

A Belgian View of (the Debate on) 'Dat nooit meer' – 'Never Again'¹

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While the booming field of memory studies is characterised by a lack of a uniform and consistent methodology, *Dat nooit meer* [Never Again] seems to reject any theoretical analysis whatsoever. The author, Chris van der Heijden, relies on the journalistic motto 'show, don't tell'. Such a vision provides both the strength and the weakness of the argument. On the one hand he manages to dig up a wealth of empirical information; on the other hand, the evidence of his thesis is solely dependent on the selection of sources by the author. This book therefore is not only a challenge for Dutch war historiography, but also indirectly an urgent call for self-reflection on the international research on collective memories. To what extent is its associative and anecdotal argument a relevant interpretation of how Dutch society remembered and rewrote the past World War II? To what extent can we develop an epistemologically justified and adequate methodology that allows the analysis of the genesis of a collective memory?

'Don't tell but show'?

Memory studies are extremely popular. Attention to memory is burgeoning continuously as the subject of interdisciplinary studies. With leading international magazines such as *History and Memory* and a remarkable publication boom in the past two decades, it does not seem to be premature to speak of an independent historiographical specialism. However, from a review of various studies it appears that 'this field of research' has scarcely rebutted the criticism formulated as early as 1997 by Alon Confino in *American Historical Review*: 'It lacks critical reflection on method and theory, as well as a systematic evaluation of the field's problems, approaches, and objects of

study'.² Critical speculations are not long in coming but, as Wulf Kansteiner argued in *History and Theory*, there is still a need for a significant development of an unambiguous methodological and conceptual analytical framework.³ In its absence, the field of memory studies more or less disintegrates into studies dissecting their subject on the operating table of prominent personalities such as Maurice Halbwachs, Mr and Mrs Assman or Pierre Nora on the one hand and, on the other, studies that completely follow their own methodological course or borrow from others.

Dat nooit meer [Never Again] by Chris van der Heijden does not belong to either of the two categories. The author actually swears by the narrative plain and simple. From the journalistic motto 'Don't tell but show' the work is more an illustration of the way in which the Netherlands *might have* remembered, rethought or rewritten World War II in the past 67 years than a solid analysis of the mechanisms and dynamics of that aftermath. In fact Van der Heijden goes too far in his conclusions by simply raising the tone of a particular source to the attitude of an entire epoch. With a fragment from Verschuur's *Zuiveringschaos in de pers* [Purging Chaos in the Press] (1945) for example, he is of the opinion that the viewpoint proclaimed in it 'is characteristic for the greater part of the first post-war period, the years up to around 1960'.⁴ Although this is an interesting position, it loses credibility when it appears that it concerns a 24-page publication with the subtitle 'Some Considerations on the Arbitrary Procedure, Inconsistencies and Injustices of the Present Press Purge'.⁵ Obviously it is particularly intriguing that even at that time the totally unknown H.G.J. Verschuur had a complex view of the war, but it is a bridge too far to project the statements of a single contemporary in what is a clearly biased piece of work on only one aspect of the post-war purge onto the perception of an entire society. Convincing arguments or indications why that conclusion would transcend the anecdotal are actually lacking. In a similar way the author sets to work on the Catholic politician and Hague lawyer L.G. Kortenhorst. By extensive examination of his booklet *Was samenwerking met den vijand geoorloofd?* [Was cooperation with the enemy permissible?] Van der Heijden hopes to demonstrate that Kortenhorst's grey view of the war years in the late 1940s and

1 Chris van der Heijden, *Dat nooit meer. De nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland* (Amsterdam, Antwerpen 2011). [Never Again: The Aftermath of the Second World War in The Netherlands].

2 Alon Confino, 'Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method', *The American Historical Review* 102:5 (1997) 1387.

3 Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies', *History and Theory* 41 (2002) *passim*.

