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Dat nooit meer. De nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland
‘Never Again. The Aftermath of the Second World War in the Netherlands’

A summary

Around the year 2010 it was not uncommon to hear those responsible for the Netherlands’ cultural heritage say that the war was ‘about to retire’. Despite the strange nature of this expression, it was immediately clear what was meant: 2010 would truly mark the end of the Second World War. Although this had been proclaimed many times during the preceding 65 years, it never happened in reality. Neither did it happen in 2010. Nevertheless, the passing of such a symbolic period of time – 65 years being the legal retirement age in the Netherlands – seems a suitable moment to take stock of the way the country relates to the war. That is also the purpose of this book.

Since 1945, efforts to ensure that the events of the Second World War are never repeated have been a consistent theme in attitudes towards the events of that period, as evidenced by the book’s title. Time and time, the text returns to the reasons behind this attitude. The most important of these is that modern warfare has become so destructive that a comparable war in Europe today would leave little behind. For many years, the symbol of the destructive power of the Second World War was the atomic bomb. Nowadays, genocide has come to epitomize the destructiveness of that period. Indeed, the transition from the former association to the latter, and the increasing salience of the Shoah when conceptualizing the Second World War, is one of the principal themes of this book.

However, considerations of historical facts such as these represent only one aspect of the story told in Dat nooit meer. There is also a completely different aspect, which is related to the growing role of the media. Thanks to the modern media, beliefs and images – in this case
concerning the war – can acquire a power that would have been unthinkable in a less mediatised world. This is why Dat nooit meer looks at the aftermath of the war largely from the perspective of the media. In fact, the book’s central theme can best be described as the public debate – and particularly the media debate – surrounding the war.

Since ‘media’ and ‘war’ tend to be catch-all concepts, an attempt is made to make them as clear as possible. This is one of the reasons why stories are favoured in this book – and wherever possible stories involving individual people. This approach has also been chosen for a second reason, which is an extension of the first: according to the author, stories are by definition the best means of approaching a complex reality.

In both its form and its chronology, Dat nooit meer advocates a perspective that expressly acknowledges the complexity of history. Accordingly, the book employs a chronology that slides one layer of narrative over the next, the accumulation of layers creating an intricate whole. When it comes to complex phenomena like public consciousness, this approach is permeated by what we might call the contemporaneity of non-contemporary events: as one phenomenon is emerging, another persists; while one aspect is visible in one place, in another place it has yet to emerge; and the time that elapses between a view being aired for the first time and that view becoming widely established can be lengthy.

Notwithstanding the recognition of this complexity, the book identifies four phases in the aftermath of the Second World War: 1) the immediate post-war period; 2) the 1950s; 3) the 1960s and 1970s; and finally 4) the period since 1980. However, the problem with this chronological demarcation became apparent, time and again. There are so many exceptions and counter-exceptions involved that it might have been better not to attempt to use any chronological divisions at all. But that would not have worked either. This is also the reason why a number of different chronologies are in use in the literature on the aftermath of the Second World War. The differences with the chronology employed here are minor, with three more significant exceptions.

The first exception relates to the ‘national story’ and the juncture that this story is said to have reached in the 1960s. It is often suggested that in the 1950s there was a shared war narrative, common to everyone
(i.e. ‘national’), and that during the 1960s and early 1970s this shared narrative came to be undermined by a younger, more critical generation. While there is an awareness that any discussion of abstract concepts such as the ‘national story’ is relative and that historians themselves seldom, if ever, speak with one voice, almost the opposite claim is made in Dat nooit meer. With the exception of 1944-1947, we can hardly speak of a shared national story that was generally accepted during the fifteen years subsequent to the end of the war. In fact, the book argues, such a shared narrative only developed – and was only able to develop – during the 1960s and 1970s, finally reaching a climax in the 1980s, as the 40th anniversary of the end of the war was commemorated. However, the nature of the seemingly anachronistic concept of a ‘national story’ had by then changed radically: the nation as the subject of history, virtually endowed with the power to act in its own right, had become the nation as a collective noun referring to a pluralist community of individuals sharing the same passport or language.

The second exception relates to the juncture usually dated to around 1970, the emergence of the ‘story of the victim’. Until that moment, the ‘story of the victim’ had not been the subject of much attention, but from then onwards this is said to have changed. This book does not deny the existence of such a change, but contends that around 1970 no such sudden shift took place. The process was a much more gradual one, and its effects only became noticeable in the 1980s.

