TERRORTIMES IN TRANSNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE 1

Between National and European Memory?
About Temporal and Spatial (Dis)Continuities in Post-1989 Dutch Memory Culture

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INTRODUCTION

“A delicate mission.”1 With these words the Dutch and German media described the invitation to German federal president Joachim Gauck to deliver a speech on Dutch liberation day, 5 May 2012. On this day, the Dutch people remembered and celebrated their liberation from German occupation in 1945. This was not only an exceptional event because the former victim invited the former perpetrator to commemorate the liberation together; it was also the very first time a foreign head of state was invited to give a speech on this national commemoration day. In his speech, the president referred to several episodes of Dutch occupation history, but he also addressed the present and future. This is especially evident in Gauck’s closing words:

Some 67 years ago, we would have described our current state of affairs as pure paradise: for three generations, Dutch and Germans have lived with shared values and have been working together in Europe and worldwide to promote these values. We can be proud that our countries have been part of this united Europe from the very beginning, and that we are considered honest and reliable partners in many regions.
of the world. We are jointly benefiting from the freedom, peace and prosperity that come with strengthened European and international cooperation. I hope this unique success will give us the strength we need to master our present-day challenges and to shape our common future in Europe.¹

The final part of the speech is completely dedicated to Europe. In fact, there is no statement in this passage that doesn’t contain a reference to Europe, and all of it has a positive connotation. A joint Dutch-German commemoration of the end of World War II on 5 May provided the perfect occasion for Gauck’s ode to Europe.

Such references to Europe on commemorations of World War II in the Netherlands are not new. They appeared with increasing frequency in the post-1989 period, often in relation to Dutch-German commemorations that became the topic of debate in the same period. The debate over whether, and how, to include the Germans in the celebration of Dutch national commemoration days represents an important turning point in Dutch memory culture. This discussion started in the mid-1990s and still remains an ongoing story; witness the mixed reactions to the invitation to Gauck. In this chapter I examine the use of Europe in the context of Dutch-German commemorations in the mid-1990s around 4 and 5 May, the national commemoration days of World War II in the Netherlands. In addition to liberation day on 5 May, the Dutch commemorate their war victims on 4 May.

To understand the background of the mid-1990s debate, I first give a brief overview of the European national memory discourse since 1945 to which the actors in the debate reacted. Subsequently I describe the immediate cause of the debate in 1994 that was triggered by international developments. Then I scrutinize the political-cultural context of the debate as well as the different points of view represented in it. Finally, I return to the question of the meaning of Europe in this debate. As we will see, Europe is often referred to as being opposed to national memory. Some of the major actors propose that Europe should supplant the nation as the central reference of commemorations. This debate has still not ended. As I argue here, it may be more fruitful to strive for a synthesis between European and national memory.

EUROPEAN NATIONAL MEMORIES AFTER 1945

After the liberation by Allied forces in May 1945, the Netherlands found itself in dire straits. The nation had suffered more from World War II than other Western European country; in particular, it experienced severe damage, economic and social chaos, and above all large numbers of casualties. This was all remembered in terms of national
terroritimes and *national* terrorscapes, leaving little space for the international aspects of World War II. National suffering played an important role in the narrative about the war alongside another essential national element: resistance. The foundation myth of postwar Dutch society was rooted in the resistance. In this myth, *resistance* was characterized as the distinguishing attitude or mentality of the entire population: the Dutch people as a nation stood up against the Germans. In public memory, the war became the paragon of national unity. Many Dutch people identified with this image of World War II as a period of “oppression and resistance.” It supported both the postwar reconstruction and the morale of the population; one could be proud of the past. This national myth compensated for the humiliating and shocking experience that actually characterized the war. Such national war narratives, which distorted history in order to forget or support the foundation myth of postwar society, were widespread in postwar Europe. “Every occupied country in Europe developed its own ‘Vichy syndrome,’” as Tony Judt has described it, referring to the French memory discourse.

