

The War That Won't Go Away

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This review contrasts the sometimes moralising Dutch historiography on the Second World War with the more detached approaches taken by Anglophone scholars on the same subjects, and suggests that many of the charges made against Chris van der Heijden's work (*Dat nooit meer. De nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland* [Never Again: The Aftermath of the Second World War in The Netherlands]) from within the Netherlands would not have seemed so important in this wider constituency. At the same time, it takes issue with some elements of his writing style and the importance he ascribes to specific trends and features of Dutch postwar memory.

Historians make a living from disagreeing with one another. If there was just one accepted narrative and a similarly agreed synthesis for each historical event and process there would be no room or perceived necessity for debate – and the cultural life of the nation would be much the quieter and much the poorer. However, only in the most totalitarian of states has this ever been considered possible or desirable, and the wider world sees benefits in scholars, journalists and cultural commentators engaging in interpretation, public debate, and reinterpretation. Whether there is ever an accepted – or even widely acknowledged synthesis in public or scholarly circles is of less importance than the fact that the debate takes place – both in academic journals, but more immediately in the pages of newspapers and weekly journals. This appears to be a positive feature of Dutch society – namely that a mature democracy can engage in public debates on its past and where historians can take on the role of journalists and commentators – and vice versa.

For the outsider, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the reception given to Chris van der Heijden's work within the Netherlands is the high degree of adverse comment that his work has generated – and the *ad hominem* charges about why he has chosen his subject material. His texts have all the hallmarks of the academic apparatus of a historian – even if he sees himself

primarily as a journalist. If nothing else, it therefore seems reasonable to echo the claim made by Ido de Haan on the back cover of *Dat nooit meer*¹, namely that Van der Heijden is the most influential historian at this moment. Certainly his earlier work *Grijs verleden. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog*² [Gray Past: The Netherlands and the Second World War], was subject to extensive and sometimes vitriolic criticism by both historians and sections of the Dutch public when it first appeared in 2001. To a non-Dutch audience, his title and contents, while open to challenge in some respects, did not seem particularly contentious. The idea that the history of any period, let alone that of the Second World War, could not be seen in purely black and white – or indeed *goed en fout* – seemed entirely rational and had been signposted by a previous generation of scholars, not least Hans Blom in his 1983 inaugural lecture, ‘In de ban van goed en fout’.

Having begun my studies in contemporary Dutch history in the second half of the 1970s, the highly moralistic tone taken by many authors on the events and personalities of the Second World War period should have warned me that such interpretations would not be given up lightly. Even conversations with (then) elderly Dutch relatives who had lived through the period garnered the same sentiments – even of having a great uncle who had been a well-known provincial lawyer make the observation that while legal processes may not have been followed in every case of presumed collaboration after the war, the accused were no doubt guilty and deserved to be punished. To an English educated and trained historian, the moral judgements incorporated in many serious and highly regarded texts seemed dissonant with what I presumed the role of the objective historian to be. It nonetheless begged the question of whether this is a trait of Dutch national historiography – to be found in all works on all periods – or peculiar to the study of the recent past – the Second World War in particular?

There is no doubt that Van der Heijden has been willing to ‘put his head above the parapet’ on what he clearly regards as the most emotive topic in the Netherlands in the second half of the twentieth century. Any conclusions were likely to draw an adverse reaction from some quarter or another, but his stated purpose is to distance himself from the intellectual and scholarly development of ideas and instead look primarily at their appearance in the media – perhaps with a view to focussing on the public assimilation and acceptance of new assessments of the past rather than on the analyses emanating from the

1 Chris van der Heijden, *Dat nooit meer. De nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland* (Ph.D. thesis University of Amsterdam 2011; Amsterdam, Antwerpen: Contact, 2011, 928 pp., ISBN 978 90

254 2094 9). [Never Again: The Aftermath of the Second World War in The Netherlands].

2 Chris van der Heijden, *Grijs verleden. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Amsterdam, Antwerpen 2001).

ivory towers of Dutch universities. His five tropes of aftermath; influence, imagery, memory, usage and historiography can be clearly defined, but the fact that he admits that each has its own dynamic and can change over time in relation to different groups and individuals within society – creating a chaotic picture – presents potentially enormous problems in disaggregating their impact. Indeed, the best that may be obtained from this viewpoint is the fact that such distinct elements are present, but not how much they influence a wider national perspective. This leads to conclusions which are at best impressionistic and largely nebulous, which after some 724 pages plus nearly 150 pages of references seems a poor return for the reader.

