



Tale after Tale after Tale

The Lost Chance of a Great Project

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Chris van der Heijdens voluminous dissertation on the culture of memory in the Netherlands of the Second World War (*Dat nooit meer* [Never Again]) is disappointing on several counts: methodologically it does not meet the scientific standards, that should be expected from an academic historian and the book is more a compilation of stories than a coherent analysis. Moreover the author has a biased view on many aspects of his research theme. To mention only two examples, his view on the purge of Nazi collaborators is extremely simple and one-sided and this also applies to his description of the way the resistance against the Nazis was viewed after the war. Furthermore a fundamental problem is his moralistic tone in judging the way people looked back at the occupation period. Those who fit into his own view of the 'grey past' are treated approvingly, others are dispensed with in an unfair or ironical way. Van der Heijden does not see that black, white or grey, are not the right terms to describe the attitude of people during the war: the view has to be multicoloured. This also applies to the description of the culture of memory after 1945 and it's just that colourfulness that is dramatically lacking in this book.

In the second half of the 1980s in the Federal Republic of Germany the so called *Historikerstreit* raged. Briefly, this was about the place of the Nazi past in German history and the question of what significance that past should have in the present. Academically, this extremely polarised debate delivered no new insights, but feelings ran high among historians and others. Germany seemed to be divided into two camps, one camp of those who 'wanted to put things in perspective', who wanted to rid themselves of the past, and the other, the 'guardians of the truth' of history, who had an eye for the moral and political lessons to be learned. If one looks at the debate among Dutch historians that Chris van der Heijden's monumental PhD thesis (*Dat nooit meer* [Never Again])¹ has unlocked then the polemics are reminiscent of the atmosphere engendered

by the German *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s.² In his earlier book *Grijs verleden* [Grey Past] (2001) Van der Heijden had already been reproached because his shading of the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in connection with the war was so great as to make the entire population into a grey accommodating multitude. ‘Does that not lead to an excuse for collaboration?’ opposed his critics. Had Van der Heijden not carried too far what Hans Blom in his famous oration of 1983 had advocated, namely to break through the ban on ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in writing the history of the war? Undoubtedly Van der Heijden frequently formulated his theses in a provocative manner, but his book unquestionably was an important and useful contribution to the discussion of the period of occupation.

It cannot be expected that his dissertation on the attitudes to the period of occupation after 1945 will have the same amount of influence. At first sight this might sound remarkable, because, as no other, Van der Heijden has gone into this material in depth, knows an impressive number of facts and figures and presents these in a fluent manner in 900 pages plus. The disappointment in the result comes in the first place from the unfortunate manner of research. In the introduction he explains that he will write primarily in narrative fashion about individual cases because this should be the best way to approach the complex reality of the situation. The idea behind this is that one cannot speak of one single public opinion or one single collective memory. Of course he is quite right in this and there is no objection at all to narrative history, but Van der Heijden’s approach leads to a chain of separate stories – about people, about affairs, about sub-themes – that in fact implies a lack of narrative, let alone analysis. Certainly, in his introduction to the various chapters and in the conclusion he pulls these story lines together, but large parts of the book make a fragmentary impression. Moreover the stories generally do not add anything new, often stop just at the point when the reader would really like to know more³, are sometimes irrelevant⁴, and in other places over-simplify the reality.⁵ Analogous to Van der Heijden’s own denuntiated description of the great public attention paid to heroes of the resistance in the important anniversary year 1995, ‘Verhaal na verhaal na verhaal’ [tale after tale after tale] (561), the reader of this weighty tome gets the impression that the author himself is dishing up tale after tale after tale, often with no connection and thereby without sufficiently binding analysis.

The introduction to the book is methodologically unfortunate as well: there is no account given of the state of research in the field or any explanation

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 See Van der Heijden’s blog: http://datnooitmeer.blogspot.de/p/reacties_01.html

3 E.g. on Westerbork, 596; renewed judicial procedures, 603.

4 E.g. on the kidnapping of Eichmann and the juridical basis of his trial, 337 ff.

5 E.g. on the attitudes to the Nazi past in Germany, 353 ff.

of his own research methods. There has already been a considerable amount written on the culture of memory to the period of occupation and in the course of his book Van der Heijden repeatedly enters into discussion with other authors, but he omits the good academic custom of at the beginning of his own dissertation to mention the work of his colleagues and to formulate his own research questions in line with the state of research. Moreover, it is irritating that in many places in the book he does not name the authors with whom he is in discussion, describing them as a ‘modern commentator’ (385), ‘a researcher’ (199) or ‘a younger historian’ (474). Van der Heijden’s response – that books in which that is correctly done and names consistently given he finds unreadable – is not a valid argument. This is the way scholarship works and it is time-consuming to have to keep paging through the notes to find out to whom he is referring. The author also breaches academic custom by failing to say anything about his sources and selection of material in the introduction, so his method remains vague. In brief, in the introduction we hear the voice of Van der Heijden the journalist, not the academic historian, and that is not a good start to a dissertation.

