The Shadow of Rotterdam

The Propaganda Battle about Air Bombardments in the Nazi Occupied Netherlands, 1940-1945

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The Shadow of Rotterdam: The Propaganda Battle about Air Bombardments in the Nazi Occupied Netherlands, 1940–1945

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In the war of words between Russia and Ukraine, which started in February 2022 with President Putin's invasion, the Second World War is an important point of reference. Both sides accuse each other of being the successor of Nazism. Although they carry a generic message of a fight of ›right against wrong‹, these narratives are also tweaked to appeal to specific publics. Ukraine's President Zelensky applied this tactic in a series of speeches he gave (largely online) to a range of national Parliaments in the Western World. In these performances he mentioned specific wartime experiences of the countries he addressed in order to raise support for his country's fight against Russia. When addressing the Dutch Parliament, he mentioned the bombardment of the Dutch city Rotterdam on 14 May 1940 by the German *Luftwaffe* as a harrowing warning what would happen if Russia's aggression would not be checked: »The Second World War was not to happen again, but everything repeats itself. The Second World War started with the invasion of a couple of countries, after that bombs fell on Rotterdam and London. The shadow of Rotterdam hangs over many European cities«.[2] With these words Zelensky referred to the Dutch national trauma of the German conquest and occupation between 10 May 1940 and 5 May 1945. Up until this

1 The authors wish to thank Anya Luscombe for her valuable suggestions.

2 »[De] Tweede Wereldoorlog mocht nooit meer gebeuren, maar alles herhaalt zich. De Tweede Wereldoorlog begon met de aanval op een paar landen, daarna kwamen de bommen op Rotterdam en Londen. De schaduw van Rotterdam hangt boven vele Europese steden.« A recording of Zelensky's online speech, with Dutch translation, can be seen via: https://debatgemist.tweedekamer.nl/debatten/toespraak-van-de-oekra%C3%AFense-president-zelensky-video-verbinding, 04:27-05:27 (accessed 29 August 2022).

day this episode is an important feature of the collective memory in the Netherlands.[3]

In part, the ongoing relevance of the Second World War in the Dutch public sphere can be explained because of the great amount of propaganda that was generated during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, both supporting the regime and resisting it. The project Media War (MediaOorlog), which ran between November 2020 and August 2023 at the Netherlands Institute for Sound & Vision, brought together historians and data scientists. The team employed a digital humanities approach to analyze the propaganda dynamics between Nazified and Anti-Nazi Dutch language media during 1940–1945 using the online primary sources platform CLARIAH Media Suite.[4] In doing so, the project strove to supplement the existing historiography which has mainly focused on the institutional aspects of Second World War propaganda in the Netherlands, describing the histories of the organizations of the most important mass media at the time: newspapers and radio broadcasting. In recent years, analyzing the content of these media has been facilitated by the digitalization of several big historical media collections, such as the Delpher wartime newspapers.[5]

While the latter collection consists of more than 133.000 newspapers that have been segmented in almost 7 million articles, the digital radio archive is much more limited and fragmented, counting only 2.275 audio-fragments from the Second World War. There are other valuable radio sources available, most notably transcripts containing verbatim broadcasting texts, but these are still on paper – although the project members have made a start to digitize them and are working to make these sources available via the research infrastructure of the CLARIAH Media Suite.[6] Working with the available digitized as well as paper source materials, the researchers of MediaOorlog have adopted a hybrid methodology, combining digital research techniques with traditional source criticism. They for example used visualizations of semantic patterns based on keyword searches, to identify certain moments in time that could be of interest for specific themes, and subsequently delved deeper into the media content of these moments, by subjecting newspaper articles

3 On the Rotterdam bombardment in Dutch remembrance culture: Strupp 2009. For a more general reflection on Dutch collective memories about the Second World War: Van Vree and Van der Laarse 2009.
4 https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/ (accessed 25 January 2024).
5 https://www.delpher.nl/thema/geschiedenis/tweede-wereldoorlog (accessed 24 January 2024).
6 For a reflection on these source collections, see: Brolsma/Kuitenbrouwer.

and (if available) radio-audio and -transcripts to a qualitative close reading analysis.

In order to understand the dynamism between Dutch media that supported the Nazi occupation and those that resisted it by comparing them, the MediaOorlog team categorized these different media in ›Nazified‹ and ›Anti-Nazi‹, building on the existing historiography. In this respect radio was the most straightforward, as in May 1940 the Nazi's took full control of the Dutch broadcasting infrastructure that was located in the town of Hilversum. Within a year all the existing national broadcasting corporations had been abolished and replaced by a centralized institution, the *Rijksradio Nederlandsche Omroep*. The station's management was formed by members of the Dutch Nazi Party (*Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging*, NSB) who used the station to make propaganda for Hitlers New Order.[7] The main Dutch Anti-Nazi broadcaster was based in London, where the Dutch government-in-exile in June 1940 was granted airtime on BBC transmitters to air a 15-minute daily programme called *Radio Oranje* (Radio Orange), referring to the color of the royal house as a sign of resistance.[8] These two broadcasters, Radio Hilversum and Radio Oranje, dominated the propaganda battle on the Dutch air waves.