In the immediate postwar period, the Dutch national memory discourse was very exclusive. Mainly (Allied) soldiers and resistance fighters were collectively remembered. Other victims, such as Jews, Roma, Sinti, and other civilian casualties, had no place in the public commemorations. Again, this was not particular to the Netherlands, for at the time many European countries centered cultural memory of World War II on *active* victims, persons who had died because of their (heroic) actions. Their death was not in vain; they had made a sacrifice for the community. By contrast, this logic would imply that *passive* victims had not died through something they had *done* but because of who they *were.* Their death was useless to the postwar community. As Judt put it: “Whereas liberation, resistance and deportees […] could all be put to some service in compensatory national myth-making, there was nothing ‘usable’ about the Holocaust.”

This memory discourse of national terroritimes and national terrorscapes was already showing cracks before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. The tide turned from the 1960s onward as the Holocaust began to take a central place in the public memory of the war. It became widely known that an incredibly high number of Dutch Jews were murdered during the war, though mainly not in the Netherlands but elsewhere in Europe. There was an increasing interest in and acknowledgment of the suffering of the Jews in Dutch society. The representation of World War II changed from the heroic and nationalistic notion of “oppression and resistance” to an image of senseless suffering—the persecution and the camps—and individual harm. Within this memory discourse, the private memories of survivors and other first-generation victims and their feelings earned significant status. These changes since the 1960s were naturally linked to the social and cultural upheaval of that time.

In spite of these major shifts in the representation of the war, Dutch historian J. C. H. Blom pointed to the fact that the basic consensus on the meaning of the war
was unchanged. The memory of the war remained a “moral touchstone” in Dutch society, “the basis of a clear distinction between moral and immoral, good and bad [goed en fout].” These “judicial-moral terms,” used to describe the Dutch behavior in World War II between resistance (goed) and collaboration (fout), were an important political-moral framework to interpret the war, both by historians and the wider public. In his inaugural lecture “Under the Spell of Good and Bad?,” delivered in 1983, Blom denounced this political-moral historiography of World War II. He incited historians to struggle out of this “goed-fout perspective” and come up with new perspectives on the war that contained fewer value judgments. Dutch behavior in the war could not be categorized as either goed or fout, according to Blom. His plea was heard by historians, but not as quickly by the wider public. In fact, in his farewell speech before retirement in 2007, Blom stated that public opinion was still under the spell of goed and fout.

This does not mean that goed and fout were not discussed in public before. In the mid-1990s the supposedly black-and-white perspective on the war was openly criticized and used to plead for a more European perspective. In general, there was a widespread call at that time for a more critical view of the Dutch war past, in which Europe played an important role. This call was a reaction to the national memory discourse described previously.

COMMEMORATING WITH GERMANS?

The invitation to the German federal president to come to the Netherlands in 2012 must be seen through the longitudinal lens of the debate about the question of whether Dutchmen and Germans should commemorate together on the Dutch remembrance days, 4 and 5 May. To understand why this debate is so crucial for Dutch memory culture and why Europe plays such an important role in it, we have to look at its origins. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, European integration gained momentum, and the memory boom of World War II came to a tentative head with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war. The link between both developments is clearly visible in the Dutch debate of the mid-1990s.

The start of this debate in 1994 was triggered by developments elsewhere in Europe. In the run-up to the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Europe, governments, municipalities, and civil society were in full preparation for what would become a true commemoration marathon. The kickoff was the fifty-year anniversary of D-Day on 6 June 1994. In Germany and France a fierce discussion had ensued months before about the question of whether German chancellor Helmut Kohl should get an invitation for this commemoration. To his disappointment, Kohl was not welcome at the D-Day commemoration, where twenty-five heads of states celebrated the invasion in Normandy.
As a reaction to these international debates, which drew widespread attention in Dutch media, a similar debate started in early 1994 in the Netherlands about whether German representatives should be invited to the commemorations on 4 and 5 May. The debate was initially started by remarks by the Dutch ambassador to Germany, Peter van Walsum. On several occasions he had pleaded for a less nationalistic approach to celebrating liberation day in the Netherlands, because this event had, in his view, a more European meaning. This plea was supported by historical arguments. Van Walsum was an advocate of the perspective that World War II was not a conflict between nation-states but rather a fight between democracy on the one hand and Nazism and fascism on the other—that is, a struggle of ideologies. In line with the argument in German federal president Richard von Weizsäcker’s famous speech in 1985, to which Van Walsum referred, the ambassador saw the end of World War II not as a defeat of Germany but as a worldwide liberation from Nazism, in which Germany was included.

