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De oorlog in het museum: Herinnering en verbeelding

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Summary

A museum is first and foremost an appealing means of representing and giving insight into the history of the Second World War while simultaneously making it meaningful and fixing it in the collective memory. Each war and resistance museum and remembrance centre in the Netherlands has its own character, with varied presentations and diverse themes, differing per location. Over the years, the approach to the past, the substantive focus, and the representation have been subject to change. These shifts can generally be connected with the history of the memory of the war, which in turn can take many forms and is constantly subject to change. In a sense, one could argue that the dynamics of memory determine which meaning is given to the history of the war, the available knowledge of the past, and the questions asked.

War museums in the Netherlands face a turning point and will have to familiarise themselves with new approaches. As the generation that lived through the war passes away, on the memories of the 1940-45 period will be transferred in another, more indirect way. The bond with the public is no longer as self-evident as it was. New target groups have no 'direct' relationship with memories of the war. For them, this period is truly the past. Other factors also play a role in the way in which memories of the war are shaped, such as a strong focus on visualisation and 'experience' in a globalized popular culture; increasing mediatisation and digitalizing of cultural heritage; a cultural sector involved with privatization, economic competition and commercialization; increasing and conflicting interests of youth education (school), an aging leisure economy and growing Euroscepticism and populism, partly in response to a developing multicultural society. This alters the relationship museums have to new audiences, inviting criticism of the 'friends' of the past. Museums must respond to changing demands from the public and a changing relationship with the past. New presentations will be based on new concepts, in which authenticity, emotion, reconstruction, experience, visualisation, staging and representation will be vitally important and which will allow archives, collections and stories to be connected by using new digital technologies. In short, museums will have to reinvent themselves, in terms of both content and design.

In the post-war approach to the years of war and occupation, the museumisation of the war played a meaningful role in the culture of memory from the outset. In the historiography, however, museumisation as a coherent whole has been understudied. In this research study, an historical perspective is taken to analyse how museums have interpreted their tasks and roles over the years in a changing society, and how the museumised account of the war has changed over time. Influential factors in this have been the changing image of the war, the appropriation of the past, the meanings it has been given by different commemorative groups, and the influence of traditional and new actors.

Research into the history of the museumisation of the war in the Netherlands is a recent development that continues to this day, but it is also one whose shadow precedes it. That a significant present-day component is interwoven into this research is also the result of the commissioning of this study, which was initiated by the Frisian Resistance Museum in Leeuwarden, an independent part of the Fries Museum. For the design of the new Frisian Resistance Museum, both museums wanted to develop a conceptual approach, based on recent research, starting with how the story of the war and the meaning of this episode could be passed on to future generations in an appealing way. Factors such as a radically changing historical and museum culture, as well as changing insights into the representation of the history of the war and the occupation, play a role in this. For this reason, the commission for this study consisted of two parts: first, a study of the museumisation of the war, from which this present publication stems, and, in addition, the delivery of a blueprint for the substantive design of the museum presentation of the new Frisian Resistance Museum. The result was the museum's new permanent exhibition, which opened in the autumn of 2013.

Starting from the central question of this research study – in what way is remembrance of the war shaped by the museum? – this study focuses on four distinct themes within the museumisation of the war:

- the meaning of heritage, including material heritage, as presented in war museums;
- the political memory of the war, or the 'message' that is disseminated by the museums;
- the local and regional significance of the museums;
- the changing representation of the war as it is shaped in concrete museum presentations.

Almost seventy years after its conclusion, there continues to be strong interest in the Second World War and its presentation in museums in the Netherlands. This research study inventoried the institutions that present themselves as war muse-

ums. This includes museums that do not meet, or meet to an insufficient degree, the meticulous norms set by the Central Statistical Office (CBS) and the Netherlands Museum Association (NMV). The inventory shows that the Netherlands has no fewer than 83 museums that specialise in the history of the Second World War. Of these, eighteen institutions are official 'registered museums'. In 2012 these 83 Dutch war museums welcomed a total of 1.190.000 visitors. For the Anne Frank House, this figure only includes the Dutch visitors. (The total number of visitors to the Anne Frank House in that year alone ran to almost 1.2 million). Judging by the figures for ten landmark war museums, public interest in war museums has increased spectacularly in the period between 1996 and 2013: it has almost doubled. Most museums (57 in total) receive no more than 10.000 visitors. Nonetheless, one-third of all visitors visit a small, often local, war museum with a military focus.

