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Focus on the Second World War: Reflections from NIOD on the Dynamics and Tensions between Academia, Politics, and the Public

Peter Romijn and Ismee Tames

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, many countries felt the urge to record the drastic experiences of those who went through it for future generations. The Cegesoma in Belgium, NIOD in the Netherlands, IHTP in France, and the IfZ in Germany were all established during the immediate post-war decades in order to document and give meaning to experiences of repression, terror, and genocide from an academic perspective. These tasks were primarily defined along national lines, and each of these institutes has thus taken up a specific position in their own national 'remembrance- and coping-landscape'. This national framework, for example, accounts for the fact that Cegesoma commemorates its 50th birthday in 2019, whilst NIOD celebrates its 75th in 2020. The diverging socio-political circumstances in both countries account for their differences, while the continued existence of both institutes suggests an ongoing sense of societal relevance. Simultaneously, however, the experiences of collection specialists and scholars at these institutes show that supra-national approaches to their work are not of lesser importance. For example, the history of repression and persecution cannot be fully researched without involving the system of political prisons, concentration- and destruction camps.

As experiences of war, occupation, and the Holocaust belong to an ever more distant past, naturally, these institutes have implemented a broader interpretation of their remit in order to encompass more contemporary history. However, this expansion has been selective, and still primarily springs from the need to research aspects of war and occupa-

tion and their aftermath. The societies concerned are still unable to experience the atrocities from the war past as a distant history—something that becomes evident from the need to lay to rest the past by giving material and moral compensation to certain victims and groups of victims, three, or even four generations later. From a historiographical point of view, Henry Rousso, the former director of the IHTP in Paris, points towards another important fact: that from an initial orientation towards the history of the Second World War, researchers have developed a special sensibility towards broader themes of mass violence, starting from the beginning of the 20th century, and they have increasingly orientated themselves towards this¹. For this reason, Cegesoma has added 'war and contemporary society' to its name, whilst its Amsterdam counterpart has redefined itself as the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies.

Starting from the Dutch experience, we want to make two points regarding the political and public spheres in which the researchers of our institutes shape their work, and the narratives to which they must relate in their public outreach. Whilst we take the present as our starting point, we are eager to acknowledge that, as researchers, we stand upon the shoulders of generations of our predecessors. Yet at the same time, we also search for new perspectives in other and more recently developed disciplines, and acknowledge that today, we face different political and social challenges than we did one or two generations ago.

Three Spheres

We differentiate three spheres in which the Second World War is an important subject of discussion: the academic, the political, and the public sphere. Of course, we acknowledge that also in the personal sphere, the Second World War continues to be both relevant and present. However, for this contribution we focus on the public debate, in which personal experience is also brought into the discussion.

1. HENRY ROUSSO, "Der Historiker als Therapeut und Richter: Was ist Zeitgeschichte in Frankreich zu Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts?," in NORBERT FREI, *Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts?*, Göttingen, 2006, p. 53.

In the academic sphere, specialised researchers have moved the field beyond the strict boundaries of any specific country's Second World War history. In the first instance, they were—especially in the case of those working at the predecessor of today's NIOD—bound to a specific place and time ('The Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War'). Precisely this expertise was part of the initial mission of the institute which, by owning archives and combining expertise, had a de facto monopoly in the field well into the 1980s, after which researchers became more interested in broader themes of war and mass violence, and university researchers made their entry into the field. This stimulated wider scholarly involvement, which pushed researchers to break out of the national framework and examine wider connections and contexts. In line with contemporary professional norms, research places 'authoritative' interpretations into perspective and is anti-particularistic when 'the historical protection of interests' is concerned. What matters now is searching for academically relevant interpretations and generalisations about processing and experiencing war and mass violence. Thus, those who are primarily looking for the political or social "usability" of this research, risk being disappointed because of the academic entry point.

In the political sphere in the Netherlands, the state successfully took the lead in shaping commemorative politics—unlike Belgium, but comparable to France. After the German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War and the end of the colonial project in Indonesia, the aim was to legitimise the recovering political community, and its exercise of power. The primary motive was the transfer of ideas of good citizenship, based on 'the lessons' that could be drawn from the history of the Second World War—summarised by Hermann von der Dunk as 'freedom at any price'². The idea of 'good citizenship' could encompass anyone who accepted the concept of national unity in ideological diversity—as long as it was practiced

within the boundaries of liberal democracy. However, this concept could also have an exclusionary effect: firstly, against the supposed opponents of constitutional order (the national-socialists of the war years, the communists of the Cold War) and subsequently against recent non-Western immigrants (who were considered insufficiently 'enlightened'). Therefore, these groups were presented with the 'correct idea' of right and wrong. Especially the young were educated with the idea that these norms of 'right and wrong' would become properly ingrained into the collective consciousness over the generations. In this respect, the lesson of 1950 does not differ fundamentally from that of 2019, even though of course, one can point towards substantial differences in its form, the references it makes to current events, and its mediatisation. Moreover, emphasis remained on the national framework, and the political sphere explicitly referred to insights gleaned from historical research. The focus of attention changed from a country victimised yet fighting (as Loe de Jong posited) to a country with a remarkably high proportion of deported Jews. These changes in perspective were closely connected to the changing preoccupations of the public sphere.