History as puff pastry

In his conclusion Van der Heijden describes changes in history with the metaphor ‘puff pastry’ (704 ff.): history is a layered process in which the new is heralded while the old has not yet vanished. That is an appropriate metaphor and indeed the periodisation of history is generally not a story of sudden breaks or rigid caesuras but, dependent on the theme, one of slow change and gradual shifts. It is no different with the periodisation of the aftermath of the Second World War. With Van der Heijden’s division of periods, which in general is found in other studies and articles on the subject, there is the basis of a good foothold for an analysis of the history of memories after 1945. Like those who have worked in the area before him, Van der Heijden distinguishes four phases – the years immediately after the war that he describes with the neologism *naoorlogs* (‘post-war’), the Fifties, the Sixties and Seventies, and the period since 1980. It is somewhat annoying that repeatedly he abandons his own periodisation. In his chapter on the 1950s, writing about the establishment of war monuments for example, he begins his story in the years immediately after the war, and with his tirade against Loe de Jong (see below) he again abandons his own periodisation. Moreover he sees a turning point in 1995 (646), but that date is not to be found in his own scheme. Finally it is a pity that at the end of each part he does not offer a coherent picture of all the stories, affairs and events that he has presented so that the characteristics of the period can be seen as a whole. The prospective passages in the introduction to each chapter cannot make good this lack.

Even though the periodisation in Van der Heijden's research, in itself, is well chosen, this is often not the case in the way he characterizes the periods distinguished. The early post-war period (in the contents listed as beginning in 1944, and above the chapter itself is given the date 1945), according to Van der Heijden, is characterised by disappointment, dissension, frustration, chaos and, not to forget, despondency – a long-lasting and repeated theme of 'universal despondency' (25, 71). Obviously there was disappointment after 1945 about the failure of political renewal, about the problems of economic recovery or the purge and the legal prosecutions. Certainly there was a housing shortage and coffee remained on ration, but Van der Heijden goes to extremes of exaggeration and draws a caricature when he sees that from the autumn of 1945 'the proud Dutch lion of the successful liberation' became the 'grumbling tom cat of a difficult recovery' (47).

Van der Heijden complements this sketch of the people's mood with an empathic story of the fate of political delinquents after 1945. He writes in detail of someone who as 'a victim of circumstances' had become a collaborator and after the war was punished for his actions, a punishment from which he never prospered. 'Thus a life was wasted', writes Van der Heijden, as if the man had suffered a great injustice (77 ff.). It is typical of Van der Heijden's method. Even though the purge and the judicial prosecutions were sometimes problematic and things took place that should not have happened, Van der Heijden's empathic tale of this single person delivers not only an unbalanced picture of the purge but also of the public feelings about that in those years. Much too far goes Van der Heijden in his consideration of Max Blokzijl, known chiefly during the occupation for his propaganda radio broadcasts on behalf of the occupying forces. He describes the post-war trial of Blokzijl as little more than a farce, and then goes on to treat seriously the diary that Blokzijl wrote in prison as an honest and reliable source. In his diary the Nazi propagandist Blokzijl, suddenly and clearly, distances himself from the German anti-Semitism, writing that he had no knowledge of the genocide taking place in the concentration camps. This last could be true, but it is not the most important point. What is important here is that Van der Heijden's arguments for taking Blokzijl's account seriously have little validity and that he has allowed himself to be led by the nose by Blokzijl. Even somebody who faces a death sentence does not write with total honesty to his wife, as the author claims: someone in that position is also concerned with the image of himself in the future. A critical evaluation of his sources is therefore not one of Van der Heijden's strongest points.

Kortenhorst as the hero

So Van der Heijden creates a biased image of the treating of the collaborators after the war, describing them generally as victims of unfair exceptional

judicial procedures. His description of how the resistance was seen after 1945 is no less biased. Of course ‘the’ resistance did not exist – one can read a great deal about the dissention and internal divisions in the work of De Jong, so maligned by Van der Heijden – and after the war there was disappointment and much disagreement among the former resistance, but that is no reason to repudiate it so thoroughly as he does. Once again Van der Heijden grossly exaggerates when he reduces the post-war image of the resistance to ‘heroic talks’ (229), calls the resistance against the Nazis, without any shade, a ‘mess’ (109) and generally greatly over-emphasises the post-war criticism of the resistance. In fact, according to the tone of Van der Heijden’s argument, during the war the whole population found itself in the same ‘grey’ situation. Typical of taking too far the grey view that comes of this is the very unfortunate order of the summary of the ‘groups deeply affected by the war [...]: resistance, forced labour, *collaborators* (my italics), Jews, political prisoners [...]’ (24). No less provocative is the ironic label ‘experts from experience’ that he gives to former concentration camp prisoners (Buchenwald, Dachau) who around 1960 took part in the discussion about the diary of Anne Frank. Former prisoners in the Japanese camps who later reported their experiences are also so described (614, 615).

