

# ‘Dat nooit meer’ – ‘Never Again’

In October of 2011 the Dutch historian and journalist Chris van der Heijden defended his dissertation *Dat nooit meer* – ‘Never Again’ which came out at the same time in a trade edition. In his 900-page *magnum opus*, supervised by the historians Hans Blom and Ido de Haan, Van der Heijden attempted to reconstruct ‘the aftermath of the Second World War in the Netherlands’. To do this, he offered a ‘thick description’ of incidents, affairs, public events and contemporary historiography, which together constructed the culture and politics of memory about that war.

Van der Heijden’s work immediately generated controversy in the Netherlands. Various historians at the public defence of the dissertation expressed fundamental criticisms of the book, a trend also evident in the media and in several reviews. The disapproval addressed the author’s method, use of sources and interpretative framework (or lack thereof), often in strong terms. Van der Heijden started a web-based blog to answer his critics and a heated debate continued for some time.

Van der Heijden was not new to controversy. A decade before the defence of his dissertation he had written a monograph *Grijs verleden* [‘Gray Past’] in which he provocatively questioned the moral dualism of right and wrong in the Second World War, a dualism he regarded as simplistic. Then, too, his book served as the locus of much national debate, some of it vituperative. That book established his reputation as a demythologiser and debunker, and it is also that book which provides some of the historical context into which the dissertation was received. *Grijs verleden* discussed the behavior of the Dutch during the war, *Dat nooit meer* deals with the afterlife of the war – topics evidently connected, but different at the same time.

Even so, we wonder if an evaluation of *Dat nooit meer* is necessarily shackled to one’s estimation of *Grijs verleden*. This discussion dossier, then, is not interested in a rehash of Van der Heijden’s old book but his new one. And room for debate there is. The responsible editors were both members of the doctoral committee that approved Van der Heijden’s work. We wonder if a bit more distance in time and space may stimulate the academic debate of Van der Heijden’s work with fresh impulses and new interpretations. This is an effort to promote a further academic discussion of Van der Heijden’s work.

To this end, we have, for the sake of distanced perspective, asked three historians living outside the Netherlands to comment on Van der Heijden’s book.

Even though these authors are very well connected to their Dutch colleagues working on the Second World War, and fulfill the important condition of having no problem reading Dutch, all three at the same time belong to different national historiographical environments. The British historian Bob Moore (Sheffield) is at the same time intimately acquainted with the Netherlands, as is the Belgian historian Koen Aerts (Ghent), both of them specialists in the Second World War. The Münster historian Friso Wielenga, focused on the twentieth century, rounds out the trio. Van der Heijden completes the dossier with his reply. The probity of foreigners is certainly evident in the texts. But having read all four pieces, the reader is unlikely to emerge from the dossier believing that all fundamental differences of opinion have been papered over.

On behalf of the Editorial Board,

JAMES KENNEDY AND PETER ROMIJN