In the public sphere, the role played by the history of the Second World War and the way in which meaning has been attributed to it have changed over the decades. In the initial post-war years, community thinking was encouraged, causing individual experiences to be considered less relevant, and placed within the same national framework. Subsequently, because the need to keep the memories alive was felt, the 'Authority of the Witness' became cultivated³. Sociologist Jolande Withuis recognises the importance of witness accounts for coming to terms with the traumatic past. At the same time she rightfully warns that historical analysis should not be mixed up with psychological intentions and purposes⁴. Additionally, specific groups of victims, until then subaltern, emerged into the pub-

2. HERMAN W. VON DER DUNK, *In het huis van de herinnering: Een cultuurhistorische verkenning*, Amsterdam, 2007, p. 298–299.

3. ANETTE WIEVIORKA, *The Era of the Witness*, Ithaca, NY, 2006, p. 140–144.

4. JOLANDE WITHUIS, "Zeitzeugen des Zweiten Weltkrieges in der Niederlande," in MARTIN SABROW EN NORBERT FREI, *Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945*, Göttingen, 2008, p. 175.

lic sphere, demanding that historical injustices should be compensated, and preferably undone. Historians were tasked with conducting forensic research (How did the injustice come into existence, and what was the nature of the damage done?), as well as with interpreting where the responsibility for any misconduct lay (Was the wrongdoing 'hushed up', due to formalism or indifference, or had it simply been ignored?).

The most important factor in the public sphere is the prominent attention paid to the history of the Second World War, in which historical issues are almost automatically connected to political and moral notions of right or wrong. Contemporary mass media, and social media in particular, have facilitated an increasing commercialisation and emotionalisation of the war past. We can observe a shift from public knowledge production to entertainment and 'opinion formation'. In the public sphere, reflection is often fed by emotions such as indignation and rejection, and it no longer takes place starting from content or the will to know about what thus far has remained hidden and unprocessed—and why.

The urge to expose those guilty and responsible to public contempt sustains a type of chain reaction, whilst there is little or no attention paid to what is known about the facts that underpin the issue. An example of such dynamics could be observed when in the autumn of 2018, descendants sought attention for the fate of so-called 'kraut girls'. In the aftermath of the liberation, these women (the derogatory Dutch term was *'Moffenmeiden'*), who had had (sexual) relationships with the German occupiers, were widely mistreated. Their fate was now attributed to the failure of the Dutch state to sufficiently protect them. In both classic and social media, participants on both sides of the discussion directly vented especially *their* own opinion—how 'wrong' either these women had been, or the people who during the liberation period humiliated them, for instance by shaving their heads. The factual development of events and the historical context remained in the background.

Another example is the controversy surrounding German pensions for Dutch members of the Waffen-SS in the beginning of 2019, which completely passed over the phase of trying to determine what exactly was going on. Reactions focussed mainly on indignation, drawing attention to the fact that some Jewish survivors and other victims have until now been barely compensated. The indicative and exemplary function of the ultimate proof of injustice was attributed to the personal—embodied by a Jewish survivor and his battle for recognition on the one hand, and the daughter of a *'Moffenmeid'* on the other. In the example of the *'Moffenmeiden'*, when insulting and misogynous remarks poured in, the personal aspect was used 'to point the finger'. The authority of the witness is the authority of the accusing party, and the professional historian is, at best, called upon only as a convenient judge—not to offer insights, but to strengthen the judgement. In such public manifestations, historical research seems justified only when it 'presses charges' in a socio-political sense. Interestingly, the commotion surrounding the *'Moffenmeiden'* as well as the SS pensions originated abroad, respectively in Norway and Belgium. The consternation, however, quickly 'nationalised' the issues, and made a case for the supposed violation of the national community—a violation that was also denounced in an exclusively national framework. In this respect, present preoccupations can still be considered comparable to those of the period directly following the war.

Interaction between the Three Spheres

The academic, political, and public spheres form a triangle, and at the centre of this triangle lies the Second World War and its long-standing legacy. Whilst it may be expected that the conversations in these three spheres pivot around the same subject, this is definitely not always the case: indeed, the history of the Second World War can be called upon for myriad reasons. Sometimes, this can be stimulating for professional historians, yet with regard to the representation of the past, they also experience it as a sign of stagnation or regression.