By the selection and presentation of his sources Van der Heijden creates a grey and shattered picture of the gradually emerging mood of the 1950s after the jubilation of the time immediately after liberation had died away. Apart from the fact that his descriptions are simplified and biased, Van der Heijden goes much too far for another reason: the image of this grey past, as he had built it up in his previous book, becomes a criterion to judge the post-war attitudes to the occupation. People who, after 1945, were bearers of this grey image are described sympathetically, presumably because they are close Van der Heijden’s own narrative of the war. Others who had a different view are repeatedly and peremptorily dismissed. In this way – set against the ‘good-bad’ thinking about the period of occupation – the author creates a similar dichotomy, but then for the post-war period. Van der Heijden does not want to moralise about the behaviour of people during the occupation, but does so concerning the attitudes to that period in the years following 1945.

His hero then is the Catholic politician L.G. Kortenhorst, who during and after the war claimed that those who made the right choice were not those who let their emotions rule them and joined the resistance, but those who followed their common sense and adapted to the circumstances. According to the author it was this view on the occupation period that was dominant in the 1950s: ‘Generally speaking [...] those who had accommodated were increasingly seen as those who had guided the country safely through the war’ (225). Setting aside the question of whether the Netherlands had really come ‘safely’ through the war, the issue is whether this attitude regarding the occupation really was dominant in the 1950s. It is certainly true that Kortenhorst’s post-war political career – he was chairman of the Second

Chamber from 1948 to 1963 – would not have been possible if his views on the proper attitude during the occupation had aroused great antagonism. The relatively quiet acceptance of the former leader of the *Nederlandse Unie*, Jan de Quay, as premier (1959-1963), also fits this image: but once again Van der Heijden simplifies the factual situation and overlooks the central point of the collective memory of the 1950s.

In this connection Rob van Ginkel is much more qualified in his equally voluminous study on the history of war monuments after 1945. Like Van der Heijden Van Ginkel also brings up the dissension and the bickery among former members of the resistance about how the past was to be interpreted, what monuments should be like et cetera. Other than Van der Heijden (who dismisses this dissension as ‘ado’, writes derisively about the monuments set up (190) and describes the 1950s as the decade in which the image of the war shattered), Van Ginkel points to the dominant war narrative in the same period as one of repression and resistance.⁶ That really was the central element in the discourse at this time, as Frank van Vree has also made clear.⁷

It was this war narrative that was built on in the 1960s and it was this narrative which formed the basis for the successful television series *De Bezetting* [The Occupation] broadcast in 1960-1965. That was how people remembered the war, or how they wanted to remember it, and they did already so in the 1950s. That is a better explanation for the developments in the early Sixties and the success of *De Bezetting* than that of Van der Heijden, who chiefly emphasises the break with the Fifties and points to the need for an unambiguous war narrative after the shattered image the 1950s (375, 383). Again: Van der Heijden does not want to see that the war narrative of repression and resistance already dominated in the 1950s.

The 1960s was also the period in which younger generations made their mark on how the war was viewed. Rightly Van der Heijden points out the outspoken number of opinion-makers born between c. 1925 and 1935 who had experienced the war, but were too young to have played an active part. There was a group of generally left-wing journalists and writers who saw similarities between ‘then’ and ‘now’ and so called for vigilance in respect of the ‘establishment’ that had failed before in the war period. Those noises, still further simplified, could also be heard from the Provos and in the student movement and, among other things, led to inflationary use of the term fascism. This is certainly true, but Van der Heijden’s description of a left-wing

6 Rob van Ginkel, *Rondom de Stilte. Herdenkingscultuur in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2011) e.g. 726.

7 Frank van Vree, ‘De dynamiek van de herinnering. Nederland in een internationale context’, in: Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, *De*

dynamiek van de herinnering. Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context (Amsterdam 2009) 22 ff.; see also: Frank van Vree, *In de schaduw van Auschwitz. Herinneringen, beelden, geschiedenis* (Groningen 1995).



▲
Budget discussions in the Second Chamber,
conversation between chairman Dr. Kortenhorst
and member of parliament J.M. Stoffels-van Haaften
(VVD).

