

Krokodil "Speech to the World" – 11.7.2026, Ger Duijzings

We are here to commemorate the Srebrenica genocide, in which more than eight thousand Muslim men and boys were killed over the course of just a few days in July 1995. They were systematically executed and thrown into mass graves. We are here to not forget them.

So far, some 7.000 victims have been identified and buried at the memorial centre in Potočari. The remains of around 1,000 victims have yet to be found.

UN courts declared Srebrenica to be a genocide. In May 2024, the 11th of July was declared the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of this Genocide, by the General Assembly of the United Nations. This is why we stand here today.

I am also standing here as a Dutch citizen. Srebrenica is a trauma for my country too.

Dutch UN soldiers were present when the Bosnian Serb Army overran the UN Safe Area. They did not resist and assisted in separating men from women. Which led to accusations concerning the role of Dutchbat, and the United Nations more generally.

Srebrenica became a black page in our country's recent history, as much as it also became a stain on the reputation of the UN.

I spent many years researching the Srebrenica genocide, as part of a team set up at the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation (NIOD) in Amsterdam.

It was tasked with investigating the events and the role Dutchbat had played. My role was to explore the local dynamics that led to the genocide.

I tried to understand how it was possible for such violence to occur in this small Bosnian town. So how did that come about? And why Srebrenica of all places? These are the key questions I have sought to answer in my research.

After we published the final report in April 2002, the government of the Netherlands resigned, accepting political responsibility for what went wrong.

“Speech to the World”: to me it sounds like a formidable task. What do I have to say, apart from saying “Hello” to the world which seems to be in a mess, right? And does not seem to want to learn from the horrors of the past.

Where new wars are fought and new atrocities committed. Where the victims are just numbers, remaining anonymous. What can I say? Does it serve a purpose? Will I be heard at all? Will it matter in the end?

Looking for some inspiration, I googled “Speech to the World” and I found Charlie Chaplin’s speech to the world at the end of *The Great Dictator* (1940): his famous war satire and the first sound film he made. Its subject was Hitler and the rise of European fascism.

At the end of the film, he drops his comedian’s mask and speaks into the camera, delivering a passionate plea for humanity and democracy, calling upon audiences to rise up against dictators and unite in peace. A message of defiance and hope.

It became the most famous fictional speech in cinematic history, by an artist whose most famous alter ego was that of a tramp, of a vulnerable and tragi-comical figure, thereby commenting on the issues of his time, like the dehumanising effects of industrial work in *Modern Times* and the rise of fascism in *The Great Dictator*.

Later he declared that he would never have made the film had he known about the Holocaust and the horrors the Nazis would cause. But his speech at the end says it all, by somebody who speaks his mind and steps out of his usual role, can we think of any better example to emulate?

So, this is what I want to talk about: denial, silence, and indifference.

These are the issues that come to my mind standing here on the Srebrenica Memorial Day. Denial is a vice for which elites in Serbia and Republika Srpska are known. But, regardless of whether we are talking about denial of genocide or of other mass atrocities, Serbia is not the only place where this happens.

If it were only here, the world would have been a better place.

We can see that also in Israel or Germany, for example, where the indifference about 75.000 Palestinian (mostly civilian) casualties in Gaza is staggering.

This is a denial of morality and responsibility, wrapped in conspicuous and wilful silence, combined with real or feigned indifference.

Also, the Dutch are not immune to this. In 1995, we saw the gradual withdrawal of empathy on the part of Dutch troops from the increasingly destitute population in Srebrenica in the months before the enclave fell into Serbian hands.

Indifference regarding the victims is a fundamental problem especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, where the Srebrenica genocide is relativized or denied by (Bosnian) Serb politicians and public figures.

Statement like "Srebrenica may be a war crime, but not a genocide" and "Serbs are not a genocidal nation" are half-hearted and disingenuous, as murderers continue to be celebrated as heroes.

If Srebrenica is a war crime, this, of course, should never be allowed to happen.

Crimes are wrapped in collective silence. Many relativize them as a regrettable but inevitable evil, they do not want to see what 'we' did, or what was done in our name. They glorify the perpetrators and refuse to see the suffering that was caused.

In the end all of this is justified with reference to OUR suffering, our suffering that is not recognised: we are the ultimate victims.

Once I wrote that nations that regard themselves as victims can cultivate their victimhood status with such intensity that they become perpetrators of heinous crimes.

It is indeed likely for nations that portray themselves excessively as victims to become perpetrators. What drives them are 'dark emotions', which constitute an invitation, usually collectively framed, to undo the humiliating status of victimhood, justifying acts of revenge and retribution, and releasing energies to take remedial action.

That is why the executioners of genocidal violence often present themselves as the prime 'victims' and not as the perpetrators. And the crimes they commit as a form of

redemption, setting the historical record straight, through brutality. It is mostly not the real victims that take recourse to this type of action, the task is assumed by others or the next generation.

They commit the crimes that they would not do normally, it is the "dirty work" that needs to be done, to create permanent security for 'us' all.

This can only be achieved through pre-emptive violence: kill first, and that mercilessly, because the enemy has sinister intentions and is otherwise going to destroy us.

It is our historical mission to do it, after which we can go back to normal life and become good and moral individuals again. But can we? Not only the victims are dehumanized through this violence, also the perpetrators.

Let me finish with this: We should never forget about the human cost of war, and the pain suffered by individuals and their families.

These personal experiences are often overwritten by the structural memory politics of postwar societies, ignoring the victims, and leaving them alone in their suffering.

Therefore, I call upon the world to rebel against the continuous instrumentalization and silencing of individual suffering by cynical politicians and state leaders. Let's look for shared humanity, show respect to and empathy for the victims, and work together for peace.

Suffering does not have to result in dark emotions: there is the remarkable altruism and generosity shown by many victims, who have made the choice to not have their lives and hearts be guided by bitterness and revenge.

They show us: it is in our own hands, we can decide, we can reach out.

I would like to conclude with the words carved in stone at the Potočari memorial:

“May revenge become justice. May the mothers’ tears become prayers – so that Srebrenica never happens again.”