4 Van der Heijden, *Dat nooit meer*, 54-55; Translation of: 'kenmerkend is voor het merendeel van de eerste naoorlogse periode, de jaren tot ongeveer 1960'.

5 Translation: 'Eenige beschouwingen over de willekeur, de inconsequenties en de onrechtvaardigheden der huidige perszuivering'.

in the 1950s was a more or less generally accepted fact. Once again a challenging proposition but one which, even with the enumeration of a selection of like-minded people, does not actually say more than that Kortenhorst & co thought that 'the transition from good to bad was seamless'.⁶ That opinion therefore existed – which is a creditable finding – but it manifestly cannot be shown anywhere that this view was supported by the entire or even a significant part of the community. Although Van der Heijden personally indicates that 'Wilhelmina, London and the resistance' were of a different opinion, he pays too little attention to dissonant or perhaps even more dominant trends in the imaginative approach to and perception of the past.

In a search for staging of war memory the author is sometimes guilty of what he personally criticises in a discussion of James Carey's communication theory:

As long as such a 'memory' has not been organised by opinion makers, historians, journalists, politicians or film makers, it actually contains little more than atmosphere, feelings or another form of suggestion.⁷

For a similar reason the most innovative conclusion of *Dat nooit meer* [Never Again] seems to lose some persuasive power: namely that the resistance image unambiguously dictated by the liberation high dissipated very soon after the war and collapsed into diverse, complex and here and there even grey images. It is a bold and courageous thesis that is completely at variance with the strict national image of the war that Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse still thought to distinguish in *De dynamiek van de herinnering* [The Dynamics of Memory] in the first decades after 1945.⁸ By anecdotal association Van der Heijden did create some caesuras in the development of the legacy of World War II. However, the question is whether the relevance remains valid when a different source selection or wider attention to the multitude of voices might produce a new reading. Can the viewpoint of a number of personalities or the analysis of individual cases be extrapolated to the perception of the majority of members of an entire society?

6 *Ibid.*, 98. Translation: 'de overgang van goed naar fout vloeiend was'.

7 *Ibid.*, 182. Translation: 'Zolang een dergelijk "geheugen" door opiniemakers, historici, journalisten, politici of filmmakers niet geordend is, bevat het immers weinig meer dan sfeer, gevoel of een andere vorm van suggestie'.

8 Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse (eds.), *De dynamiek van de herinnering. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context* (Amsterdam 2009) 327.

A pointillist painting

Quite frequently the book suggests a real trend by the addition of no more than a few elements. The stringing together of personal narratives, a variety of curiosities and interesting stories – often from fairly idiosyncratic individuals – largely ignores *civil society*. The dynamic processes that lend a collective memory form, content and resonance, both top-down and bottom-up, need a more structural interpretation. Undoubtedly the role and agency of a number of personalities will have been directional, but memories, according to Wulf Kansteiner, ‘even the memories of eyewitnesses, only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented, and used in a social setting’.⁹ However, the author passes by some opportunities to investigate fundamentally the way in which a particular perception of the past won public space or public forum. On the one hand in the most literal and material meaning (monuments, street names, commemorations, et cetera) but, on the other hand, how it was expressed by the wider socio-cultural and multimedia forms (literature, film, television, radio, et cetera). Concerning the thousands of war memorials and their installation dates he states: ‘in general not much more can be said than that they are many, very many, especially in view of the lack of a monumental tradition’.¹⁰ Well, it is precisely that information which allows for detection of some general trends and thus for transcending the study of a number of cases and events.

Although *Dat nooit meer* compensates for the conceptual and therefore sometimes analytical dearth with empirical richness, the evidence reads more like a pointillist painting. The touches that define the image and colour are too dependent on the artist’s hand. The author even admits this at a certain point. Since it is ‘not feasible to write a collective biography of the journalists, editors and other opinion makers [...]’ a ‘more impressionistic approach [is] therefore inevitable’.¹¹ It demonstrates intellectual honesty when Van der Heijden informs the reader of this, but at the same time it is a pity that a methodologically sound attempt at network analysis thus makes place for a discourse on gut feeling. Moreover, a large part of that intuition links up with the concept which many *memory studies* bring to the fore as an explanation: generation. Like class, race and gender it is a convenient term, even a *deus ex machina*, which allows for making complex developments understandable.¹²

9 Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies’, *History and Theory* 41 (2002) 190.