The media landscape of newspapers was more extensive and more complex as there were hundreds of titles (see figure 1). Considering the Nazified newspapers, a distinction can be made between papers that were published by Dutch Fascist organizations (categorized as ›Nazi Party‹) that supported the occupation of the Netherlands by the Third Reich from ideological motives and papers that had existed before the war (distributed either nationally or locally) that were placed under control of the regime (›Censored‹). It took the Nazi authorities quite some time to fully control the latter subcategory, but René Vos has shown that in the course of 1942 this had been achieved.[9] There were also people in the Netherlands who resisted the Nazi occupation by – in strict secrecy – writing, printing, and distributing newspapers (›Illegal press‹). The regime actively hunted for people involved in this clandestine press and hundreds of them have been executed or died in concentration camps.[10] As a consequence the illegal press was scattered and fragmented, counting far more titles than the other categories, but far fewer pages, mak-

7 See Verkijk 1974.
8 See Sinke 2009.
9 Vos 1988, p. 472.
10 See Van den Heuvel/Mulder 1990.

ing it complex to compare semantic patterns.[11] The second category of Anti-Nazi newspapers were titles that were published after September 1944 in the ›liberated territory‹ in the Southern part of the country which was controlled by the Allied Forces. This latter category, however, falls out of the scope of this contribution.

Nazified (139 titles)	**Anti-Nazi (1.112 titles)**
Censored (118 titles)	Illegal press (955 titles)
Nazi-party (21 titles)	Liberated territory (157 titles)

Figure 1: table with categories of Dutch wartime newspapers

After analyzing the propaganda narratives in media supporting and resisting the Third Reich with distant and close reading methods, the researchers of MediaOorlog established that there was a constant interaction between propagandists on both sides. In a special issue of the Dutch academic journal *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* the authors discuss different case studies in which they show that wartime media pundits constantly battled for issue ownership over certain themes which they could use for their own purposes. This interaction was complex and varied: sometimes propagandists chose to denounce the propaganda narratives of their opponents as lies, or to ridicule them, in other cases they tried to appropriate a frame of the adversary or referred to publications in neutral states to legitimize their message.[12] This interaction can only be explained considering the transnational context as Dutch media institutions were directly influenced by the propaganda policies of the major belligerents in North-West Europe: Nazi-Germany and Great-Britain. Up until now, we have sought to understand how these entanglements helped to shape propaganda for the Dutch public between May 1940 and May 1945. In this article we seek to expand the boundaries of our project and analyze how Dutch propaganda narratives also reached audiences outside the Netherlands and helped shape specific perceptions of National Socialism. In this way we hope to contribute to further insights into the transnational entanglements between Nazified media and the media of their opponents.

For these purposes the case study of the propaganda battle about the aerial bombardments of Rotterdam serves as a useful starting point. As has

11 For more reflection on this issue, see Kuitenbrouwer et al. 2023.

12 Kuitenbrouwer/Wijfjes 2022.

been shown in the opening of this article, the *Luftwaffe* bombardment of May 1940, which in not more than 15 minutes reduced a large part of Rotterdam's city center into rubble, is an important event in the collective memory of the Netherlands and has triggered debate amongst historians about the legal and strategic nature of the bombing.[13] However, the last few decades have witnessed a growing public interest in the Allied bombardments of the city as well. This increased interest fits a wider historiographical trend to revise the history of the aerial bombardments in the Second World War. Since the 1990 German historians have started to put more focus on the air forces of the Allies, particularly the British and American, in the later stages of the war. After they acquired dominance in the air, the Allies engaged in ›strategic‹ mass bombardments of cities in Nazi occupied Europe, and especially Germany itself. The most notorious of these raids was the bombardment of Dresden, which was destroyed with incendiaries in February 1945. In a controversial, but influential study Jörg Friedrich in 2002 gave a detailed account of this harrowing ›firestorm‹ that led to the ›rediscovery‹ of the history of Allied bombings in German public memory.[14] Although they explicitly refrain from moral judgements, local historians in Rotterdam in the 2010s compiled an inventory of the Allied air raids over the city and the surrounding region, including harbors and industrial infrastructure, that took place between May 1940 and May 1945. Going through various sources they have counted 315 air attacks during which 1,386 tons of explosives were dropped, roughly 15 times the amount of bombs that the *Luftwaffe* used on 14 May 1940.[15] The history of these ›forgotten‹ bombings has also emerged in the public sphere. Since 2017 Rotterdammers, for example, organize an annual commemoration of the American bombardment of 31 March 1943 in a small park that was created after the raid on a flattened plot of land.[16]

The goal of this contribution is to show the dynamics of the narratives around the Nazi and Allied bombardments of Rotterdam and to connect the content of Dutch wartime media to transnational propaganda campaigns of the Nazi's and their adversaries. That the air attacks on the city were an important topic in the war of words between Nazified an Anti-Nazi media be-

13 An overview of the historiography on the bombardment of 14 May can be found in: Benda-Beckmann 2010, footnote 366; Van der Pauw 2006, pp. 153–56.

14 Benda-Beckmann 2010, chapter 5.

15 Baart/Van Oudheusden 2018, pp. 423–31.

16 https://openrotterdam.nl/live-herdenking-het-vergeten-bombardement-in-park-1943/ (accessed 5 September 2023).

