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Suffering as a Warning: The Netherlands and the Legacy of War

The Second World War remains, fifty years later, a more important topic and a more painful memory in the Netherlands than perhaps in any other country. To the Dutch society of the seventies, the thought that a leading politician might not have an absolutely unblemished wartime record was both intolerable and politically fatal, and a number of them fell from favour because of this feeling. In the Netherlands, a person's wartime past could be held up to scrutiny many years later. A pivotal place has been accorded to the era of the German National Socialist occupation in public debate. "*The* war", as we Dutch usually call it, was firmly embedded in the national psyche as a moral touchstone, as the basis of a clear distinction between moral and immoral, good and bad.

That the events of these years not only were shocking but would cast their shadow far ahead was felt very early on. Plans to set up the State Institute for War Documentation were made during the occupation, and indeed it was created on 8 May 1945. The country's plight at the moment of liberation by the allied forces made the consequences of the war abundantly clear to all: large numbers of victims, tremendous damage and incredible chaos. It seemed as if everything would have to be rebuilt from scratch. It is hardly surprising that the shocking events of the recent past would provide a source of inspiration in this process of reconstruction.

What is remarkable, however, is the extent to which the constituent elements of war memories and the significance awarded to them have remained largely unchanged over the half century following 1945. The story told with countless variations on so many different occasions — at commemoration services, in schools, in books and through works of art, and in everyday domestic conversations — is almost always narrated with emphasis on the suffering which was undergone. Although the Netherlands ultimately was one of the victors, triumphalism is rarely perceptible. Even the military events are seen as subordinate to the human drama. If military aspects are discussed, more emphasis tends to be placed on the humiliation of the defeat in 1940 than on the Dutch role in the liberation or on military and para-military resistance activities.

If one can speak at all of pride in the Netherlands' wartime past as a whole, it almost exclusively concerns the supposed determination of the Dutch to resist the enemy. In practice, that determination, as people are generally well aware, was only translated into action by relatively small groups of underground fighters, who made huge sacrifices and ran enormous risks. Many of them paid for their convictions with their lives. Their conduct, and the sufferings of various categories of victims, tend to be given a prominent place in stories about the war. A message is usually not hard to find. It is this very suffering and determination which exhort us, indeed require us to create a better world.

This trinity: suffering, determination and a better world, are reflected on many Dutch war monuments, particularly the National Monument on the Dam square in Amsterdam. On that monument suffering is represented by four men, who have indeed been given a central place: one, who has been crucified, is flanked by three figures in chains. Determination is symbolised by two naked men on either side of this Golgotha-like scene: the left-hand figure is fighting misery with his spirit, the right-hand figure with his strength. The beckoning prospect of a better world can be found in the figures of a woman and child, placed against a towering column. Their gaze is symbolically fixed on the future. Weeping dogs, lions and doves, depicted on and near the monument, duplicate these symbols. I believe, moreover, that the rather unwieldy but solid column, like an admonitory finger, expresses an emphatic warning: this painful and heroic episode from our country's past must not have been in vain.

The attempt to create a better world is expressed, notably, in the lessons which are commonly extracted from the experiences of wartime, or the cautionary messages which are distilled from them. Three themes

recur time and again. L. de Jong summarises them pithily in his *Koninkrijk der Nederlande in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* ("Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War"): "It was (and still is) our general opinion that it is wrong for a people to be assailed and oppressed by another people, that parliamentary democracy, however deficient, is preferable to any other form of government, that discrimination or persecution is fundamentally wrong, and that the same applies *a fortiori* to deportation and mass murder." Here we have, in other words, the national theme, the theme of political ideology and the human rights theme.

In public debates, the story of the war is almost always invoked with the intention of stressing the norms and values contained in these three themes. That story is thus at once interpretive and moralistic. An additional aim is always to examine the past in order to distinguish good from bad. Our interpretation of what was or is good or bad has not undergone any real change in the half century following 1945. One might see this, as H. W. von der Dunk does, as a basic consensus which has remained unaltered "because this basic consensus at the same time constitutes the foundation of present-day democracy in the Netherlands, and in the West as a whole. If it were to vanish, it would imply an erosion of the foundations on which democratic society rests. In this sense a direct link continues to exist between the historiography of the war and the present day." This fact would also explain why a historiography based on the convictions of "the other side" (not an uncommon phenomenon in the world of historiography) never saw the light of day. Anyone who attempted to write from such an angle would instantly have been felled by critics invoking wartime suffering and its moral message. To adopt such a stance is still openly to champion the cause of evil.