10 Van der Heijden, *Dat nooit meer*, 191. Translation: ‘in het algemeen nauwelijks meer te zeggen dan dat het er veel zijn, zeer veel, zeker als je daarbij het gebrek aan monumentale traditie in ogenschouw neemt’.

11 *Ibid.*, 416. Translation: ‘ondoenlijk is van de journalisten, redacteuren en andere opiniemakers van de oorlogsgeneratie een collectieve biografie te schrijven [...]’ a ‘meer impressionistische aanpak [is] daarom onvermijdelijk’.

12 Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Moral Pitfalls of Memory Studies: The Concept of Political Generations’, *Memory Studies* 5:2 (2012) 111.

Experts in *memory studies* mainly derive benefit from it because it permits defining generations vis-à-vis the previous ones by reconstructing their 'prevalent strategies of interpretation as an end itself'.¹³ Since it drives analysis of causal dynamics (social, ideological, political) somewhat to the margin however, many historians leave empty-handed. Van der Heijden appears to be aware of these epistemological pitfalls or shortcomings of a generational explanation model. However, in his discourse he uses the 'war generation', described by him rather audaciously as 'a tool of intellectual compromise that delegitimises experiences of relentless homogeneity as well as perceptions of radical discontinuity'.¹⁴ Here too, however, again there is a need for a broader view, at least one that goes further than the written word of a series of protagonists and spin doctors. Whose memory image is representative for which echelon of society? How did a particular perception of the past resound in civil society? In fact, public evocations or iterations of the past say more about who canonises what, and possibly why, than what is actually remembered by the greatest public common denominator.

The benefits and challenges of an international comparison

Well, the journalistic *Sturm und Drang* of *Dat nooit meer* has at least the advantage that it conveys a rather explicit message. Even if it takes 700 pages of full text and another 200 pages of notes and bibliography, Chris van der Heijden is sure: the referential War story, on a scale from good to bad, only caught on from the 1960s. In the previous period there was a lack of consensus and therefore a convergent view. As indicated, that finding largely conflicted with the study of Dutch war memory by Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse. For the rest, the results run more or less parallel. Gradually, as part of an international trend, the Shoah starts to appear more and more on the memory stage and the increasing temporal distance creates comfort for scientific research and space for nuance and interpretation. To a certain extent this route differs from the Belgian story. In the recently published *Scherven van de oorlog* [Shards of the war] Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters draw two clearly linked conclusions: 1. Belgian society does not know a uniform war memory, and 2. for a long time the Belgian State remained passive in the field of memory.¹⁵ By signing up to already existing memory frameworks, mainly passed on from World War I and the lack of steering from above, various groups of victims positioned themselves as completely individual memory communities. What is striking here is the presence of a highly organised

¹³ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁵ Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, *Scherven van de oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog 1945-2010* (Antwerp 2011) 260.

Flemish-nationalist counter-memory that presented itself not as a victim of the war but precisely as a victim of the post-war punishment of collaboration. Finally, in the wake of the international ‘holocaust memory boom’, but also because of the reality of a successful extreme-right movement, from the 1990s a memory rhetoric developed that increasingly streamlined the fragmented imaging of the Belgian war past into the context of human rights. Moreover, only at this stage, so many years after the war, the authorities succeeded in asserting themselves to a certain extent – at least the authorities in the various Belgian federal communities. Now that disintegration of the Belgian State has increasingly become a fact through consecutive state reforms, it is remarkable that in the search for legitimacy the new authorities are discovering the political-normative potential of the past and memory.