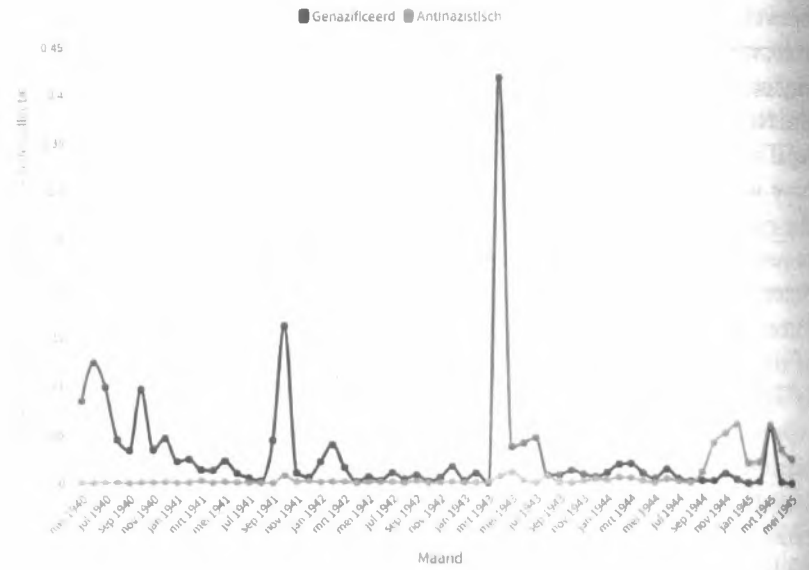

Figure 2: comparative ngram-graph of Boolean keyword search in Dutch digitized newspaper sources 1940–1945: »Rotterdam« AND »bombardement«

comes clear from a visualization of the outcomes of the keyword search »Rotterdam« AND »bombardment« in newspaper data. Figure 2 shows that there are several peaks in the semantic patterns suggesting that the air attacks on the city were a topic in wartime propaganda. Broadly speaking one could say that the most prolonged periods of public attention for the topic took place at the very beginning and very end of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, both of which focused on the Luftwaffe bombing of 14 May 1940. In addition, there were two higher peaks that coincide with Allied raids, the one of 31 March 1943 that is mentioned above, and a British air raid carried out in the night between 3 and 4 October 1941. In the first section of this contribution, we will analyze these peaks, and the ways in which the Nazified newspapers and radio on the one hand and resistance newspapers and Radio Oranje on the other hand instrumentalized the case of Rotterdam for various propaganda purposes. In the second section we will subsequently shift the focus to the significance of the Rotterdam bombardment in the broader, transnational war of words showcasing the international propagandistic value of ›Rotterdam‹.

The propaganda battle about Rotterdam in the Dutch press

The seizure of Rotterdam and its strategic bridges over the Nieuwe Maas was central to the plans of the German military for a rapid defeat of the Netherlands. To break the city's fierce resistance, on the morning of the 14th of May 1940 the general of the Wehrmacht ground forces Rudolf Schmidt issued an ultimatum to the commander of the Dutch troops in Rotterdam threatening to bomb the city if he did not surrender that same afternoon. Schmidt expected a tactic bombardment, however the *Luftwaffe* leadership decided to bomb civilian targets to force a speedy capitulation of the Dutch army. While negotiations were still taking place, around 1.30 p.m. heavy Heinkel bombers flew over the city and dropped their explosives. The bombardment, and the fires that resulted from it, destroyed Rotterdam's historic center, around 850 people were killed and 78.700 Rotterdammers lost their homes; almost 13 % of the city's population.[17] In the late afternoon, the commander of Rotterdam garrison capitulated. The commander-in-chief of the Dutch army, general Henri Winkelman, initially intended to continue the fighting, but when it became clear that the Nazis had issued an ultimatum to Utrecht as well, he decided otherwise. Early in the evening, Winkelman announced the surrender of the Dutch armed forces over the radio. The official capitulation documents were signed the next day.

On 17 May Dutch national and local newspapers were summoned to publish a declaration of the German military leadership stating that the commander of the Dutch troops in Rotterdam was responsible for the bombardment because he had let the German ultimatum expire without making clear whether the city would surrender or not. Moreover, it also emphasized that Rotterdam was a legitimate military target, for it had given up its rights as an »open city« because it was defended so forcefully.[18] The Nazi newsreel *Die Deutsche Wochenschau* of 23 May blamed the Dutch government-in-exile for the city's destruction. While showing images of Rotterdam in flames, the voice-over declared that the »irresponsibly Dutch ruling clique«, in the service of »British plutocracy« had urged the Dutch people to a pointless revolt, and subsequently – by fleeing to London – had left them to their own devices. According to the voice-over, the German army had no other choice than to

17 Baart/Van Oudheusden 2018, p. 56.

18 For example: »Gevechtshandelingen te Rotterdam«, in: *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 17 May 1940, p. 3; *De Telegraaf*, 19 May 1940, p. 1.

strike hard as it had to thwart the British plans to attack Germany.[19] This last remark referred to the official Nazi justification of the invasion of Belgium and Holland which read that the invasion of the German army was aimed at preventing a British-French attack of the Ruhr area via the Low Countries that was supported by the Belgian and Dutch governments, which – despite their formal neutrality – secretly colluded with Britain and France.

