

Abstract conference Veteran Politics and Memory: A Global Perspective
University of Warwick, 16-17 April 2021.

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Back with a mission – an interdisciplinary analysis of veteran return trips to former Yugoslavia.

It is not uncommon that war veterans return to places they have been deployed to (eg. Captain, 2008; Eade & Katić 2018; Fallon & Robinson 2016; Murakami 2018; Walter, 1993). The last years, more and more Dutch veterans have undertaken return trips to former Yugoslavia, an area where the Dutch army has been present since the early nineties as part of different UN, NATO and EU missions. The Dutch involvement in these missions included the failed attempt to protect the ‘safe-haven’ Srebrenica, and the consequent genocide that killed more than 8,000 Bosnian-Muslim men and boys. For obvious reasons, this genocide dominates the collective memory of the military mission to former Yugoslavia in the Netherlands, and has had a great impact on the experiences of the veterans after they returned home – also on the ones that weren’t deployed to Srebrenica. Many veterans associate their time in former Yugoslavia with feelings of shame, distrust, and powerlessness – even when their personal memories are actually quite positive.

Earlier research (Driessen, 2020 – forthcoming) has indicated that veterans use the return trip to come to terms with their wartime experiences and put their experiences into perspective. In this paper, we further explore the effect that return trips to former Yugoslavia have on the lives of Dutch veterans. In doing so, we argue for an interdisciplinary approach to studying return trips, in which a focus on trauma and PTSD is complemented with perspectives from the disciplines of memory studies, ritual studies and oral history. By paying attention to the place that the deployment and return trip have in the personal lives of the veterans and their families, we aim to get a more complete understanding of the potential of the return trip as a means to process wartime memories and tool for healing. Our research is based on an ongoing collaboration with a group of veterans and their partners.

Biographies

Siri Driessen is a postdoc researcher at the Leiden University Medical Centre and lecturer at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. She wrote her dissertation (Dec. 2020, EUR) on contemporary war tourism in Europe. A part of this dissertation was dedicated to the experiences of Dutch veterans who returned to sites related to their military deployment in former Yugoslavia.

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