Undoubtedly an international comparison will bring to the fore similarities as well as differences between the Dutch and the Belgian narratives. However, apart from the fact that this finding is self-supporting, at first sight it is of little use. This has nothing to do with the soundness of the various studies, but rather with the specific context of the countries and the special handicap of *memory studies* in general. In the first place, a description of the variable parameters within a national unity (political, ideological, possibly ethnic and socio-economic fault-lines, occupation context, past history, party system, state structure, et cetera) often comes down to a contextual explanation of the differences in memory dynamics vis-à-vis another country. In other words, the necessary basic information produces immediate and direct insight. In the second place, and more fundamentally, the field of the *memory studies* lacks an unequivocal charter – a conceptual and methodological framework – which allows for auditing the numerous interesting cases in a uniform way in the search for similarities. Does *Dat nooit meer* or any other national case study not provide a contribution to the international historiography of the politics of memory? Or, in a wider context, does this signify the bankruptcy of an international comparison? No, not at all. In any case any contribution to the debate is an incitement to evaluate one’s own analytical model. If all studies on memory are examined systematically, it might be concluded that the mosaic of memories within national frontiers is at least as large as the number of authors who have put it in the spotlight. However, a reading of these different approaches leads to a more balanced empirical synthesis, which in turn allows making more balanced cross-border connections. Therefore Van der Heijden’s merit is that he redefines the focus on the initial post-war years. Even if his point of view is contested, his special – quasi unifocal – attention for indications of a grey war memory in the first decades after 1945 incites other researchers to be alert to the strength of such voices dissident to national memory culture. The question is mainly whether the extent of it is the rule or deviation, and how this can be demonstrated convincingly: and that is precisely the issue that is still relevant for international historiography. What is the most appropriate way to

map public memory? How does one determine the shifts – of both form and content – of the imaging and signification of the past? Which broader social, historiographical, and political debates determine its dynamics? How does one introduce an appropriate staging?

The benefits and challenges of a decent debate

In this connection there is no other conclusion than that Van der Heijden's work can be called a success. This is witnessed at least by the scope of this publication of *Low Countries Historical Review*. There is discussion, a discussion that sometimes takes on grotesque statement and rebuttal proportions, but hopefully a discussion that remains open. This is by no means the author's test piece. As a talented and prolific writer, for more than twenty years this Dutch historian has been combining a full journalistic career with the development of a mainly historical oeuvre in which World War II has a special place. It is unfortunate for those who envy him, but the publication of *Grijs verleden. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [Grey Past: The Netherlands and the Second World War] (2001) already put him firmly on the map of Dutch war historiography. Litres of ink, not infrequently spiked with vitriol, flowed across his point of view.

This view was that during the occupation the majority of citizens were more involved with their daily bread than with the honourable principles of good and bad. It set the cat among the pigeons, an approach which in a single-minded way lent an ear to the lament in the inaugural speech of Hans Blom at Amsterdam University (1983), namely that for a long time Dutch histories of the occupation period were written from a paralysing black-and-white perspective. A decade after *Grijs verleden* [Grey Past], and this time with the professor mentioned as the promoter, Chris van der Heijden set the world by its ears again. *Dat nooit meer* received a flood of reviews, a majority that did not spare the rod for both content and author. It seems like a copy of the commotion brought about by *Grijs verleden*, a first time on publication and in a more severe form since 2008, apart from the remarks on content, concentrating on the person rather than the deed (or book in this case) – not very constructive or intellectually honest. Chris van der Heijden has already been reproached for 'secondary anti-Semitism' – a term borrowed from Peter Schönbach – and it is subtly argued that he is the son of a member of the Waffen ss, as if he is doggedly fighting the Stockholm syndrome. Mud-slinging redounds. Last and not least, many critics take the opportunity to put his 2001 book on the rack again. An overview of criticism and retort, the major reactions of which were collected on a blog the author created especially (<http://datnooitmeer.blogspot.com/>), teaches at least one thing: The Netherlands is suffering from an annoying past. Although it is apparently not inferior in the least to the 'unprocessed past' minted in Belgium by Luc