Five weeks after the bombardment, the Reich Commissioner for occupied Holland, Arthur Seyss-Inquart, paid a visit to Rotterdam. The nazi-controlled press reported extensively on this charm offensive and mentioned how the Reich commissioner distributed presents among wounded German and Dutch soldiers in a Rotterdam hospital and promised ten million guilders for the city's reconstruction. In a speech at the city hall, Seyss-Inquart repeated the official explanation that the German military had bombed the city because the commander of the Dutch troops kept tarrying and let the ultimatum expire without evacuating its inhabitants. However, he added, he did not want to scold Dutch army commanders as their decision-making abilities were understandably hampered because they were deserted by their own government.[20] When Winkelman heard about Seyss-Inquart's speech, he requested a hearing with the Reich Commissioner. In this meeting the Dutch general made clear that the – in his view justified – decision of the queen and ministers to move the seat of government to London had not affected the decisiveness of the Dutch military commanders, and that the *Luftwaffe* in fact had bombed Rotterdam a few hours before the ultimatum deadline, while negotiations were still taking place. According to Winkelman, Seyss-Inquart had not provided a substantive response, but instead had shrugged his critique aside with the remark: »This is what you say, but my sources have informed me otherwise« [»u zegt het zo, maar ik heb inlichtingen die anders zijn«]. When the occupying authorities prohibited Winkelman from publishing a report about his discussion with the Reich Commissioner in the Dutch press, the general drew up and disseminated a circular, which was frequently copied, and soon circulated across the country. A few days later, after Winkelman also had denounced a Nazi white

19 Van der Pauw 2006, p. 146; Die Deutsche Wochenschau (UFA-Tonwoche), Newsreel No. 507, 23 May 1940, minute 10:18, https://archive.org/details/dws-23.05.1940.of

20 For example: »Rijkscommissaris dr. Seyss-Inquart te Rotterdam«, in: *De Volkskrant*, 22 June 1940, p. 1; »Rijkscommissaris stelt *f* 10 millioen beschikbaar«, in: *Nieuwe Apeldoornsche Courant*, 22 June 1940, p. 8.

book issued by the *Auswärtige Amt* on 30 June which claimed to prove the alleged long-standing military cooperation of the Netherlands with France and Britain, the general was arrested and was kept as a prisoner of war until 1945.[21] In other words: the occupation regime suppressed information that did not fit the Nazi propaganda narrative about the invasion of the Netherlands and the bombardment of 14 May.

For the Dutch government-in-exile it was of crucial importance to convince its citizens back home that moving the seat of government to London was the best way to continue the struggle against Nazism as the flight of the ministers and queen Wilhelmina to London and the capitulation of the Dutch army after only 5 days of fighting had caused a shock and deep sense of insecurity in occupied Holland. Moreover, the government-in-exile also felt compelled to debunk the Nazi accusations of its alleged partiality and secret military cooperation with Britain and France. Therefore, the first broadcasts of Radio Oranje explained how the Netherlands was an innocent victim of Nazi aggression as the country had upheld a strict policy of neutrality. The broadcasts also signaled that the government-in-exile would do everything in its power to liberate the Netherlands with the help of its Allies. In its first broadcast on 28 July 1940, queen Wilhelmina had presented the war as »a battle between good and evil« and urged the listeners to commemorate with her the »untold suffering, brought upon our nation«, to praise the gallantry of the Dutch army, and to maintain confidence in a final Allied victory.[22] To bring to the fore the unprecedented evilness of the Nazi's and the terroristic ways in which they waged war by deliberately killing defenseless civilians, the Radio Oranje staff in their broadcasts frequently referred to the bombardment of Rotterdam. The programme stressed the capitulation of the Dutch forces was aimed at preventing »a repetition of Rotterdam«, and for example compared the consequences of the attack to the bloodshed in Verdun in 1916, or – invoking Entente propaganda tropes of the First World War – ironically spoke of the bombardment »as a masterpiece of German civilization«.[23] Moreover, in its broadcasts it repeatedly denounced claims in the Nazified media, stating that only 300 Rotterdammers had lost their lives as a result

21 De Jong 1972, pp. 308–11; Van der Pauw 2006, pp. 147–48.

22 A recording can be found here: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/ Radio_Oranje_28jul1940_INWIJDING_RAD-AEN560220WZ.wav

23 NIOD, PER 1134: Radio Oranje (thereafter: RO): »Wapenstilstanddag«, 11 November 1941; »Zo zijn onze manieren«, 12 September 1941; »Rede van H.M. de Koningin«, 10 May 1941.

of the bombardment.[24] Also resistance newspapers invariably presented the bombardment as a terror attack and strove to debunk the Nazi propaganda aimed at justifying the assault and downplaying its consequences, such as the resistance newspaper *Bulletin* which, referring to Winkelman's circular, in July 1940 emphasized that the Dutch would never forget »the wanton destruction of Rotterdam«.[25] To indicate that the Netherlands were in the same predicament as other nations which had become a victim of Nazi brutality, often the phrase »Warsaw, Belgrade, Rotterdam« was used, comparing the bombardment of the Dutch city with those of the capitals of Poland and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.[26] The attack was moreover regularly mentioned in connection to the air raids on British cities and the superiority of the Royal Air Force over the *Luftwaffe*.[27]

The propaganda narratives about Allied bombings show a dynamism similar to the ones surrounding the *Luftwaffe* bombardment of Rotterdam, only the tables were turned. In May 1940 the British government had decided to attack military targets in Nazi occupied territories near residential areas, accepting the risk of civilian casualties.[28] In one of its first broadcasts, on 1 August 1940, Radio Oranje explained that the British would carry out air raids over the Netherlands as part of the ongoing war against the Hitler regime. The programme justified these attacks by indicating that Germany had started the war and formed a clear and present danger for Britain. Moreover, it was stated that the R.A.F. would only focus on military targets. In this narrative »the responsibility for suffering and damage caused by these bombardments solely lies with Germany« [»De verantwoordelijkheid voor leed en schade door deze bombardementen aangericht rust op Duitschland alleen«].[29] The Nazi propaganda machine responded to these claims by condemning the British bombings as terrorism, carried out by ruthless men, who deliberately attacked the Dutch population. R.A.F. personnel in particular was a target of German propaganda, as is illustrated by a poster

