



# Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

## Towards a new history of the Second World War?

Ribbens, Kees; Romijn, Peter; Piersma, Hinke; Wouters, Nico; Van Doorslaer, Rudi

2015

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Ribbens, K., Romijn, P., Piersma, H., Wouters, N., & Van Doorslaer, R. (2015). *Towards a new history of the Second World War?* KNHG / Royal Netherlands Historical Society (Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap).

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the KNAW public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the KNAW public portal.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[pure@knaw.nl](mailto:pure@knaw.nl)

# Position paper

## Towards a new history of the Second World War?

**RNHS Conference co-organised by NIOD and CegeSoma**

**The Hague, 21 April 2015**

### **Introduction: A Call to Arms for War Historians!**

Seventy years after the end of the liberation, the large interest in the history of the Second World War continues. Producers and consumers meet each other in a continuing exchange of narratives and questions, provided by a set of media that are becoming more and more diverse: from books to articles, via websites and filmed documentaries, to games and apps. The access to- and the use of these sources are changing fundamentally due to digitization and the application of new methods and techniques for presenting and studying data.

Consequently, the future of the historiography of the Second World War appears to be guaranteed, and it may therefore not seem a very urgent theme to discuss. However, the initiators of this conference hold a different view. We think it is vital to leave this supposed comfort zone.

In 2015, can we still consider this war as a living past? Is there a lasting relation between the public interest and the need to discuss the historiographical foundations? And how is war history imbedded in the field of contemporary historiography? We assume that the confrontation between the different Belgian and Dutch contexts may result in new insights. We suppose there is a serious threat that the historiography of the Second World War will become an isolated field of expertise, in which an ‘appealing’ past will be preserved and relived. In Belgium, this question is even more urgent, in view of the present context of WWI commemorations, which seems to influence the public interaction with war history in a general way.

By asking critical questions, we aim at inspiring war historians to keep developing new ideas for their research. Should we not do this, our profession would be doomed to scientific sterility and we would deprive ourselves from the possibility to feed the public debate with new insights. We have chosen four themes to discuss these issues.

## **First theme: Nation and community? Political and social frameworks**

War historiography is strongly determined by its original national-educational objective. More recently, this aim has merged with a discourse of human rights and cosmopolitanism. Therefore, it is a logical step to compare the dynamics of war historiography and political culture in the Netherlands and Belgium. This comparison offers an opportunity to look more closely at the separate, but partly corresponding ways in which both countries are dealing with the tensions between the legitimation of a political system and the foundations of political and social community-thinking on several interrelated levels of the nation, the language community, the local and regional community, or various groups of victims. As a consequence, war historiography is under pressure of a variety of finalistic views about the meaning of the Second World War. More than other specialised fields, the history of the Second World War is urged to look outside the frameworks of its discipline and finds itself supporting social and political objectives. The idea that WWII historians tend to take on an emphatic form of ‘ethical responsibility’ (Jo Tollebeek), can be substantiated by many examples. The question remains to what extent such moral implications of war historiography in the near future may be counterproductive from a scholarly point of view.

Addressing such questions cannot be seen separately from the social context in which war historiography takes place. Characteristic features are 1) the early institutionalisation (NIOD in the Netherlands and the former version of CegeSoma in Belgium); 2) the expectations associated with the production of specialized expertise including calling in historians to serve as experts; and 3) the general assignment for historians and institutions to act as custodians of the past, by taking care of the sources and providing interpretations. These features may still be applicable, but fundamental changes seem to be at hand as the national state seems to lose its leverage. Transnational financing of historical research and infrastructures is partly taking over the role of national institutions and in the process has introduced new norms and requirements based on, for example, a discourse of European citizenship. In general, the question must be asked if the accent on citizenship, heritage and valorisation (and even in terms of tourism) should be considered as a shift in emphasis or rather a prelude to the end of history as an academic profession.

Has the new organisation of research, including conditional funding – national and transnational – also led to new relations of dependency? How will war historians express a professional identity in their research questions? Has the time come for war historians to claim, or reclaim, their scholarly autonomy?

## **Second theme: More of the same? Research agendas**

In 2010, Jo Tollebeek (KU Leuven) and Pieter Lagrou (ULBrussels) came to a more or less similar conclusion in an online publication concerning ‘the social role of the historian’. Tollebeek concluded that: “just like other sciences, history should not serve society, on the contrary, it has to annoy society. The historian must provoke society.” And Lagrou concluded: “So let us choose marginality (...), because only from within the relative freedom of the societal margins, we might eventually regain the critical potential of our discipline.” Both conclusions reflect clear visions and intentions, partly implying an autonomous control of own research agendas. However, very often, it remains unclear how this intended ‘critical potential’ should be implemented practically. This is proven by the situation in Belgium nowadays, where the context of the WWI commemorations has stimulated new directions in the debate on this professional autonomy.

This challenge creates the framework of this session, which will be made concrete by using four focal points.

The first point of discussion concerns the necessity of **broadening and widening**. This concerns a geographical scope (transnational history for instance), chronological frameworks (diachronic conceptualisation; contemporary history of wars and genocides) and – in particular – multi-disciplinarity (cultural history and cultural studies, gender studies, transitional justice, research on perpetrators and criminology, media studies and digital humanities). The next step comprises the sharing of research questions with contemporary research into phenomena of war, social disruption etc. The Holocaust deserves special mention here. The dominant attention for this theme has actually led to a new specialised field, often linked to present day societal challenges.