It is interesting to note that this aspect of war memories relates very directly to certain cherished self-images which are part of the wider Dutch national consciousness. The first of these is what I prefer to call the "small but plucky" image. This self-image can be found in many popular tales of the Dutch, both now and in the past. The Dutch, though few in number, defied the huge might of Spain; the tiny Netherlands succeeded in creating a Golden Age, and in making a stand against superpowers such as England and France; though small, the Netherlands were able, through its stout-hearted entrepreneurial spirit, to build up a huge empire in the face of constant competition from the European superpowers, and so on. Determination and valour had always played an essential role in the struggle to survive. The tribulations of the war years fitted seamlessly into this self-image. The small, peaceable Netherlands, scrupulously neutral, had been most scandalously attacked by a large, aggressive neighbour. Initially shocked and powerless, the Dutch people straightened their backs; this determination, and the heroic deeds of many people, enabled them to weather the storm.

The second self-image concerns fellowship in diversity. Dutch history is full of opposition and strife: Protestants against Catholics, moderates against orthodox, monarchists against republicans, patriots against the house of Orange, liberals against the supporters of denominational parties, and a whole host of others. But when the need arose, ranks were always closed, and despite this feuding, Dutch society always provided a tolerant climate in which very different groups lived peacefully and freely side by side. Here, too, the story of the war years fits seamlessly. It was in the battle against the National Socialist enemy that the various groups of this fragmented society stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting to preserve, amongst other things, that very pluralism and tolerance. Although later it proved necessary to admit that resistance against the persecution of the Jews had not been very effective, this solidarity had in principle extended to the Jews. The Dutch are fond of relating the strong abhorrence felt by the vast majority of the population with regard to the persecution of the Jews, and to all other cruelties practised by the "Huns".

A third important element in the national consciousness is a recurrent reference to the high moral calibre of the Dutch people. The leaders of the Dutch revolt were, on the whole, good people. The story of William of Orange, who as a young rake in Brussels had become nauseous when he smelt charred flesh and realised that the odour emanated from heretics being burnt at the stake, is a good example. His humanity revolted against such practices. Similarly, Hugo Grotius stood at the threshold of a long tradition when he strove to create a world in which the relationships between states and nations would be peaceful, founded on ethical principles and rooted in law. In 1939 the Dutch prime minister De Geer called the Netherlands "a beacon in a dark world". This self-image was charmingly expressed at

the end of the 19th century by J.W. Hofdijk, whose history of the Netherlands, written for a broad readership, closes with the words: "It is better to be the most virtuous, rather than the most powerful people on earth!" Once again, it is not hard to see that most narratives about the war tie in very well with this self-image. Accounts of the resistance, especially, portray one sterling character after the other. Typical, here, are the resistance fighters who are inspired by Christian motives, and who, before deciding to liquidate an enemy, think long and hard about the acceptability of such a deed, and seek help in prayer.

Thus far I have focused on a series of remarkably unchanging elements and characteristics of memories of the war. I should now like to look at variations of the extent to which these elements were manifest, and the degree of intensity which marked public debate. Roughly speaking, four phases can be distinguished here. The first, of course, covers the years immediately after the war, from the liberation in 1944/1945 to the end of the forties. Memories of wartime suffering were still fresh, and in many respects people were only now becoming aware of the scale of the catastrophe in terms of loss of human life. The material damage resulting from the fighting and destruction was colossal. With great effort, certain basic amenities were once more set up. Reconstruction proved a laborious process. The reception of individuals returning from concentration camps, prisoner of war camps and forced labour was a difficult and chaotic process. The issue of how to deal with traitors and collaborators raised huge problems. Shortly after the capitulation of Japan, moreover, the Netherlands was faced with the issue of its relationship with the Dutch East Indies, which was threatening to deteriorate into a colonial war. Finally, on the international stage, the first rumblings of the Cold War could be heard.

The government, in other words, was beset by problems, while the population struggled to cope under difficult circumstances. Despite the trying situation, the liberation was the cause of much joy (the summer of 1945 was a time of partying), and there was a general keenness to get to work. Many laboured with cheerful energy and a spirit of self-sacrifice, not only in the reconstruction of what had been lost, but also in the construction of a new and better Netherlands, the contours of which had been sketched in many varied forms during the war. In the atmosphere of the time there was a great demand for narratives about the war, which entered into almost all contemporary conversations anyway, and was therefore very often the theme of discussion and debate. The national theme played a particularly important role in this process, since the main aim was, of course, to ensure that national independence, now happily regained, would prove successful. To this end solidarity was needed above all else. People had to put their shoulder to the wheel to ensure that such dearly-won freedom did not fall victim to sheer poverty. Those first years after the war are often described as years of discipline and austerity.