24 RO: L. de Jong, »De Stemming in Engeland«, 30 July 1940; A. Pelt, »Ons kent ons«, 17 August 1940.
25 »Zapenend Nederland«, *Bulletin* (24 July 1940), pp. 1–2.
26 For example: RO: L. de Jong, »Een woord tot generaal Seyffardt«, 17 July 1941; »Rede van Z.E. den minister van Waterstaat, ir. J.W. Albarda«, 27 August 1941.
27 For example: RO: A.K. van Riemsdijk, »De orakelen van Hilversum«, 7 December 1941; A. den Doolaard, »De totale oorlog«, 2 February 1943; L. de Jong, »Luftwaffe en Royal Airforce«, 13 February 1943.
28 Overy 2013, p. 239.
29 RO: D.J.F. de Man, »De Engelsche bombardementen in Nederland«, 1 August 1940.

from the Summer of 1940 which carried the slogan: »English pilots have no mercy for peaceful civilians« [»Engelsche vliegers kennen geen genade voor vreedzame burgers«].[30] The Nazified media in the Netherlands drew from this general narrative about Allied air forces, also after several air-attacks on the Rotterdam area. As is illustrated in figure 2, there were two marked peaks in the newspaper data, which coincide with two bombardments that caused significant civilian casualties, i.e., the R.A.F. bombardment of 3–4 October 1941 (which caused the death of 106 to 130 people) and the United States Army Air Forces bombing of 31 March 1943 (which killed an estimated 400 inhabitants of Rotterdam). In the coverage of these attacks Nazified newspapers tried to illustrate the senselessness of the attacks and the cruelty behind it. In October 1941, for example, several censored newspapers published photos of a bombed-out church (called »het Noorse Kerkje«) with captions such as »the repulsive bombardment of the English« [»het weerzinwekkend bombardement der Engelschen«].[31] The funeral of the civilian casualties was also turned into a propaganda event, with uniformed Nazi officials laying wreaths at the graves and making the Hitler salute. A film journal from 1941 showing these images ended with the phrase: »the gravestones accuse England!« [»grafstenen klagen Engeland aan«].[32] The bombardment of March 1943 was presented in similar terms, both in newspapers and via radio. In a broadcasted report Louis Gerard Wybrands described the damage in the city and condemned the bombardment as an »arbitrary« act of aggression by the Allies aimed against »defenseless civilians«.[33]

This Nazi propaganda-narrative about the Allied bombings of Rotterdam drew sharp rebukes from the Anti-Nazi media. A few days after the October 1941 bombardment, the prominent resistance newspaper *Het Parool* published a long article with the title »Bombs on Rotterdam«. In it the author claimed that German propagandists deliberately overstated the number of

30 An illustration of the poster can be found here: https://geheugen.delpher.nl/nl/geheugen/view/engelsche-vliegers-kennen-geen-genade-voor-vreedzame?query=isShowPiece+exact+%221%22&page=3&maxperpage=36&sortfield=isShowPiece&coll=ngvn&identifier=NIOD01%3A49507.
31 For example: »Zinloos bombardement«, in: *Twentsch Dagblad*, 8 October 1941, p. 1 (tweede blad).
32 Polygoon Journaal, week 42, 1941. https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=210160814012009303 1&cid=daan-catalogue-aggr&st=polygoon%20journaal%20week%2042%201941.
33 »Bombardement op Rotterdam«, radio report by L.G. Wybrands, Nederlandsche Omroep, 2 April 1943. https://mediasuite.clariah.nl/tool/resource-viewer?id=210160808006870613 1&cid=daan-catalogue-aggr&bodyClass=noHeader&singleResource=1.

civilian casualties and the damage to non-military buildings, including the »Noorse Kerkje«, to obscure the fact that the R.A.F. had destroyed a significant number of military targets. Although it was not denied that some bombs had missed their targets, *Het Parool* echoed the narrative of Radio Oranje that Allied bombings were a necessary evil to liberate the Netherlands from the Nazi yoke. But the most damaging argument against the Nazi propaganda was made in the opening paragraph of the article, which fiercely condemned the officials attending the funerals »as the hypocrite displays of sympathy by the German occupiers« [»huichelachtige uitingen van medegevoel der Duitsche bezetters«]. The resistance newspaper in this context explicitly referred to the bombardment of 14 May 1940, indicating that Rotterdam had suffered far more from the *Luftwaffe* than from the R.A.F.[34] This argument – that was also applied to Allied bombardments of other cities – was difficult to dispel for Nazi propagandists as this would revive the memories of the inferno that the German air force caused in 1940. This can explain why the peaks in Nazi propaganda around Allied bombings of Rotterdam (figure 2) are quite short.