As a journalist, Van der Heijden undoubtedly understands the value of brevity, but in constructing his work has chosen to incorporate (very) long narrative sections that deal with the various issues which signpost his argument about the increasing pre-eminence of the Holocaust in Dutch society. This begs two immediate questions; does this approach help or hinder the argument, and what audience is the author addressing? On the first, the storytelling aspect does serve as a reminder (for his and my generation) of what took place – although the length of some sections suggests that he is primarily writing for a younger generation whose memories do not go back before the 1980s. There is also inevitably a danger that his choice of subjects will bring charges of teleology – of careful selection of events and issues that bolster the overarching argument while ignoring those that undermine or are dissonant with the central thesis. The only way for the author to avoid these charges is for him to be honest about his selections and to make objective judgements about the relative importance of the issues involved at the time. Are they front page material or consigned to minor editorials? What else is framing public discourse at the time when these issues are raised? Are these topics of genuine public interest or just for discussion among the intellectual elite? This latter charge cannot be levelled against the various exposés of Aantjes, Luns and Menten, which were undoubtedly major stories, but can the same be said of all the elements included in the book? Part of the historian's craft is to be honest about his or her sources – qualifying conclusions where necessary to take account of *lacunae* or other possible interpretations of the material. In the end, however, we have to trust the author to have that honesty and to make rational choices about what to include and what weight to give it in any analysis. In some instances Van der Heijden has apparently tried to avoid charges of selective omissions by attempting to include every possible example. How else can we explain his discussion of 'other' war victims and the onset of 'victimitis' at the end of the twentieth century with a brief section on each of the categories that came to the fore in that period – the victims of Japanese camps, the Sinti and Roma, the Jehova's Witnesses to name but three. Other historians with an eye to keeping the reader engaged in the central aspect of the thesis might have chosen to summarise some of the material discussed here.

In his section on how the war came to be seen in the light of the Shoah and to reinforce his idea about changes that took place in the 1980s, Van der Heijden begins with the reception of the Diary of Etty Hillesum and then moves quickly through a series of publishing and cinematic events; Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Gerhard Durlacher, Claude Lanzmann and finally Spielberg's *Schindler's List* before turning to the ways in which this renewed consciousness was manifested in other aspects of Dutch cultural life. His detailed tabulation (586) of how the terms Shoah and Holocaust have increased in the titles of media productions ostensibly demonstrates how the 'Holocaust industry' has blossomed since the mid-1970s, but this needs to be seen in the context of a rapidly expanding publishing sector. While the statistics may reinforce what many already believe – namely that there has been an exponential growth in attention to the Holocaust as a topic, this raw data needs some qualification and needs to be seen in percentage terms against the number of outputs involved. Moreover, reference to the term in a specific media output may be more or less gratuitous and without some 'weighting' of the semantic evidence can produce some very unreliable results.

Van der Heijden attributes the increased memorialisation and number of monuments to the Jews as victims in the Netherlands in the period after 1980 to an international trend and an increased focus on the Holocaust emanating from the United States and culminating in its creation of the Holocaust Memorial Museum. This raises the question of how far the debates he outlines take place within a national context, and how far they are influenced by external factors. Given the widespread Dutch access to foreign languages and the internationalisation of the media, especially television and the cinema, it would be difficult to argue that Dutch cultural life was in any sense hermetically sealed from such influences.

All the states overrun by the Axis during the Second World War have – of necessity – had to come to terms with the behaviour of their leaders and citizens during the occupation period. In Eastern Europe, national narratives were delayed for decades by a picture imposed by ideologues informed by Moscow, but in the Western democracies comparable with the Netherlands, the process was more gradual but arguably just as traumatic. The obvious comparatives for the Netherlands are with neighbouring Belgium and with France where, although there were material differences in the occupation regimes and the responses of the political elites, the 'stubborn particularities' identified by Marrus and Paxton should not prevent us from seeing the Dutch example in comparative terms. Van der Heijden has looked at outside influences on the Netherlands, but there may be more to be gained from seeing his putative stages in Dutch perceptions of the war in a comparative context. Are the same patterns and changes evident in the Belgian and French media and wider society?

To criticise him for not looking at the comparative dimension given the size and scope of the work he has done may be harsh. While many in the historical profession (including this reviewer) have looked for new syntheses in comparative studies of the wartime and post-war history of Western Europe, such tasks require a bedrock of existing national studies to make them viable – reference points that can be compared and contrasted. In this regard, Van der Heijden has very little to relate to – save for the literature emanating from France, which has its own specific demons to confront when examining the occupation period. Nevertheless, there would be scope for direct comparisons on some specific issues. Two immediately suggest themselves. The first is the ‘discovery’ of alleged ‘war criminals’ within society decades after the event and the questions asked about their avoidance of the purging process and their continued protection by post-war elites. Here it might have been possible to juxtapose the unmasking of Aantjes and Menten with the likes of Bousquet and Papon.