Then the dominant emphasis on the war in almost all areas of life levelled off, and even began to wane. To some extent this process began as far back as the end of that first excited, exciting summer of 1945; in other respects it took place in the late forties. After a few years, the all-consuming hunger to know what had happened had clearly been more or less satisfied. In 1947, for instance, bookshops were selling books on the resistance at knock-down prices. The political and social agenda, so varied and slightly chaotic in 1945, became simplified in the sense that a clear hierarchy was created. The issues awarded the highest priority were economic recovery and the Indonesian question, with international relations a clear third. This greatly undermined the drive to renew society, and in most areas attempts at innovation were in any case not very successful.

The war was no longer a direct source of inspiration for daily life; it receded somewhat into the background. This does not mean that interest in the war as such died out, but the late forties saw the beginning of a second phase, in which public interest in the war tended to be aroused on special occasions, such as the annual commemoration on 4 May and the publication of certain lengthy studies commissioned by the State Institute for War Documentation. A great deal of interest was shown in books written about the three great wartime strikes, the February strike of 1941, the April/May strikes of 1943 and the Rail Strike of 1944. These works were published in 1954, 1950 and 1960 respectively. The unveiling on 4 May 1956 of the National Monument, to which I referred earlier, was also a very special event.

On occasions such as these, the war was the subject of general high-flown discussion. There was hardly any real debate of the subject, except perhaps with reference to the role and position of the Communists during the war. As the Cold War unfolded, it became dubious whether the Communists could still form part of the national consensus concerning the war, or still wished to do so. The

national theme still dominated, but in the context of the Cold War, the theme of political ideology was very much in the public mind. The same context prompted consideration of the human rights theme, but of the three themes it still received the least attention. Occasionally, personal suffering during the war, or its later effects, might form a dramatic element in a speech, or serve as the symbol of a wider issue, but on the whole it was felt that such personal suffering should be regarded as a personal and private matter. This was the natural consequence of a social code which required fortitude, restraint and adherence to established social patterns.

Great changes occurred in the sixties and seventies, changes which were linked in part to the social upheaval of those years. An unprecedented growth in economic prosperity and a certain relaxation in international relations were among the factors which sparked what is sometimes described as a cultural revolution. These changes prompted a new keen interest in the war, and gave rise to numerous heated debates on the events of this period. The transition to this third phase was marked by the broadcasting between 1960 and 1965 of L. de Jong's celebrated television series *De Bezetting* ("The Occupation"), by the Eichman trial in Jerusalem in 1961, and by the publication of J. Presser's dramatic account of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, *Ondergang* (1965; English tr. *The Destruction of the Dutch Jews*, 1969). Publications about the war became numerous once again, and did not diminish for a time. A shift occurred in the focus of iInterest. While formerly suffering had been seen in largely abstract terms, the actual victims were ow coming forward, and attention also turned to the question of collaboration in a wider sense than hitherto. *The* war was also referred to much more in political debate than had formerly been the case. The national theme, while not disappearing entirely, receded into the background, while conversely, much greater stress was placed on the political and human rights themes.

With respect to the victims of the war, people became much more aware of the persecution of the Jews and the significance of this event. Directly after the Liberation, those few Jews who had returned from the extermination camps or emerged from hiding had encountered considerable indifference, even anti-Semitism. The first wave of publication had included H. Wielek's *De oorlog die Hitler won* ("The War that Hitler Won") and A. Herzberg's *Kroniek van de Jodenvervolging* ("The Persecution of the Jews: A Chronicle"), but in general in the fifties, there was only fairly limited interest in the Holocaust as part of the war as a whole. This situation now changed, a fact reflected in the erection of monuments : most of the memorials which specifically commemorate the persecution of the Jews date from after 1960. It is therefore significant that a monument was erected as early as 1950 in Amsterdam's Weesperstraat in commemoration and gratitude for the assistance offered by the people of Amsterdam to the Jewish population during the occupation. "Protected by your love" was the text chosen for this memorial, presented to Amsterdam by the Jewish community. Such a gesture would not have been thinkable later on, when it emerged just how many Dutch Jews had died.

The broader interpretation given to collaboration was very directly related to the great social and political debate of the sixties and seventies. For a long time the term collaborator had been applied mainly to those who had betrayed their country (members of the Dutch National Socialist Movement or of the SS), who, it was felt, should have been expelled from society during the purge and special jurisdictional proceedings of the period immediately after the war. Now, in the sixties, great changes took place in the thinking on democracy and authority in society, often marked by stormy and sometimes violent conflicts. In that context, a parallel with the occupation could readily be found. The behaviour of the economic and administrative elite of the day, which was felt by innovators and activists to be a perpetuation of the old ruling class, became subject to scrutiny. Had not this elite actually been guilty of large-scale collaboration, and how democratic were its actions now?