In contrast, Anti-Nazi Media referred to the tragedy of Rotterdam throughout the war as the case was instrumental to expose the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the Nazi propaganda about Allied bombings on occupied Holland. In doing so, resistance newspapers and Radio Oranje repeatedly invoked frames about the ruthless brutality of the *Luftwaffe*, even if these frames could not be backed up by solid evidence and nudged towards conspiracy theory. In December 1940 Radio Oranje for example devoted a broadcast to a press declaration of the government-in-exile claiming that the German *Luftwaffe* deliberately attacked Dutch cities and residential areas, after the R.A.F. had bombed military targets. Subsequently, it was argued, the occupying authorities pinned the blame on British pilots and forced the censored radio and newspapers to report on these alleged British atrocities. According to Radio Oranje the declaration also read that, to convince the Dutch citizens, the Nazi's had started to fabricate incendiary bombs that seemed to be made in Britain.[35] This narrative resonated in occupied

34 »Bommen op Rotterdam«, in: *Het Parool*, 10 October 1941, p. 1.

35 RO: »Uitzending van maandag 2 december 1940«, 2 December 1940. The poem was also cited on Radio Oranje at other occasions, in its broadcast of 9 May 1942 the announcer claimed that »via London« the poem was translated and disseminated abroad.

territory.[36] In its response to the bombardment of Rotterdam of October 1941 the illegal newspaper *Het Parool* asked the question if »it were Germans bombs« (»Waren het Duitsche bommen«) that hit the city. Although the paper could not »answer this question positively«, it pointed out that observers had spotted German bombers taking off from various airfields in the region during the R.A.F. raid.[37] Such unsubstantiated claims suggest that Anti-Nazi media felt confident about referring to air bombings in their propaganda campaign and that they gained issue ownership over this topic. Indeed, figure 2 shows that in the last year of the Nazi occupation the Anti-Nazi newspapers gave markedly more attention to the bombardment of Rotterdam of May 1940 than in the years before. They presented it as one of the great sins of Nazi regime, which helped to legitimize the Allied push for total victory. Indeed, the Dutch government in exile used this narrative to gain international support, as will be explored in the following section.

The significance of Rotterdam in the transnational war of words

For the government-in-exile, after the Nazi invasion, information was one of the most important means left at their disposal to assert political influence. Therefore, a few days after he had arrived in London, foreign minister Eelco van Kleffens established the Dutch Government Information Service RVD (*Regeeringsvoorlichtingsdienst*), which resided under the ministry of Foreign Affairs. The RVD soon developed into a professional organization with various specialized sections (including Radio Oranje and the press agency ANEP-ANETA) and branches abroad, such as press departments at Dutch embassies in Washington, Lisbon, Bern, Stockholm and Pretoria, and the New-York-based Netherlands Information Bureau (NIB).[38] RVD aimed at generating international support for the Dutch cause, convincing the other Allied countries of the Dutch on-going preparedness and capacities to genuinely contribute to the struggle against the Axis Powers, and at debunking Nazi propaganda about the Netherlands, such as the accusation that the country for years had conspired against Germany with Britain and France.

36 Baart/Van Oudheusden 2018, p. 152.

37 »Bommen op Rotterdam«, in: *Het Parool*, 10 October 1941, p. 2.

38 Van der Zwan 2003, pp. 37–8; pp. 43–4.

Moreover, it also strove to counter criticism and unfavorable media coverage in other Allied as well as neutral countries, including the idea – resonating in Britain and the US – that the Dutch army had not put up enough of a fight.

To oppose these views, in the first stage of the war the RVD put a lot of effort in propagating the narrative of the Netherlands as a small and innocent victim, whose strict neutrality – without any provocation – had ruthlessly been violated by Nazi brutality. To get across this message and to explain that the Dutch army in fact had bravely fought in May 1940, the Information Service made the bombardment of Rotterdam central to its propaganda targeted at foreign audiences. In his book *The Rape of the Netherlands*, which was published in September 1940 and written for British and American audiences, Van Kleffens for instance included a two-page aerial photo taken by an R.A.F. plane which showed the destruction of Rotterdam's city center. According to the foreign minister this »merciless bombardment« of an open city was »one of the worst crimes of military history« which, so he claimed, had led to the death of »[t]hirthy thousand of innocent victims« within 30 minutes. He rebuked the German propaganda machinery which pinned the blame on the commander of the city's garrison forces and tried to »minimise [...] the importance of the havoc they had perpetrated«. Van Kleffens presented this case as a typical example of German hypocrisy.[39]

The *Luftwaffe* bombardment of Rotterdam received a lot of attention in the international press.[40] Like Van Kleffens and the RVD, British newspapers too mentioned the – incorrect – death toll of 30.000 and presented the bombardment as a »terror attack« which revealed the true face of Nazi brutality to the world. The bombardment was moreover interpreted as a warning for what the *Luftwaffe* had in mind for British cities. Shortly after the beginning of the London Blitz, the *Manchester Guardian*, for example, warned that Hitler tried to achieve in London what he had done in Rotterdam and that the Blitz was a prelude to a German invasion.[41] Just like Radio Oranje, the British press too often mentioned Rotterdam in one breath with Warsaw, Belgrade, London, or Coventry. According to John Terraine in his study on the Royal Air Force in the Second World War: »Rotterdam ceased to be just a place name; it became a watchword, almost a slogan, joining Madrid, Barcelona and Warsaw, and