In the public sphere—via classic and new media—it is expected that professional historians will provide the raw material, not only for quotes, but also for indignation. Moreover, the authorisation of arguments is expected from an institute such as the NIOD, summarised as: ‘What does the NIOD think of this?’ The political sphere often quickly intervenes in order to demonstrate that the government is not deaf to the sentiments that live ‘amongst the people’. Politicians hurry to express their opinions on controversial issues—such as in the cases of the supposed pensions for former members of the Waffen-SS or the question of whether apologies should be offered for the treatment of *‘Moffenmeiden’*. By doing so, politicians again feed public debate. Meanwhile, bureaucracy takes it upon itself to search behind the scenes for possible ways to smooth over the given controversy and to depoliticise the problem. Academia comes in handy here, as the supplier—at least eventually—of authorised visions on the topical past.

Moreover, in order to support the legitimacy of the democratic order, the political sphere also makes broader claims on scholarship when it comes to citizenship. Public events, exhibitions, and educational packages use aspects of the Second World War in order to educate young people and recent immigrants about ‘good citizenship’: what being a Dutch citizen should mean with regard to ideals of democracy and human rights, but also about respect and piety regarding victims and survivors of the Second World War and their commemoration. Recently these educational political messages were bundled together in the so-called thematic ‘Year of Resistance’ (2018). These endeavours bring us back to the entry point of Loe de Jong, the first director of the NIOD, who described the goal of his institute and his historical work as educating the people in how to be ‘responsible citizens’⁵. De Jong, a former journalist himself, knew exactly how to find and play the media in order to place his work at the cen-

tre of the national debate. The alliance between the historian and the media, directed towards the public, has by now become more diffuse—just like ‘the media’ itself, ‘the public’, and ultimately also the public sphere have become increasingly diffuse. Today, historians who popularise histories of the war (such as Van der Heijden, Van Liempt, and Brokken) are the ones most likely to establish such an alliance with the media and reach a large public. They usually opt for narrative approaches, a proximity to emotions, and a distance to what is considered ‘an academic approach’. Thus, they obtain an outsider image as someone who more truthfully addresses the concerns of larger audiences and ‘the ordinary people.’

Yet this development is not necessarily a loss, as long as academic historians also manage to relate effectively to questions that are being asked in the public sphere. Their responsibility remains to address those questions on the basis of their own professional standing. Ultimately, their goal is to work towards a better understanding of troublesome pasts. They should provide new and deeper interpretations, rather than simply comfortable and ‘usable’ historiographies.

Above, the dynamics at the state and national level have been discussed. In the Netherlands this level has been dominant for the past 75 years, albeit not without being challenged. Below the level of the state and the nation many communities of commemoration have emerged, demanding recognition and the undoing of historical injustices (Jewish victims were followed by forced labourers, postcolonial migrants, Sinti and Romani, homosexuals, civilian casualties, the children of Dutch Nazi-collaborators, to name but a few of the most striking groups). These groups found support with professional researchers writing about their experiences as victims and the accompanying claims. The media gave those experiences and claims meaning and were able to put pressure on processes of recognition and compensation.

5. LOE DE JONG, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 12: Epiloog*, Leiden, 1988, p. 1109.

The nation provided the commemorative framework for the desire of these pressure groups: they aspired to be written into the national narrative of the war as a previously overlooked and victimised community. At the same time the state provided both the political capacity and the financial resources to offer restitution in the form of moral recognition and material compensation. In the Netherlands, the will to be included in such national frameworks prevailed, whilst in Belgium, it was precisely the opposite: there identities solidified not on the level of the state, but on a sub-state level, where Nazi collaboration, the *'Koningskwestie'* (literally, the 'Royal Question'), and social fault lines could be given a more obvious place.

Conclusion: Navigating?

The dynamic between the academic, political, and public spheres surrounding Second World War history in the Netherlands displays significant continuities. The NIOD and other academic researchers still play an important role in the political sphere, even if the priorities and perspectives of the two do not always converge. This happens for example when 'lessons in citizenship' drawn from the Second World War in the public sphere can be phrased in such a way that the search for insight and nuance is overruled by a desire for categorical judgements.

The political and media spheres are profoundly interconnected. Upheaval in one domain results

in upheaval in the other. Whereas the media want to set the agenda, politics look for unambiguous forms of agency; both want to show they are on the 'right' side. Academic knowledge is requested, yet simultaneously considered as complicating when this knowledge does not concur with, for example, the emotional positions already taken. Researchers sometimes have to navigate between following their academic agenda, and wanting to prove their societal relevance.

The near future will probably reveal a landscape in which media and politics will deal with both unverified stories and specific claims in an even less rigorous manner. Eyewitnesses, with their unique multilayered and complex memory of the events, will no longer point towards important aspects that are being overlooked in the debates. Moreover, whilst research has generated more knowledge and more information has been disclosed and made available, knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the context in which such events took place is rapidly decreasing. Conversely, the increasing temporal distance may foster a demand for clear-cut representations of the past that are more attuned to the national community: 'How did "we" do during the war?' This suggests that, whilst the call for interpretation increases and with it a form of societal relevance, academics will unabatedly have to ask themselves how to play their role in a way that is both scientifically relevant and honest.

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