More than ever before, *the* war became a heavily-loaded political weapon in current affairs. It did not, incidentally, turn into a real generation conflict. The composition of the conflicting parties was too divergent for that. On reflection, it is striking that the innovators, who wanted to overturn so many old values, did not oppose the basic consensus on the war. When, very uncharacteristically, a wreath laid by Canadians at the National Monument was destroyed, the offenders even apologised and laid a new wreath. In fact, the innovators adopted the official values on this subject in their purest form and confronted those in power (and their associates) with their actions during the occupation. A series of "affairs" resulted, involving public figures such as Aantjes, Menten and Weinreb. In a number of cases this practice led to great injustices. A case in point is that of the mayor of Amsterdam, G. van Hall, who despite his very

honourable personal record as a resistance fighter was still toppled as the symbol of tyrannical authority. All in all, the effect was primarily to reinforce the moral exemplary function of the occupation.

The recurrent debates on the German war criminals still serving prison sentences in Breda also provoked a great deal of feeling. Paradoxically, the view that the rules of a democratic constitutional state should also apply to these individuals proved untenable. The feelings of the relatives of the victims or, worse, of the victims themselves (including the second generation) were felt to be more important. There was now considerable sympathy, which had been lacking in the second phase, for the individual suffering brought about by wartime experiences. The resultant psychological problems were openly discussed, treatment facilities were set up and more material assistance was offered than hitherto: 1972 saw the introduction of the Victims of Persecution Benefits Act (supplementing the Special Pensions Act of 1947) and in 1973 a special clinic, the "1945 Centre", was set up for the treatment of psychological problems caused by war and persecution.

This pattern did not change very radically as the third phase gave way to the fourth, covering the eighties and extending to the present. The main difference lies in a reduction, not of the frequency, but of the intensity with which the war is discussed, just as the intensity of the general public debate has diminished.

Certain shifts in emphasis are also noticeable. In the interrelationship of the three central themes, the human rights theme is increasingly in the ascendant. The persecution of the Jews, in particular, has impressed and continues to impress its own stamp on our perception of the war years, more than any other event of this period. The national theme, even as far back as the third phase, had already receded somewhat into the background, its relevance undermined by the view that nationalism, if not downright reprehensible, is at least an outmoded ideology, remaining in the background. There are, for instance, few if any indications that the current resurgence of national feeling and focus on national interests — a resurgence which has not particularly marked in the Netherlands in any case — have been linked in any direct way to wartime experiences. Quite the contrary: there is greater apprehension than ever before that too much emphasis on the war might sour our relations with and perception of Germany, which is so politically and economically important to the Netherlands.

It is also striking that, in this phase, much more coverage has been given to the events of the war in the former Dutch East Indies. During the earlier phases complaints had been voiced, notably among those who had been interned in camps in the region, of a lack of interest in their plight. They felt that their suffering had been eclipsed by the experiences of the Dutch during the occupation of the Netherlands. There would appear to be a correlation bethween this phenomenon and the somewhat painful way in which the Dutch faced up to the tragic course of the decolonisation process, or in many cases preferred not to face up to it. It is therefore probably no coincidence that the increase over the years in public interest in that conflict in Indonesia has been matched by a greater interest in the wartime experience of that region. A similar pattern seems to be emerging with respect to the military side of the war, which was for a long time a subject of merely marginal interest to the public. Recently, however, this has changed, perhaps as the strongly anti-military or at best a-military feelings of the sixties and seventies recede.

All in all, the war is still a topic which greatly interests both professional historians and a much wider public. However, the relationship between these two groups has become somewhat more problematic. The trend towards greater differentiation in subjects and increasing academic distance on the part of historians has made it harder to meet the general public's need for didactic narratives. Nevertheless, there is no question of historians distancing themselves from the basic consensus to which I referred earlier. *The* war thus remains, for the time being, in the Dutch public debate, not only a temporal watershed (for many, "before" and "after the war" is the extent of their understanding of the chronology of history) but also as a significant touchstone. As long as the Netherlands is not swept up by drastic and catastrophic events on a scale similar to the war (in the way that Central and Eastern European countries were a few years ago), *the* war seems likely to retain this function. Shifts in emphasis may occur after the current great marathon of commemorations comes to an end, or when there is no longer anyone left alive who can actually remember the war, but for the time being I predict that *the* war will retain a lasting significance, particularly in commemorations, as a ritual self-assurance of the qualities our society is supposed to embody.