which this investigation would be carried out were highly unorthodox. Clearly, the agreements already reached with the client (the Government) at the start of the project were highly propitious: maximum access to the sources and ample material resources to actually conduct the investigation. However, the investigation also came under heavy pressure from a whole array of factors: the deeply emotional import of the subject; the political sensitivity of the investigation, especially in the Netherlands; the sometimes fast-changing political and military relations (particularly abroad); the overwhelming media attention; the need for secrecy during the investigation; the many other research activities in the same field; and finally, the pressure to report quickly, which was at odds with the dimensions and complexity of the investigation.

The emotional import of the subject is self-evident. The murder of thousands of people shortly after the fall of Srebrenica elicited particularly strong emotions which the researchers could not and would not eschew. Anyone who has spoken with the survivors, the close family, or the perpetrators – which the researchers obviously did – can no longer see his historical research as a detached, perhaps intellectually-rewarding activity. Moreover, those who also had to witness the events as so-called ‘bystanders’ (such as various Dutchbat soldiers) may be marked for life. Contact with these individuals has an impact on researchers which goes far beyond their professional role as collectors of information.

Such emotionally-charged issues have the potential to jeopardize the impartial desire to reconstruct and analyse events on the basis of verified information. But impartial reporting was the whole purpose of the assignment. The researchers’ awareness of this problem enhanced their

24 O. Scholten, N. Ruigrok and P. Heerma, In Sarajewo wordt geschoten, in Genève gepraat. Vier landelijke dagbladen over de oorlog in en om Bosnië (1993); O. Scholten, N. Ruigrok and P. Heerma, Good guys, Bad Guys (1st half year 1995); O Scholten and N. Ruigrok, Het debriefingsrapport in de Nederlandse pers (2nd half year 1995); J. Wieten, Srebrenica en de journalistiek. Een onderzoek naar opvattingen en werkwijze van Nederlandse journalisten (Srebrenica and journalism. An appraisal of the approach and methods of Dutch journalists). These reports are included in the appendices.
motivation to bring the assignment to a good conclusion which met the professional criteria of their discipline.

As was to be expected, the subject continued to be politically-sensitive after the investigation had been commissioned: Srebrenica remained on the (public and) political agenda. Time and again, this sensitivity triggered fresh debates on the subject, in which the NIOD investigation could also become a focus of attention. The NIOD resolutely declined to issue interim reports or to comment on new publications on or media attention to the events. The disclosure of provisional or out-of-context information could have created confusion. The inextricability of the many factors relevant to the investigation also made it impossible to report adequately on sub-issues. Moreover, interim reporting could have adversely affected the part of the investigation that was still in progress.

Accordingly, the NIOD distanced itself as far as possible from debates which touched on the investigation. Only once did it make an exception, when certain proposals threatened to negatively affect the interests of the investigation. In 1998 the NIOD Director, who bore ultimate responsibility for the project, publicly requested that due attention be paid to its interests.\(^{25}\)

The main problem created by the ongoing political attention was that it could influence the discussion partners of the NIOD researchers. It made some people reluctant to cooperate (freely). Fortunately, in the course of the discussion most of them could be persuaded of the usefulness and desirability of their cooperation. Even so, it must not be ruled out that, in a few cases, a certain fear to make political statements (or statements with political consequences) did play a stronger role than was desirable. The researchers were aware of the potential influence of the political debate during the investigation and have endeavoured to minimize its effect on the investigation itself and its findings.

In actual fact, the changing political circumstances abroad exerted a far greater influence on the investigation than the political debate in the Netherlands – in positive and negative terms. For example, the UN decision in 1998 to conduct its own investigation into Srebrenica had the beneficial side-effect of increasing access to the UN sources. On the other hand, the Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing of Serb targets resulted in a temporary total break in the researchers’ contacts in Serbia, just when these had been painstakingly established. The researchers were no

\(^{25}\) J.C.H. Blom, ‘Politiek rijdt RIOD lelijk in de wielen’ (‘Politicians throw a spanner in the works for NIOD’), in: De Volkskrant, 18 August 1998; also information from various radio and TV programmes on the same day.
longer permitted entry to the country. Once the main tensions had subsided, they could carefully pick up the thread again. But it was only at a very late stage, with the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2001 in the Republic of Yugoslavia, that the possibilities in this country started to improve. Without going into detail – the reasons are not even entirely clear to the researchers – it may be concluded that the (changing) political climate in some countries was also partly instrumental in determining the general perception of the NIOD investigation, and whether or not people were prepared to cooperate. Hence, shifts in these political relations became relevant to the investigation. This is an unwelcome but not totally uncommon situation in historical research. In any case, it prompted alertness and a cautious strategic approach.

It can generally be said that, with the passage of time, the changing political climate opened up more opportunities to obtain material and to speak with those involved. ‘Srebrenica’ and Bosnia became less of a priority on the international political agenda, as indeed did the whole problematic situation of former Yugoslavia at a later stage. This made it more acceptable to cooperate with historical research. It also took time for the researchers to gain the trust of potential informants or suppliers of archive material.