Huysse and Steven Dhondt, it is remarkable that the Belgian community-charged controversy rages more beyond the cenacles of university and research institutes than among professional or academic historians – regardless of whether they are Dutch or French-speaking. For an outsider, at first sight the Dutch commotion looks more like an exaggerated territorial dispute within the historical corporation. However, on closer inspection the reviews, apart from envy and factual comments, generally express much irritation and even frustration about the interpretation provided.

The author was on the wrong tack if he thought he could remain out of the firing line now that he had written a book that it is not about the actual war and the relativity of the moral. In fact, what and how we remember might say even more about ourselves and society than we would like. Or in the words of Richard Ned Lebow: ‘Our understanding of the past not only helps us interpret the present; it tells us who we are’¹⁶; and for many critics, Chris van der Heijden clearly says that he is a journalist in the first place. Of course, this observation does not need perfect vision, because the author likes to position himself all too sharply in that role. This is manifest not only in the shocking casualness with which he presents some results (for example ‘There can only be one answer [...]’¹⁷), but also in the sometimes tasteless diminutives with which he trivialises or belittles ‘the little world of academia’.¹⁸ In addition, the prologue resolutely announces his journalistic method. His meaningful marginal notes on the impossibility of dissecting *the* public opinion or *the* collective memory do not lead to rational development of a model that at least can structurally test the reality values of a memory dynamic, but rather to a plea for the exemplary as an instrument of narrative analysis. In the end, the author is certainly aware of the advantages and drawbacks of the plan, but in that sense the epilogue is no more than an indispensable but hardly operational manual for reading it.

In spite of all that methodological criticism, there is of course the question whether Chris van der Heijden is not also redrawing the moral blueprint of Dutch collective identity, together with the new outline of memory culture. If this is really the issue of the debate and the fuss, the characterisation of J.J. Buskes reads as an autobiographical note, namely that he is the type ‘who does not mince his words, often is right but in being right takes no account of what is socially desirable’.¹⁹ It is to be hoped that this discussion takes place with the same frankness. ◀

16 Richard Ned Lebow, ‘The Memory of Politics in Postwar Europe’, in: Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham 2006) 3.

17 Van der Heijden, *Dat nooit meer*, 304, 374. Translation: ‘Het antwoord kan er maar één zijn [...]’.

18 *Ibid.*, 527. Translation: ‘het academisch wereldje’.

19 *Ibid.*, 351. Translation: ‘dat geen blad voor de mond neemt, weliswaar vaak gelijk heeft maar in dat gelijk geen rekening houdt met het sociaal wenselijke’.

Koen Aerts (1983) obtained the degree of Doctor of History with his PhD-thesis on the purge of Belgian collaborators after the Second World War: *Repressie zonder maat of einde? De juridische reïntegratie van incivieken in de Belgische Staat na de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Ghent University, 2011). As a postdoctoral fellow of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO-Vlaanderen) he is affiliated to the research unit *War, Crisis and Contemporary Society* of the History Department at Ghent University where he is working on a socio-political history of the collective memory of collaborators in the postwar Belgian society (1944-1970). Recent publications include: 'L'Affaire De Becker (1956-1962): La fin de la répression et la Convention européenne de sauvegarde des droits de l'homme et des libertés fondamentales', in: Geneviève Duchenne (ed.), *Autour de Raymond De Becker* (Bern 2013) (in press); 'De Belgische Bijbel: evangeliën, apocriefen en exegese van het nationale verleden', *Ons Erfdeel* (May 2013) nr. 2, 153-157 and (with Bruno De Wever), 'Het verzet in de publieke herinnering in Vlaanderen', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 42:2-3 (2012) 78-107. Email: koen.aerts@ugent.be.