Finally, we turn to the third exception. Some argue that the fall of the Berlin Wall also involved a shift in memories and perceptions of the war and the emergence of a more complex and international perspective. This, too, is by no means denied in this book. However, according to the author it is still too early to see the events of recent decades in perspective and he therefore doubts whether the fall of the Berlin Wall had as much impact on perceptions of the war as is commonly contended. Other factors were certainly just as significant in the changing image of the war at the end of the last century and the beginning of the current one: the completion of Loe de Jong’s life’s work on the history of the Netherlands during the Second World War, the publication of critical studies by younger writers, the increasing association of war and Shoah, the simultaneous growth of attention to groups other than Jews, and most of all the revelations concerning the poor level of assistance given to war victims in the period immediately following the
war and the embarrassing way in which Jewish assets were handled. In any case, it still seems too early to take a balanced view of the complex developments that have occurred in recent decades, which is why they are grouped together in this book as the fourth phase in the aftermath of the Second World War (1980 and after).

As far as previous years are concerned, as mentioned earlier, three other periods are identified. The first, the post-war period, was characterized by attempts to recover from the trauma, and to clear up the rubble, rebuild and start afresh. During this period, there was an abundance of war stories in which, in imitation of those who had been active in exile and the resistance, a relatively unambiguous picture was propagated. However, this picture did not last: disappointment got the upper hand and the waters became muddier. This remained the situation throughout the 1950s, the second period delineated. The main difference with the preceding period is that a more fragmented, difficult to verbalize memory of the war came increasingly to predominate, albeit under protest here and there. Even the idea of beginning with a clean slate faded into the background. The war was mainly a subject for domestic discussions and special occasions. It was not that the war was forgotten, but the lack of a story that was recognizable to all meant that it was no longer remembered, at least not as an event or series of events that could be described easily. This changed during the third phase, the 1960s and 1970s, which was also the most crucial period for the collective memory of the war. During this period, a clear ‘war story’ re-emerged, although there was both a moderate version and a radical version of this narrative. But that was not all: this story became rooted in the collective consciousness. That is the reason why, from the second half of the 1970s onwards, the war came to be ‘relived’ as a result. This revitalisation also marked the beginning of an increase in the number of commemorative publications, an ever stronger association between the war and the Shoah, the contemporary rediscovery of the war story of numerous other marginalized groups which had hitherto been neglected, and the subsequent collapse of that war memory. All this happened in the 1980s and 1990s.

On the basis of this short summary alone, the word ‘aftermath’ in the subtitle of this book seems to have various meanings: influence, imagery, memory, usage and historiography. Each of these aspects has its own dynamic. This dynamic can vary over time, from one group to an-
other and from one person to another. What is more, these various dynamics are interconnected, giving rise to an apparently chaotic picture.

Discussions of nuance aside, there can be no doubt at all that the impact of the war on the Netherlands during the second half of the twentieth century was enormous. However, the nature, timing, direction and consequences of this impact have varied to a remarkable degree. In the years immediately subsequent to the war, we can broadly say that everyone was touched by its after-effects, even if this was simply because the country was, physically and economically, in tatters. No more than ten years later, however, the economy had already recovered to such an extent that the material impact of the war was becoming ever less noticeable. Strangely, it was only at this point that the psychological consequences became evident, specifically among those who had been affected the worst – the victims of the concentration camps and extermination camps. The impact of the war on their lives had obviously been huge ever since the events themselves had taken place, but initially relatively little of this became public. It was a subject that people found hard to discuss or did not want to hear about, which in fact amounts to the same thing. This began to change in the 1960s. As a consequence by the final decades of the twentieth century the situation was almost the opposite of that of the late 1940s and 1950s. On closer inspection, it seems that the various aspects of what is called the ‘aftermath’ merged into one another.

Particularly when it comes to the psychological aspects, assessing the impact of an event becomes all the more complicated because it depends on what the person in question (or his/her spokesperson – doctor, journalist, historian) communicates. This is one of the reasons for the confusing relationship mentioned between the five aspects into which ‘aftermath’ can be divided. Immediately after 1945, the war was the subject of exhaustive discussion, both orally and in writing, but this soon dried up. The usual explanation for this is that people were keen to focus on the present and look to the future, the Cold War and the process of reconstruction in particular. This is undoubtedly true. But what is mentioned less often – and is also much less easily discernable – is the fact that the impact of an event and the level of communication about it may actually be in inverse proportion to one another. As a consequence, silence becomes – paradoxically – a form of speaking: people do one thing but mean something else; they may
remain silent, surround themselves with riddles, ‘speak’ using monuments or silence, or view mere suggestion as the highest possible form of expression. Communication is more than just ‘sending a message’ – i.e. *speech*. In the first place, it often takes the form of gesture, ritual, form – *silence*.