The second is the gradual shift in focus towards the Shoah as the central feature of the Second World War. Van der Heijden treats this largely as a phenomenon in the Netherlands, but it is clear that this happens across (Western) Europe, albeit not in a uniform fashion and is undoubtedly informed and affected by outside issues – not least the increasing attention given to the subject in the United States. He sees the shift in antiwar sentiment away from the idea of mass destruction through the deployment of nuclear weapons to a focus on the crimes committed under the cover of war. Thus it is argued, genocide and mass killing in all their forms have become the central preoccupation in contemporary conflicts from Bosnia and Rwanda through to present-day Syria. There is some merit in this argument and it can certainly be seen playing in other countries as well as the Netherlands. As an example, people of his (and my) age will have personal recollections of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the fears it engendered. In Britain, the testing of the four-minute warning sirens was discontinued some years ago – thus removing the last tangible (audible) symbol of this danger for the public, but while the relief felt after the crisis was averted was palpable, the possibility of a future nuclear war has not gone away. The proliferation of nuclear weapons in the hands of ‘rogue’ states and terrorists is still used to justify international political positions and military interventions by the West, but there is a reticence in raising public fears on matters where the state cannot provide adequate protection. While I would not suggest that this has been the deliberate policy on the part of politicians, journalists or scholars, focussing on genocides does have advantages. Its victims are more clearly defined – as are its perpetrators – although even these have been open to some debate, as evidenced by the shift from the term Holocaust to that of Shoah to retain the essential Jewish dimension of the tragedy.



Historian Loe de Jong sorting through his research material at the Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie [Netherlands Institute for War Documentation], Amsterdam, 6 May 1950. Photo/Unknown photographer. National Archives of the Netherlands /Spaarnestad, The Hague.

The critique that Van der Heijden attempts to relativise the Holocaust by equating its Jewish targets with 'other' war victims comes as no particular surprise. By showing how others could, and have been, included among those regarded as war victims he is merely recounting how the memory of the war has developed. Other victims of Nazi racial policies, other political opponents, those incarcerated in Japanese camps, and more contentiously still in the wider context of the war – the sons and daughters of collaborators – have all claimed or been claimed as war victims. The creation of an international compensation culture since the 1990s has undoubtedly aided this process. Is Van der Heijden making the case for this relativisation or merely recounting the fact that this has happened in Dutch intellectual and public debate? Perhaps the search for comparison and verisimilitude is a natural reaction where the Holocaust becomes the standard against which every other experience is then measured. Clearly, this can easily be misused and misrepresented, but the fact that it exists in both Dutch and other historiographies should not preclude its discussion as an historical phenomenon.

His suggestion that the years immediately after the war produced a welter of stories and a relatively unambiguous narrative of the war, followed by a shift towards reconstruction and other issues – thus marginalising discussion of the 1940-1945 period – does give some pause for thought. Certainly in the 1950s there were other issues to consider – both domestic and foreign – but were the traumas of war really subsumed so completely? Many of the practical issues surrounding the period of occupation; financial, medical, communal still had to be dealt with on a day-to-day basis. The return to a more focused approach signalled by De Jong's television series *De Bezetting* and the subsequent appearance of the monumental *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [The Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War] may well have had a more immediate impact on Dutch society – not least because of its broad popular appeal. Yet while there were many critiques of De Jong in terms of the detail involved in his writings, there was less said about the overall approach, which seems to have garnered a high degree of popular approval from what might be termed mainstream Dutch society. Van der Heijden's identification of a shift away from the trope of 'resistance' to a focus on the Holocaust as a (or *the*) central theme of the war is hardly unique to the Netherlands and the appearance of increasing numbers of memorials – even in countries like the United Kingdom that have no direct experience of or involvement in the Holocaust – speaks to this as a widespread international phenomenon.

From an Anglophone perspective, the slightly rhetorical and journalistic style of writing employed here does seem at odds with common standards of historical writing, but certainly does not seem out of the ordinary when compared with other texts emanating from Dutch authors. Van der Heijden explicitly raises many questions – not all of which are answered in

his text. The long narrative sections tell informative and interesting stories – and social historians can often make excellent use of the sources speaking for themselves – but the central thesis is actually about the portrayal and coverage of the issues rather than on the issues themselves and there is therefore a real danger that the analysis is lost in the welter of detail provided. In spite of Blom’s plea for a more nuanced view of the Second World War and a move away from De Jong’s ‘goed’ and ‘fout’, a survey of general Dutch historiography over the last thirty years suggests that this has not really happened and that many academic and popular texts retain this overall approach and propensity to moral judgements. While Van der Heijden may have overstated the transitions between his various phases of development, the value of his work (and to an understanding of contemporary Dutch history and historiography) lies in his ability to raise issues that may aggravate and annoy other practitioners but nonetheless force them to re-examine the assumptions behind their own work and thus provide the healthy basis for further discussion and debate. ◀

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