According to Van Walsum, this view also implied a correction of the Dutch nationalistic image of the war, in which all Germans were wrong and all Dutch were good. Along these lines, he thought that the Dutch should stop commemorating the war in nationalistic terms; it was about time to celebrate together with the Germans. The commemorative collaboration would do justice to this perspective.

We should keep in mind that this was a plea made by the Dutch ambassador to Germany, who saw himself as “the guardian of Dutch-German relations.” These relations had been under stress in the early 1990s for several reasons. First there was German irritation about the publicly expressed Dutch doubts with regard to the reunification of the two Germanies in 1990. With other European heads of government, Dutch prime minister Ruud Lubbers was skeptical about German reunification, fearing renewed German nationalism and expansionism. More European cooperation proved the answer to this fear. The strengthened European integration process of the 1990s was not so much the result of renewed friendships in Europe but of the memory of European terrortimes.

Second, in 1993 the outcome of a survey showed that Dutch adolescents had an extremely negative image of Germany. But above all there were frictions about the 1.2 million Dutch postcards with the presumptuous text “I am furious” that were sent to Kohl after the antiforeigner violence in Solingen in 1993, where five people were killed in a fire—as if the Germans themselves had not been outraged. Therefore, the ambassador may have had a hidden agenda for the improvement of Dutch-German relations behind this public plea for commemorative collaboration. In March 1994, his words were picked up by Dutch media and caused a huge public debate. In this controversy, the concept of Europe assumed a central position in the various arguments.
DIVIDED PASTS, COMMON FUTURE

Within the debate concerning the joint commemoration with Germans an important topic became this question: What should be remembered? Temporal and spatial dimensions were important here. Proponents of a joint commemoration focused on the postwar period. They found it important to concentrate not only on the terrortimes of World War II but also on the postwar successes. In these proponents’ view, a common Dutch-German commemoration could reflect and underline postwar reconciliation and cooperation between the Netherlands and Germany: in Europe. From former enemies the Germans had turned into allies in a united Europe, wherein both countries supported the same values, like freedom and democracy. Europe was an important spatial frame of reference in this line of argument that enabled a joint commemoration. The success of a united Europe was what bound the Germans and Dutch together.

In the Dutch newspapers, several examples emerged that contributed to this way of thinking. The Anne Frank foundation wrote: “In the present Europe, in which there is talk of fraternization, we should involve them [the Germans] in one way or another in the liberation.”17 Others stressed that there could be no real Dutch-German reconciliation as long as the Dutch kept excluding the former enemies from their commemorations.18 One newspaper editorial presented Germany as a guarantee for European stability, arguing that “this Germany deserves a place at the commemoration of the end of the period of the Third Reich. […] Fifty years later, the commemoration is the pre-eminent moment for reconciliation and affirmation of the normalized relations [in Europe].”19

A collective commemoration is thus explained as a reward for Germany’s achievements in Europe. The European spatial frame of reference adds weight to these arguments: Germany was important not only for the Netherlands but for Europe in general. Some even reversed the debate by arguing that it would be inappropriate behavior toward the fully European-integrated and democratic Germany to not invite it to the commemoration.20