Under the circumstances it was virtually inevitable that Srebrenica would stand in the media spotlight. The deep emotional and political implications of the subject also contributed to the sometimes sensational and revelatory nature of the coverage. This was again relevant to the context of the investigation as it could influence the individual perception of the events and the nature of the cooperation. Independent research by the media could affect the NIOD investigation in a number of ways: it could act as a stimulus or it could impede it. In practice, it frequently turns out that several researchers or research teams are interested in a specific topic. On balance, this is usually beneficial to the development of scientific knowledge and insight. Accordingly, researchers can then either seek cooperation, sharing information and provisional findings, or they can each go their own way (whether or not in competition).

The need for non-disclosure of (provisional) findings in any form whatsoever had to play a decisive role in the attitude of the research team, also in terms of cooperation with the media. At some moments, the researchers would have liked to have cooperated with the media for intrinsic reasons, but this was totally out of the question as it could have caused untold damage to the rest of the research. This also applied when, for instance, inaccuracies needed to be corrected. But any cooperation with the media would have inevitably meant (rightly so from the media perspective)
the disclosure of partial or provisional findings. Additionally, as has already been mentioned, the media were an important factor in all the events which the NIOD was investigating. Cooperation with the media, except for access to sources, was therefore not an option.

Various other investigations were being carried out simultaneously with the NIOD investigation by private individuals and government agencies alike – in addition to detective work by journalists. An informal collaboration could occasionally be established with independent publicists on ‘Srebrenica’ or related subjects, sometimes after publication and sometimes beforehand. This always took place under the strict condition that it would not lead to premature disclosure of the NIOD findings. A good, businesslike understanding was also built up with the researchers of the UN Secretariat on the basis of a scrupulous separation of both investigations. This delivered results, particularly in the form of reciprocal notification of sources and strictly confidential discussions on the background to and the interpretation of the events. Obviously, the final report of the UN Secretary-General 26 focused strongly on the role of the UN, and was partly determined by the issues facing the UN at the time of the investigation. However, the UN investigation is also highly valuable within a broader perspective. It also contained important information for the NIOD research and provided opportunities to sharpen the subsequent insights. The same applies mutatis mutandis to the French parliamentary inquiry that was largely conducted in 2001. 27

While the NIOD investigation was in progress, criminal justice investigations were also underway in the Netherlands into the conduct of Dutch troops in former Yugoslavia. These investigations did not result in prosecutions. Here too, absolute discretion was required in what was essentially useful cooperation. Criminal justice investigations send out threatening signals to (potential) suspects. In general, this will not increase their willingness to cooperate with another investigation – in this case the NIOD investigation – and will reduce their value as a provider of information. Any collaboration between the NIOD and the prosecution services would only have been counter-productive. It is for this reason that contact with the Dutch prosecution services was restricted to formal information on written sources. The researchers were allowed to take cognizance of the content of the relevant dossiers. Any use that was made of these dossiers took place in anonymous form.

The investigations of the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia ran concurrently with the NIOD investigations. These concerned themselves entirely with war crimes and crimes against humanity and involved research on a large scale with progressively larger research teams, which were active locally and in the archives. Srebrenica is only one of the important subjects that they address. Even so, it was crucial for the NIOD, especially at the start, to keep the activities strictly separate and, at any rate, to stay away from the other party in the region. The NIOD researchers would only be disadvantaged if confusion arose about the relationship between the two investigations or if its own investigation became associated with that of the Tribunal. This happened often enough in practice and cost considerable trouble to correct. The earliest informal contacts with the Tribunal researchers were therefore more or less limited to the reciprocal exchange of information. The more information the Tribunal collected – which was also relevant to the NIOD – the greater became the desire to establish further contact with the Tribunal researchers with regard to their sources and their reconstruction of the events. Needless to say, this also took place with each party retaining its own responsibility and independence. Fortunately, the information and reports that were produced at the public sessions were made public largely in compliance with the rules.

After the NIOD had been commissioned to conduct the investigation, two more decisions were taken in the Dutch political domain to set up an investigation on the same subject. In the summer of 1998 the ‘accusations of a cover-up’ figured predominantly in the press and in Parliament with deep political import. The accusations were levelled at the Ministry of Defence and the Dutch Army. The recently appointed Minister of Defence, F.H.G. de Grave, deemed it necessary to have these accusations investigated separately and therefore instructed J.A. van Kemenade to report in the shortest possible term. This report followed within two months.\(^{28}\) In 1999, Parliament instructed a Temporary Commission (also referred to as the Bakker Commission after its chairman) to specifically investigate the circumstances surrounding the political decision-making in the Netherlands with regard to the participation and deployment of troops in international peace operations. Although the scope of this investigation extended beyond the deployment of Dutchbat in Srebrenica, it was clear that this deployment would

receive particular attention from the Commission. The report of the Bakker Commission appeared in September 2000.29

Both investigations were instituted as a result of mounting political tension in which the debates also addressed the (limited) breadth of and the potential conflict with the NIOD investigation. In the mutual contacts, agreement was reached between Van Kemenade and the Bakker Commission on the one hand and the NIOD on the other that only strictly necessary information would be exchanged in order to prevent the activities from causing too much damage on either side. Given the current political climate and the political tension surrounding the subject, more intensive contact was considered undesirable by all parties. It would only have contributed to the ‘ politicization’ of the investigation, which is precisely what the NIOD wanted to avoid. This report will explore the results of both these investigations in greater detail when this promotes a clear understanding.