Photographer Harry Pot, Photo Collection Anefo.
National Archives of the Netherlands, The Hague.

inner circle that set the tone for how things had to be seen is biased. He rightly admits that the influence of this group cannot be proved (416), but the trend of his argument gives a different picture. Again, as so often in his dissertation, Van der Heijden simplifies and exaggerates. If one looks, for instance, at the Menten affair in the 1970s, it becomes clear that conservative media (TROS, journal *Accent*) played an important role in the debate on collective memory. The author himself also mentions this, but this does not lead to moderating his simple view on the ‘dominant’ left-wing intellectuals.

The crusade against De Jong

Van der Heijden has even fewer doubts about the successful steering of public opinion by Loe de Jong during the years in which this historian published his volumes of the series *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [The Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Second World War]. The professional presentation of De Jong’s books and his prompt answering of letters are presented as a form of ‘all-pals-together’ manipulation by which De Jong managed to win ‘everyone’ to his viewpoint. ‘Even school children received an answer, also when they asked impossible questions [...]’, writes Van der Heijden almost implying that De Jong was doing something offensive (498) and that even the young were not exempt from his manipulative communications strategy. Of course there was a media circus for the presentation of De Jong’s books, but Van der Heijden makes it into a caricature and implies that in the offices of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation a successful conspiracy took place, so that De Jong did not need to fear any criticism and his view of the war could spread like an oil slick.

Even more important than this over-simplification and occasional insinuations is the constituent aspect of a feud that Van der Heijden brings to the battle with De Jong and seems to have made his life’s work. No-one questions the fact that De Jong’s view of the period of occupation was greatly determined by a dualism of ‘good’ and ‘bad’, but De Jong did have an eye for the gradations between the two, as Hans Blom has rightly remarked in his review of Van der Heijdens *Grijs verleden*.⁸ Now in his dissertation Van der Heijden, page after page, tries to prove his point (471 ff.). Setting aside the fact that he fails to do so, the question arises whether this historiographical battle should be part of his dissertation. After all, public opinion and collective memory are central to his book. Detailed dissection of precisely how De Jong

8 J.C.H. Blom, ‘Grijs verleden?’, in: J.C.H. Blom, *In de ban van goed en fout. Geschiedschrijving over de bezettingstijd in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2007) 62; originally in: *BMGN* 116 (2001) 483 ff.

wrote on various themes without going into the social and public reactions is one of the unnecessary sidetracks of the book. And in this sidetrack it seems to be Van der Heijden's only concern to dismiss De Jong's work as black-and-white history, moralistic and out of date. That is a pity, particularly as the author has shown in his conclusion that he can write more moderately about De Jong. But Van der Heijden is not the man for nuances: he likes to be provocative and partly through this has missed the chance to produce a standard work on the aftermath of the occupation in the Netherlands.

The importance of international comparisons

Finally, there remains the question of what starting points the book gives for the international comparative research into the culture of memory that has since emerged.⁹ In a number of places Van der Heijden also goes into developments abroad and here and there indicates international trends, even when once again they too remain tales without analysis and coherence. For this reason Van der Heijden's dissertation is also disappointing in the field of international comparisons. That is a pity, because there are many possibilities for comparative research indeed. If, for example, one looks at the development of the culture of memory in the Netherlands and Germany, then it is noticeable, despite the very different starting points of the two countries in 1945, that there are great similarities in the phases of the public debate about the Second World War.¹⁰ It is also typical that in recent years both countries gave attention to the victims of the *Allies* war efforts – in the Netherlands more people died from allied bombing than from German – so that what is just about the last taboo in respect to the Second World War has been broken.¹¹ In both countries gradually a multiform culture of memory has come into being with comparable tendencies and developments. It is time to study further this multiplicity of forms and colour that transcends boundaries.

In the last decade Van der Heijden's concept of the grey past has undoubtedly fulfilled an important function in sharpening the discussion on the Second World War in the Netherlands. In the trench war about it that has since developed there is the danger of losing sight that black, white and grey

9 Cf. for a Dutch contribution to internationalisation: Van Vree and Van der Laarse, *De dynamiek van de herinnering*, 22 ff.

10 Cf. Friso Wielenga, 'Erinnerungskulturen im Vergleich. Deutsche und niederländische Rückblicke auf die NS-Zeit und den Zweiten Weltkrieg', *Jahrbuch Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien* 12 (2001) 11-30.

11 In this connection and for more recent aspects of the Dutch and German culture of memory see: Nicole Colin et al. (eds.), *Täter und Tabu. Grenzen der Toleranz in deutschen und niederländischen Geschichtsdebatten* (Essen 2011).

are not the right terms to describe the war and its aftermath. The appropriate concept is multicolouredness.¹² This is the term that should be central to an analysis of attitudes to the past, both national and in international comparison. Unfortunately, Van der Heijdens voluminous work doesn't contribute to such analyses. ◀

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12 Cf. Blom, *In de ban van goed en fout*, 66.