From the beginning of the 1960s onwards, it became more normal to discuss the war. At first this discussion occurred collectively and through gripping narratives about shared experiences. In this context we should mention the television series *De Bezetting* (‘The Occupation’) by Loe de Jong, and books such as *Ondergang* (*Ashes in the Wind*) by Jacques Presser and *In de schaduw van gisteren* (‘In the Shadow of Yesterday’) by Henk van Randwijk, as well as various background events such as the trial of Adolf Eichmann, enormous social changes, and the rapidly growing influence that the generation that had gone through the war during their childhood were having on politics and the media. All this led, in a relatively short time, to a clear image of the war. This image was based on existing but ‘forgotten’ ideas which had their origins in the war itself or in the early post-war period, springing from the resistance and the exile community of London: 1) the violation of an apparently defenceless people by a malevolent neighbouring power; 2) the resilience of that same people, who under the leadership of their best men and with assistance from overseas were finally able to defeat the malevolent neighbouring power and its henchmen; and underlying all this 3) a clear boundary between good and evil.

However, there was a serious complication in the acceptance of this image of the war: the possibility that the people themselves were partly responsible for the drama. This notion was based particularly on the work of Jacques Presser and was brought to public attention by a younger generation. But partly because their critical image of the past was associated with a radical vision of the present, it faded after a few years, to re-emerge twenty years later.

But things had not yet reached that stage by 1970. The publication of *The Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (‘The Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War’) by Loe de Jong – and everything that was written and said as a result – caused a subtle version of the existing narrative to become dominant from the 1970s onwards. The divergence was a subtle one not only because of
the enormous scale of De Jong’s work, but also because it shifted the focus from people’s actions against the enemy to the suffering caused by that enemy. This shift in emphasis can be seen in De Jong’s book itself, but is more evident in the reactions to it. At the same time war victims, particularly those of Jewish ancestry, displaced former resistance fighters as the chief protagonists of war stories. This was to have a huge effect on the aftermath of the Second World War. It must be remembered that only a small number of people could truly identify with the resistance – only those who had actually done something during the war, with the possible addition of those who had been arguing for radical social change. By contrast, nearly everyone could identify with the victims of war, whether actual or potential. This identification en masse was the main reason for the controversies that shook the Netherlands during the second half of the 1970s regarding the wartime activities of a number of Dutch citizens. After all, unlike previous and subsequent war scandals – which had primarily concerned the present and the distant past, respectively – the scandals surrounding figures like Willem Aantjes, Pieter Menten and others illustrated above all that the war had become the ultimate reference point of ‘our democracy’. Only this democracy could prevent a repeat of what had happened in the recent past.

One of the many consequences of this collective belief was that individuals struggling with their emotions and memories could find a way of telling their own stories and coming to terms with their past. This, in turn, was the reason why from the late 1970s onwards there was an enormous growth in the number of personal histories and memories, shorter or longer stories, documentaries, organizations, activities and demonstrations which in some way or another were connected to war-time experiences. This flurry of activity obliged the government to intervene. This intervention confirmed the existence of such activity.

By expressly appointing itself as the guardian of the nation’s war-time past, the government confirmed what had already proved to be true countless times since 1945: that the war was not simply a historical or personal event, it was also a political instrument. This became clear in the debate over the Dutch East Indies during the late 40s, in the Cold War, in the Netherlands’ relations with Germany, during the Vietnam War, in the debate about Israel and, at the very end of the twentieth century, during events in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Iraq and
elsewhere. But this phenomenon was not limited to foreign affairs. In
domestic politics too, the war has been used repeatedly as a rhetorical
or political instrument during the past 65 years. In this way, the Social
Democrats and Communists traded insults using the new taboo-word
‘fascist’, while in the 1960s and 1970s a younger generation described
their parents as petty collaborators. In fact, references to the war within
domestic politics lasted well into the last decades of the twentieth cen-
tury, as evidenced by the growing debate over the revival of the far right
and, according to many, the unacceptable treatment of minorities. This
effect was amplified by the fact that, during the same period, the Sho-
ah came to take a central place within the perception of the war. Par-
ticularly when it came to discrimination or genocide, the government
intensified its self-appointed role as a guardian of the ‘Never again’
principle. It was one of the reasons the war took on a meaning that
was far-removed from the actual historical events: it became a sym-
bol. This met with disapproval from those who deal with the past on a
professional basis and who, ultimately, are also the official guardians
of the past – historians. Despite numerous political and professional
discussions, they have always tried to preserve the authenticity of the
past. But in a society where that history, in this case the war, assumes a
symbolic meaning, that is no easy task.