The second and interconnected point concerns WWII research as an **applied science**, where the discipline is evaluated for its relevance for dealing with current issues regarding war, genocide, conflict and society. This complements the ‘programmatic’ discussion that has been started in the *Cambridge History Manifesto* and which emphasises the *longue durée* and the return to *grand narratives*. Does the appeal for *grand narratives* implicate a nostalgic return to the (alleged) traditional authority of the historian or should we understand this process as advocating new and fundamental attention for the dynamics of the historical process? Mostly everyone might welcome the latter. Much more complex are the increasing institutionalisation and the model-based types of evaluation of new research proposals. Does a more strictly regulated realisation of research agendas not automatically lead to an *affirmative* research agenda by which proposals radically stepping off the beaten track have less opportunities to get funded? And is this risk not extremely strong regarding WWII research, which due to its exceptional ‘popularity’ faces a sort of disadvantage in the competition, exactly on this point of fundamental innovation?

A third focal point of discussion is connected with **governmental regulation**. The regulation and content control or programming of research agendas by a variety of governments increases, certainly with regard to themes related to WWII. This occurs via memory laws or decrees (the ‘duty of memorisation’), centrally decided thematic research calls and other forms of targeted research funding, via ‘ordered’ research (by public authorities, cultural institutions,...), or simply by normative frameworks that have a compulsory impact.

A fourth point is connected with **the content of the research agenda** itself. At the current junction, passing the 70th birthday of the liberation, the history of the Second World War will increasingly become a ‘foreign’ history: a history that, despite its immense presence, is becoming fundamentally unrecognisable and alien for future generations. If it is the task of historians to bridge this cultural gap between past and present, would that not be in contradiction with some of the perceived movements of broadening and widening mentioned above?

### **Third theme: Which public? Mixing sources and media**

During recent decades, historians are becoming more and more aware of the fact that history writing in general is indissolubly connected with readers, viewers and other audiences. The image and representation of history are not constructed by isolated historians, but rather through a dynamic process that has recently received increased attention. Within the fast-growing domain of public history, the Second World War is one of the themes that receives most interest. Therefore, it is extremely relevant to discuss how our profession communicates with its audiences about this recent past, in Belgium, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

In this context, choices that are being made with regard to dominant and less dominant themes (war and society), media (classical and new media in all their diversity) and forms (to historicize or to orientate on heritage?) are very important. In the eyes of researchers and public, does the so-called 'hype of heritage' (Gita Deneckere), which can also be defined as the continuing amalgam of historical research and heritage studies, lead to a fruitful result? Can we simply speak of enrichment or should we rather consider the shift of attention towards material and immaterial artefacts as a source of interaction with the past as narrowing? And, to link back to the second theme of this conference, in which research agenda does the heritage approach fit as an integrated component?

Through its dramatic impact, the theme of war, mass violence and society strongly captures our imagination. For the time being, there is still an increasing social demand for stories and so-called *experiences*, although it is still unclear to what extent this desire in terms of public performance plays a role in the allocation of resources and the determination of academic choices. Condemnation is not always justified. Creating so-called *experiences* can indeed be regarded from a commercial perspective, but can also be considered a neo-hermeneutic project that teaches citizens (and researchers) about the past. In the same way, we can overcome the usual rejection of *counterfactual analyses* and *if-history*. Therefore, we need to understand them as optimal informed simulations, with the aim to understand situations from the past and to improve our knowledge of possibilities and choices of the actors.

These questions are directly related to communicating about war history in both new and old media. Historians are aware that there is a world to win and they do so, like they did previously, for instance when they learned in the initial decades after the Second World War how to use the audio-visual media. Nowadays, when the unprecedented possibilities of digitization are creating possibilities of new interactions with historical and virtual reality (games, big databases, multimedia), historians are invited to integrate public history in their research agendas and to create new forms of interactivity and audience participation. These are challenges that historians should meet.

#### **Fourth theme: lasting integration or self-dependency? Collections and public functions**

For the last two decades, the world of archives has undergone profound changes: themes, research questions and methods are probably changing faster than historiography, the science it used to serve. In the field of the Second World War, specialised institutions (NIOD and CegeSoma) were leading, even though they never had a complete monopoly. What makes them unique is their close intertwining of scholarship, public function and archive management. But how should their place and assignment in the field be conceived for the future?

These institutions feel the urge to engage in the many innovative developments in (post-) modern archival science. The EHRI-project (European Holocaust Research Infrastructure) concerning the accessibility of European collections related to the Holocaust is considered a core activity in this field. At the same time, many more choices should be made concerning new ways of using the institutes own collections, including their digital disclosure and accessibility, and working towards the digital availability of other relevant collections at home and abroad. Given the importance these institutions themselves attach to the field of public history, they should be able to accomplish new standards of interactivity with the audience. In the Netherlands, the example of '*Netwerk Oorlogsbronnen*' (Network of War sources) demonstrates the scale and diversity of archival institutions that preserve source material related to the Second World War. The relatively simple overview of this voluminous, and often complementary, source material increases the demand for better access, in the interest of both professional and non-professional researchers. In Belgium, the 'WWI hype' has created a fresh momentum for data collection and digitization, which has been supported by many different actors, both professionals and non-professionals. These local and grass-roots contribution may very well have a positive and sustainable impact, and consequently may also influence the ways in which more WWII collections will be made accessible.

Another consequence of such innovative practices may be that the existing and proven institutions will more and more transform into virtual institutions or networks that will disconnect from their national ties. It remains debatable if these fading frontiers (from the different but interconnected points of view of scholarship, archive management, and public history) should be considered a positive or a negative trend. Will innovation of Second World War historiography and virtualization of the archival infrastructures change the public image and impact of this specialism? What should be preserved, what is to be innovated, and how?

Hinke Piersma

Kees Ribbens

Peter Romijn

Rudi Van Doorslaer

Nico Wouters