The Second World War is the best documented and most accessible period in Dutch history. For many years, the war museums allowed themselves to be guided by an unbridled passion for collecting everything that commemorated the war. Due to the fact that for a long time the Overloon War Museum was the only appealing war museum in the Netherlands, it functioned as a kind of national depot for objects and items from the war. The arrival of other war and resistance museums and remembrance centres at the beginning of the 1980s led to increasing amounts of war-related material being collected on an organised basis in the Netherlands, and collections were formed that were spread across the entire country. While museum depots became ever fuller, the museums lacked sufficient professionalism and expertise in the area of collection management. Largely driven by idealistic motives, they also did not make these aspects a high priority. Only gradually did the institutions become convinced that having a collection also necessitated sound management. When central government began to assume responsibility for conserving the heritage of the war in the 1990s, the war museums received more assistance with collection management and were persuaded to follow a more balanced collection policy.

The collection constitutes a key pillar of museum design. The function of museum objects changed over time, however: increasing emphasis was put on the meaning of objects as pieces of heritage. Objects were linked to an active process of transfer and the conferral of meaning – meaning that contributes to the formation of a society or group's identity. With this, an object has symbolic value in addition to its original practical or aesthetic value. Heritage involves interpretations of the past and is subject to a continual process of analysis and decision. Constantly shifting, it has a present-day political, social and cultural function and can hereby be connected to the concepts of memory and identity.

Some museums arose as a result of the presence of a collection of objects from the Second World War, others were founded based on idealistic and political con-

victions: the presentation of the history of the war is often linked to a moralising message. The lessons of the past became a key issue in the politics of remembrance. At the end of the 1970's and in the 1980's, sociopolitical initiatives and organisations got a hold on the museumisation of the war. The history of the Second World War was used to warn against alarming developments in society, such as right-wing extremism and resurgent anti-Semitism. Many of the museums that exist today were created in this period.

Contrary to popular belief, the government exerted powerful influence over the cultural remembrance of the war. At the end of the 1980s, the government developed an active youth information policy. Priority was given to the educational importance of museums, and information about the past had to be presented in relation to the present. Insight into the causes, background to and consequences of the Second World War had to evoke awareness of 'the dangers of fascism and racism in our modern national and international society'. In the mid-1990s, government policy was revised. Events and aspects from the period between 1940 and 1945 relating to universal human rights were emphasised: freedom, democracy and equality as fundamental pillars of society. There was a focus on other commemorative groups. The most important shift in direction was the emphasis on the commemoration and shaping of memories of the persecution and terror of the war at the original sites. In particular, the former camps in the Netherlands (Westerbork, Vught and Amersfoort), as well as, later, the Hollandsche Schouwburg (Dutch Theatre) in Amsterdam, were given 'national status' and from then on have received structural support from The Hague. In 2007, the East Indies Memorial Centre was added to this quartet.

In recent years, the moral-ethical message of Dutch cultural policy (partly defined by European policy) disseminated by the government has increasingly focused on the area known as active citizenship. War museums are also expected to contribute to the promotion of this message. It is remarkable that, at the same time, the many Dutch war museums fulfil an important local and regional function. Particularly since the turn of the millennium, across the country, there has been an upsurge in the number of small, private war museums. These museums have arisen from relatively idiosyncratic, autonomous processes that do not always keep pace with prevailing historical views or remain in step with the transnational discourse of political memory, to which moral messages are usually linked. This development of parallel globalisation and localisation, or 'glocalisation', is illustrative of the rapid expansion and transformation of historical culture in recent decades. There is a strong focus, in particular, on the military conduct of the war and the Dutch, German and allied armed forces. The interest is in the relics of the aerial war fought above the Netherlands, and especially in what remains of the (German) defences. There is a steady increase in the number of Atlantic wall museums along the Dutch coastline. The 'recognised' landmark war museums also tend to have lo-

cal or regional content. With this, the appealing history of the surroundings and local and regional memories are for the most part made complementary to national memory. The large number of museums is indicative of a key characteristic of the museumisation of the war in the Netherlands: there is significant fragmentation and dynamism in the field of Second World War museums. The high degree of fragmentation contributes to a multiform culture of memory, in which different interpretations and meanings are attributed to the past. One possible negative consequence of this might be a disintegration of memory.

In order to increase visitors' involvement in the history of the war, the second half of the 1990's saw the rise of a new favourite form of transfer among landmark war museums: emphasis on personal stories. This is still the situation today. The public is able to identify with individual experiences and personal testimonies, which, to an important extent, are still distant, factual history to the subjective memories of individuals. Furthermore, there is the development that museums are strengthening their function as memorials. 'Museum commemoration' is becoming an increasingly important instrument for keeping memories alive.