39 Van Kleffens 1940, pp. 168–69; pp. 176–80.
40 Overy 2013, p. 65.
41 Holman 2009, p. 275.

soon to be joined by names of English cities; all transmuted into symbols of Nazi atrocity«.[42] In a later stage of the war Churchill referred to the bombing of Warsaw and Rotterdam to morally justify the fact that R.A.F. made civilian casualties in German cities.[43] The importance of Rotterdam to justify British air raids on German towns, is also evident in an R.A.F. air-training manual issued in March 1944 which described the attack as an outright atrocity.[44]

The case of Rotterdam was not only cited in the British press to expose the ruthless brutality of Nazi warfare and to legitimize the bombardments carried out by the British themselves, it was sometimes also used to explain there was a broad popular support for the R.A.F. bombings on military targets in occupied territory. The London *Evening Post* for example reported on how R.A.F. pilots during an air raid on the Rotterdam port in July 1941 saw the city's inhabitants cheer at them, concluding »The Dutch ›enjoyed‹ it«.[45] When a few days later the Nazified Radio in Hilversum complained about the waving crowd in Rotterdam, the RVD passed on this information to British and American newspapers.[46] That the RVD took full advantage of this kind of media attention – which was useful to them in convincing British audiences the Dutch were a courageous and staunchly Anti-Nazi nation and a loyal Allied partner – also becomes clear from the involvement of RVD official Meyer Sluyser in the Powell and Pressburger propaganda film *One of our Aircraft is missing* (1942) which was set in occupied Holland. As is pointed out in the opening scene, the film – which tells the story of a crashed R.A.F.-crew escaping to Britain with the help of the Dutch resistance – was dedicated to five men from the village of Oud Beyerland who were executed by the occupying authorities in the summer of 1941 for assisting in the escape of British pilots. In the last scene, the Dutch national anthem is played displaying the slogan »The Netherlands will rise again«.[47]

The same narrative of an alleged typically Dutch resilience, hardiness, and collective aversion against Nazism, which seemed to be represented *par*

42 Terraine 1985, p. 135.
43 Overy 2013, p. 243; p. 248. Unlike what has often been assumed the decision of the British government in May 1940 to bomb military-economic targets in Germany close to civilian populations was not a response to the destruction of Rotterdam but motivated by the crisis in the battle of France.
44 Ibid., p. 65.
45 »R.A.F. Blitz 140.00 tons of ships. Crowded Rotterdam Harbour left in flames«, in: *The Evening Post*, 17 July 1941, p. 1.
46 RO: M. Sluyser »Speech: Rotterdam«, 23 July 1941.
47 *One of our aircraft is missing*, Minute 0:23 and 1:42:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nn36kYSzkXk.

excellence by the alleged admirable spirit of Rotterdam, was also invoked by the RVD in their propaganda targeted at Dutch people in occupied territory. The aim of these kinds of self-definitions was to enhance the confidence in an Allied victory and to demonstrate the Dutch were a loyal and gallant Allied nation. To promote this self-image of steadfastness and moral strength, Radio Oranje for example described photos made by British pilots of Rotterdammers who, despite their traumatic experiences with the *Luftwaffe* bombardment, had enthusiastically waved at R.A.F. aircraft flying over the city to bomb strategic targets in the city's docks. Radio Oranje emphasized that the Rotterdammers' response proved that »the Jerry's had not managed to break their spirit«, which, the announcer added, was of crucial importance in the war.[48] The same argument was made by the Rotterdam-born announcer of the London radio programme for Dutch seamen De Brandaris, Henk van den Broek, who on air used the alias »the Rotterdammer«. He explained that the city's inhabitants were »exemplary patriots« whose hardy mentality had brought Rotterdam the reputation in America of being »the most stubborn city in the world«.[49] The London-based Dutch language weekly *Vrij Nederland* also reported on stories of British pilots about waving Rotterdammers and published photos taken at low altitude to prove that – despite their awful experiences – they were not afraid of Allied bombers because they knew the R.A.F. would only bomb military targets. According to the magazine, the Dutch welcomed Allied bombardments singing: »Come Tommy, come, throw another bomb« [»Kom, Tommy, kom, gooi nog een bom«].[50]

While the case of Rotterdam was instrumental in eliciting British sympathy and mobilizing the population in the occupied Netherlands, it played an even more significant role in the RVD propaganda directed at American audiences. Until December 1941, America was the most important neutral country. Therefore, it was of crucial importance for the Dutch government-in-exile to mobilize American public opinion for its cause, to inspire aid, and to ultimately entice the American government to enter the war on the side of the Allies. In July 1940 the RVD issued a declaration to the American press, along with a map revealing the destruction of Rotterdam's city center. In the declaration, the RVD depicted the bombardment as »the greatest mass destruction the world has so far ever known«, and claimed that 30.000 civilians had lost their lives, »4000 unoffending men women and children per minute«. To underline the unprecedented brutality of the attack it furthermore stated that: »Not even the forces of Nature have ever been so wantonly cruel. Not even the volcanoes of Pelee and Krakatoa took such a horrible toll of life in so short a space of time...« The German embassy in Washington responded firmly and denounced the declaration as deceit. It emphasized the importance of Rotterdam as a military stronghold and proclaimed the bombardment had been a military-strategic attack that led to the death of no more than 300 people, the majority of which died as the result of fires lit by the Dutch themselves. RVD took advantage of the rather lukewarm responses of the American press to this German defense by distributing photos of the city's destruction which were smuggled out of occupied-Holland. These photos of Rotterdam's damaged historical city center were published in various newspapers and magazines, including in *Life Magazine* in September 1940.[51] According to the popular American weekly, for the German Air Force the bombardment had served as a »model sample of what it could do to a city« and was aimed »to terrorize the burghers of all of Europe«. The author argued that »[t]he terrible lesson of Rotterdam had the effect the Germans wanted«, as since 14 May, no city on the European continent – such as Paris, Brussels, or Le Havre – had dared to resist the German army, but instead had promptly surrendered. In conclusion, the example of Rotterdam was used to commend the R.A.F., stating that without its fierce defense of London, the British capital would look like the bombed-out Dutch city.[52]