Both the earliest descriptions of the war and the images that emerged
from the 1960s onwards were clear in their tone and content. Using
terms that were later to become widely used, we could describe them
as black and white. However, a narrative of such contrasting tones
has not always predominated. Particularly during the 1950s, again in
the late 1990s, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, other
thoughts about the war prevailed. The decisive factor in this was the
realization that for a large part of the population, if not the majority,
the early narrative of the war – which had been fashioned by members
of the resistance, exiles in London, victims and those who felt close
to them – did not tally with their own experience. This was why, soon
after the euphoria of liberation had subsided and when it became clear
how difficult the process of recovery would be, another view of the war
became dominant. To continue using the same colour scale, we could
describe this view as ‘grey’ (i.e. complicated), with fluid boundaries, at-
titudes that change over time, and an often relative distinction between
right and wrong. The dominance of this view from the late 1940s on-
wards explains why the resistance was sidelined, why war victims felt
compelled to remain silent, and why war-time collaborators were treated leniently or even left unchallenged. This also enabled many people or institutions – who according to the black-and-white view of the war had a fair amount of egg on their faces – to simply continue their careers. This ‘grey thinking’ became so dominant that, at the end of the 1950s, one of its most important proponents, Jan de Quay, was able to become prime minister without any significant protests.

Subsequently, during the 1960s and early 1970s, following the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the publication of Presser’s *Ashes in the Wind*, a younger generation judged this ‘grey’ attitude differently. It was no longer seen as having been unavoidable, and certainly not as laudable. On the contrary, it now came to be viewed as reprehensible and wrong. Although the radical variant of this view did not last long, as mentioned previously, it never completely disappeared and returned in the 1990s. This time its strength made its previous incarnation seem pale by comparison. The 1990s also witnessed a great deal of controversy over anti-Semitism after the war, over the reprehensible behaviour of numerous leading intellectuals during the war, over the high percentage of Jews who had lost their lives, over the way in which the Dutch government handled the property of murdered Jews following the war and over the poor assistance given to war victims. As a result of discussions on so many themes, the government apologised and delved generously into its pockets. The effect of this was only partly positive. The ‘compensation’ offered to the victims and their descendants was seldom seen as enough.

Despite the prominence of the war in the public consciousness around the year 2000, it was inevitable that past events came to be viewed with increasing distance from that time onwards. In that sense, at least, the concept of ‘taking retirement’ is not such an absurd one. Such a distance is often accompanied by a fragmentation of lines that previously seemed clear. As a consequence, a sense of the diversity of such events and the people that were part of them returned. Accordingly it has been suggested that instead of a ‘grey-scale’, the concept of multiple colours should be used in connection with war-time events. After all, this is how the war must have been: a patchwork of experiences, a diverse mix of stories, a criss-cross of backgrounds and, in any event, a much more complicated composition than can be represented in just one or two colours.
Many see a grey vision of the war as unacceptable because it does not do justice to the victims of that conflict. In the 1950s, this viewpoint was seldom heard because the war was still viewed predominantly from the perspective of the perpetrator – good versus bad amounted to the same as collaboration versus resistance or the Nazis versus the Allies. That was also how De Jong and Van Randwijk saw it at the beginning of the 1960s. Certainly, when one looks more closely, one can only conclude that a great deal of material was written from the perspective of the victim, even during the fifteen years that followed the war, but this did not receive much attention outside the authors’ own circles, and in comparison to what was published later it was merely a drop in the ocean. That changed during the 1960s, influenced by the publication of works such as Presser’s *Ashes in the Wind*, by growing individualism and the rise of a generation, which had been too young to participate in the war but found itself having an increasing say during the 1960s and 1970s. The consequence of all this was that around 1970 the view of the war shifted slowly from that of the perpetrator to that of the victim. This shift proved so fundamental that during the 1980s it sometimes almost seemed a virtue to have been a war victim. Here and there, this gave rise to unease and criticism. Where was the boundary between real and imagined victimhood? Was it possible to ‘talk your way into’ such a status? How could you determine whether someone was a victim of the war or a victim ‘of life’? But at the same time, who had the right to deprive someone else of their sense of victimhood? As each case was different and depended on an evaluation of both the person in question and of their representatives, this led to an extremely complex situation.

In the midst of this, however, there was only one subject on which no doubt was ever cast: the Shoah. The acknowledgement of Jewish suffering and the consensus on all attempts to prevent this ever happening again, became so widespread that it almost seemed a criterion for participating in Western society. The consensus at the beginning of the twenty-first century was reinforced by national governments and international organizations through countless declarations and actions. It gave the story of the war more coherence than ever before. This is all the more remarkable because that same story was simultaneously undergoing a process of fragmentation. Such is the paradoxical result of the 65-year aftermath of the Second World War: an unbroken mirror with a myriad of cracks in its surface.