In today's museum heritage practice, 'authentic experience' in particular seems to be a keyword. Now that the war happened a longer time ago and eye-witnesses are no longer able to tell their stories first-hand, there is, on the one hand, a strong predilection for a new materialisation of memories – the experience of 'real' objects and 'personal' stories – and, on the other hand, a trend towards visualisation and experience, in which reconstructions of the past are important. That is, in addition to the strongly individually-oriented historical experiences through contact with authentic objects or original sites, there is the experience that is evoked by means of a staged historical reality, with the help of directed narratives and reconstructions. Emphasis is increasingly being put on giving the visitor the feeling of 'experiencing' the past. Sensorial and emotional experiences are stimulated in the representation of the past. 'Experience and perceive' is the motto. Authenticity can be created by presenting a story that is wrapped in historical representation. Replicas, reconstructions or other interventions then determine the representation that must lead to a better understanding of the past. Staged authenticity then takes the place of material authenticity. Forms of presentation that are based on staging and (re)constructions of the past seem to be more in keeping with the experiences of the younger generation. When using new forms of presentation, museums have to weigh up the pros and cons. After all, 'experiencing the past' does not always contribute to the acquisition of knowledge and insight or give cause for reflection. But the question also arises as to how far we can go when evoking experiences of a highly charged period of history. When are moral-ethical boundaries crossed? There is a precarious balance between well-considered education and information on the one hand, and emotion and sensation on the other.

Another process that exerts a powerful influence on museum practice is the rap-

id development in the area of digitalisation and interactive and multimedia applications. The applications are not limited to collection management and museum presentations, but also mean that museums are increasingly communicating with their 'visitors' beyond the museum itself. Virtual online exhibitions and the provision of databases of pieces in the collection are popular: applications offer the public information and strengthen interest in the theme of war and occupation. Nevertheless, there is little chance that they will replace the 'physical' museum. This is because, as a result of advancing technical developments, demand for 'tangible' experiences of authenticity appears only to be increasing. The museum offers contact with authentic objects, sometimes at the original sites. By using convincing historical staging – whether or not this includes artificial interventions and creative representations – the museum can evoke (the suggestion of) authenticity. Ultimately, it is in this confrontation, this experience of authenticity, that a museum's uniqueness lies.

Furthermore, an important development is that museums are an increasingly emphatic part of the culture of leisure. It is expected that in addition to offering information and insights, a visit to a museum – even when it concerns a theme such as war and occupation – will also be relaxing and recreational. The popularity of heritage tourism – visiting memorial sites – has increased over the years, and this offers interesting economic opportunities. Responding to today's 'experience economy', museums seek increasing cooperation with the private sector, and with the tourism sector in particular. Concepts such as marketing, market orientation, the profit principle and cultural entrepreneurship are also established in the war museum sector.

The expectation is that for the time being, the history of the Second World War will continue to speak powerfully to the imagination. One significant element herein is the present-day meaning attached to this period of the past. In a fluid and multiform culture of memory, the period between 1940 and 1945 has remained, above all, a moral reference point: this history gives meaning to the here and now, and – indirectly – also to the future. In recent years, the memory of war has been increasingly linked to attention to universal human rights themes, and this can be expected to continue in future. In this context, the issues are ones of universality and globalisation; at the same time however, the focus on universal values is linked with concrete, imaginable, local and personal histories. It should be nonetheless noted that within the branch of war museums, the traditional 'collection-museum' has persisted. At the same time, in Dutch museum presentations the significance of the theme of resistance is weakened by the increasing focus on the Holocaust. Conversely, the focus on military warfare, in the form of the 'museum experience', has in recent years seen a significant resurgence.

Memories of the Second World War, in all its forms of expression and rituals, are deeply rooted in our society. With their presentations, the war museums in the

Netherlands constitute an appealing expression of historical culture. They keep the past alive and contribute to the historical consciousness of this formative episode. The museums have their own narratives, in which the historical events, with their dilemmas, personal choices, emotions, drama and perceptions, are addressed in diverse ways. In museums, the story of the war is passed on by and for generations that did not personally live through the war. They have their own (indirect) memories, their own interpretations, and their own depictions of that past. These are, for the children and grandchildren of victims, collaborators and bystanders (most Dutch), sometimes disputed just as fervently as they were in the initial post-war period. This is indicative of a key characteristic of 'the war in the museum', and the museum as a battlefield in a memory war: depictions of it are inevitably subject to the dynamics of memory.