After America entered the war, the bombardment of Rotterdam became an integral part of American narratives about the brutality of Nazism. Like Churchill, Roosevelt too referred to the city's destruction in his wartime speeches. In his State of the Union of January 1943 the American president ensured that the Americans, together with the British and Russians, would hit their adversaries »from the air heavily and relentlessly« and that the German Air Force could not prevent them from doing so as they had lost the superior air power which they once had »when they bombed Warsaw, and Rotterdam, and London and Coventry«.[53] In *Divide and Conquer* (1943), the

48 RO: M. Sluyser »Speech Rotterdam«, 23 July 1941.

49 NIOD, PER 1136, De Brandaris: Henk van den Broek, »De stad der stijve nekken«, 20 July 1941.

50 »R.A.F. boven Rotterdam. Opmerkelijke luchtfoto's«, in: *Vrij Nederland*, 27 July 1941, p. 803.

51 Van der Zwan 1995, pp. 41–3.

52 »Speaking of pictures. Nazi bombers did this to Rotterdam«, in: *Life*, 9 September 1940, pp. 12–3.

53 Franklin D. Roosevelt, »January 7, 1943: State of the Union Address«, The American Presidency Project, University of California, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/state-the-union-address-0

third film of Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* propaganda series of the US Department of War, the bombardment was instrumentalized to justify American involvement in the Second World War. While showing images of a destroyed city, burning buildings and rows of dead bodies, a voice-over described the Rotterdam attack as »one of the most ruthless exhibitions of savagery the world has ever seen«.[54] Already in 1942, a key advisor to the American branch of the RVD had concluded that winning »the sympathy of the American people« especially with respect to the destruction of Rotterdam, was among the biggest successes of Dutch propaganda in the United States.[55]

Conclusion

In the media war between the supporters of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and those resisting it, the dramatic *Luftwaffe* bombardment of Rotterdam of May 1940 played a marked role. In the direct aftermath of the raid the German authorities claimed that the bombardment had a clear military goal and that the defenders of the city had been responsible for it as they did not surrender in time. The Dutch government-in-exile responded via Radio Oranje from London, condemning the bombardment as a wanton act of destruction, which fitted the general narrative that Nazi Germany had unprovokedly attacked the Netherlands. In the years that followed, the bombardment of Rotterdam cast a shadow over the propaganda campaigns of both sides. In response to Allied bombings of cities in occupied Western Europe, the Nazified media used a narrative similar to that of their adversaries to denounce the pilots of Allied bombers, accusing them of spreading ›terror‹ with the senseless and deliberate destruction of residential areas. These attempts backfired immediately. Anti-Nazi media responded fiercely and referred to the *Luftwaffe* bombardment that destroyed Rotterdam city center to expose the hypocrisy of Nazi propaganda, attacking the ›dishonesty‹ of high-ranking members of the occupation regime that mourned the deaths of Allied bombings in the same city they had flattened themselves. In this sense the Anti-nazi media gained the upper hand in the propaganda battle about air bombardments as is also demonstrated by the semantic

54 *Divide and Conquer*, minute 30:15, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divide_and_Conquer_(film).
55 Snyder 2010, p. 70.

pattern in figure 2, which displays two high but also relatively short »peaks« in the Nazified newspapers after the Allied bombings of 3–4 October 1941 and 31 March 1943. By the last year of the occupation mentionings of the »bombardment of Rotterdam« were mainly about the *Luftwaffe* raid in May 1940 – which became a symbol for the cruelty of the Nazi regime at large.

The Dutch government-in-exile did not only frequently refer to the bombardment of Rotterdam in their propaganda targeted at occupied Holland, it also effectively managed to instrumentalize the city's destruction as a propaganda frame to muster international support, especially amongst British and American audiences. In this narrative the citizens of Rotterdam, who waved at R.A.F. aircraft displaying their determination to rid themselves of the Nazi yoke, became a symbol of the alleged resilience of the Dutch population. This narrative of support from the heroic people of Rotterdam to the heroic Allied airmen was instrumental for the RVD to strengthen the confidence in an Allied liberation in the occupied Netherlands and – simultaneously – to assure the British the Dutch were a steadfast and gallant Allied partner. Another frame that entered the transnational Allied propaganda campaign was the idea that the Rotterdam bombardment had revealed the true face of Nazi brutality to the world, such as shown in the American propaganda film series *Why we Fight*. In this way, the bombardment of Rotterdam, like the bombing of Warsaw and Coventry, has become an internationally known symbol to illustrate the evils of Hitler's Germany, which resonates up until today, as becomes evident in Zelensky's speech to the Dutch parliament in 2022. With our analysis we hope to not only have shown that the war of words about air bombardments during the Second World War was a transnational affair, but also to have demonstrated that in order to understand present day media frames, it is important to look at the propaganda narratives of the past.

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