The scope of the investigation, the voluminous sources, the need for detail and the complicated circumstances of the research resulted in a lengthy process. As already mentioned, no deadline had been initially agreed because of the many uncertainties that existed at the time. Obviously, when more insight had been gained into the sources and the dimensions of the investigation, timetables were drawn up. After the commotion in the summer of 1998, these were also made known to the Government in procedural progress reports. Regrettably, these timetables had to be reviewed several times. Initially, this was mainly because new lines of inquiry had opened and new sources had become available. Later, the complicated nature of the events and the extreme difficulty of formulating the results in a scrupulous manner in compliance with the professional demands of the discipline meant that more time was required than was originally planned in the (over-optimistic) timetable. The only solution was, unfortunately, to announce another postponement.

Paradoxically, the time-consuming conditions under which the investigation was conducted increased the pressure to report quickly. The investigation was commissioned in an effort to find adequate answers to the urgent questions posed by the politicians and the public. It is precisely because the questions were so urgent that answers were needed soon. There was an

underlying tension between this understandable external pressure (which was also endorsed by the NIOD) and the uncompromising professional demands of soundness, scrupulosity and precision. As the cogency and import of the investigation needed to lie first and foremost in the historical-analytical quality of its reporting, the professional criteria weighed heavily in the balance.

5. The nature of the report

A ‘historical-analytical investigation’ into the events before, during and after the fall of Srebrenica: this was the research assignment. This is also the unequivocal ambition of this report. No more and no less. Prolific use is made of the term ‘report’. This is in keeping with a commission from the political domain. But essentially, the NIOD has produced an analytical monograph: a reconstruction of events as an intrinsically dynamic historical process with the highest achievable level of accuracy and substantiation.

In this reconstruction and analysis it turned out that the political, military and socio-cultural context defined the contours within which the players and agencies operated and construed their (political) responsibility. But there was no question of far-reaching determinism. Referring to a statement by E.E. Evans Pritchard, Duijzings remarked that “the train of events was irreversible but not inevitable”. Situations constantly arose in which a different decision or another course of action, based on some consideration or coincidence, could have led to another chain of events. It is also important for a good understanding of the story of Srebrenica to apply the same fundamental – albeit limited – open-minded approach which should be adopted towards any historical account. From this vantage point all written history is ‘if history’. T. Nijhuis expressed it as follows: “History cannot be reduced to what has happened; it is what happened in the context of what could have happened”. This does not imply that it can go in all directions. Nor does it mean that it is possible to say with any certainty what would have happened if another decision or course of action had been taken. Attempts to reason along these lines lead to assumption after assumption and hence to pointless speculation. But a good eye for the open-

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endedness of historical situations can be useful in identifying the decisions and events – coincidental and otherwise – which, at a specific moment, determined the further course of events. All these factors must then be viewed within the constraints of the historical alternatives that existed at that moment in time. In the interests of clarity it is also important to draw attention to what historical research has demonstrated time and again, namely, that the intention or the motive of the parties concerned need not necessarily accord with the effect of that intention or motive.

This is one of the reasons why the report employs the utmost discretion regarding political judgements. Just as the researchers cannot sit in the chair of the (criminal) judge, they cannot and will not play the role of political arbiter. The question as to the political consequences of the investigation should be answered in the political arena and in public debate. It is in any case open to question whether consistent and political conclusions can be directly drawn from the results of historical-analytical research. The report does nonetheless endeavour to provide the firmest possible foundation for this debate, so that it can be conducted on the basis of the best possible reconstruction of the events and insight into their background that could be achieved under the current circumstances.

The report is loath to venture opinions on what certain persons and institutions ‘should have done’. The researchers wanted to guard against easily made judgements after the event, now that, after years of study, they have learned to place things in perspective and consider them in tranquillity (‘the armchair effect’). Those who were involved in the events of Srebrenica often had only a split second to decide how to act in extremely complicated and hectic situations. They were nowhere near aware of all the exigencies. The report therefore devotes its full attention to providing exact descriptions and analyses of these situations. In the process, it can be highly revealing to also consider the alternative action that was open to the officials. This exercise is intended only to facilitate a clear understanding of what happened and not to point an accusing finger. The same applies to any tension between valid and known regulations and the actual actions of those involved.

These questions do not present such a problem in many historical investigations because the norms are generally shared. Moreover, most subjects are unlikely to stir up special emotions in the reader or significantly divert his attention from the analysis. This subject is different. The

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31 T. Nijhuis, p. 8.
researchers have sought to avoid the role of executioner precisely because of the weighty political questions surrounding the subject. This role was not part of their remit. In any case, the assignment was to conduct a historical-analytical investigation. This calls for an analytical and explanatory judgement. The political judgement should be developed and formulated in the public and political arena. It is in this arena that the researchers now lay their report as material for a closer formulation of judgement on the basis of the presented facts and insights.