Many dissenting opinions were also represented in the newspapers. The most frequently stated argument against Dutch-German commemorations was that of respect for the victims of World War II. They were not ready to commemorate together with their former perpetrators, it was said; this would hurt their feelings.21 One commentator wrote: “It befits the Dutch government […] to spare the feelings of resisters and victims on this Day [5 May].”22 This perspective nicely demonstrates the “psychological” narrative of the war that was still dominant in the mid-1990s.23 In public memory, the suffering of the victims still retained a central place, and the victims themselves held a high social status. Therefore, according to many opponents of the joint commemorations, people should respect their wishes if they did not want Germans present. Indeed, in the weeks of discussion in September and October 1994,
groups of former resistance fighters and Jewish organizations, among others, had expressed precisely this wish. As far as Europe was concerned, the opponents rejected the spatial reference to Europe as a common frame, proposing instead to stay focused on the national space. They stressed that they had nothing against European cooperation and reconciliation, and they acknowledged the achievements of Germany in this respect, but national commemoration days of World War II were in their view not the occasion to be utilized for this cause. Some extended this argument by casting doubt on the intentions of the supporters for Dutch-German commemorations. What was striking in the whole debate was that the advocates were mainly politicians and intellectuals; the opponents, by contrast, were mainly members of resistance and victims’ organizations or other members of the “first generation.” In several readers’ letters to newspaper editors this distinction was observed. According to the readers, the collective commemoration was a top-down initiative, imposed on the Dutch public by politicians. The general message of these letters was clear: don’t use “our” national commemorations for political purposes.

An opinion poll at that time showed that a small majority in the Netherlands had nothing against the involvement of Germans in the national liberation day. The poll result also revealed that mainly older people opposed the joint commemorations. Nevertheless, the psychological narrative of the war caused the solidarity of the majority with the minority.

In the end, it was the Dutch government that would decide if a German representative was invited or not for a national commemoration. Initially, Dutch prime minister Willem Kok cautiously supported the idea of a common Dutch-German commemoration. After several talks with groups involved, such as the Jewish community and organizations of former resistance fighters, however, he had come to the conclusion that the Dutch commemoration days should remain a national affair. One can conclude that the government had had to surrender to the dominant psychological perspective on the war. Too much resistance among the first generation had arisen against the proposal to commemorate together with Germans.

**BETWEEN NATIONAL AND EUROPEAN MEMORY?**

I return here to the meaning of Europe in this debate. What narratives of World War II are articulated by referring to “Europe”? A closer look at the reference to Europe shows that European memory was used as opposed to national memory. This spatial dichotomy was important; it was however not fruitful in bringing closer a European memory discourse.
Most advocates of a joint commemoration contested, in their view, the hegemonic nationalistic memory discourse of that time. The Dutch ambassador to Germany, for example, who had started the debate, supported his plea for a Dutch-German commemoration with historical arguments, namely a different perspective on how people should view World War II. According to Van Waalsum, a correction of the nationalistic image of the war in which all Germans were wrong and all Dutch were good was needed. In his view, the war was not a struggle between nation-states but between ideologies. The ambassador was not alone in his call for a more self-critical perspective on the past.

Next to historians and other intellectuals, in 1994–95 it was the Dutch government itself that repeatedly advocated cutting across the perspective of goed and fout, black and white. This clear memory politics was visible on several occasions, for example, in the speech given by Queen Beatrix during her state visit to Israel in March 1995. In front of the Knesset she spoke about “courageous and sometimes successful resistance.” “But,” she continued, “we also know that they were the exceptional ones, that the people of the Netherlands could not prevent the destruction of their Jewish fellow citizens.” These were the exact phrases that were picked up and spread by the media.

Two months later, on the national liberation day, the queen expressed words of similar meaning. In her speech on 5 May Beatrix said: “How weak the heart can be in such distress [World War II], may not be forgotten. After half a century, the recollections of these days are sometimes colored too black-and-white. To allow an honest representation it shouldn’t be concealed that besides courageous behavior, passive conduct and active support to the occupiers have occurred.”

In April 1995, prime minister Kok also addressed the black-and-white stereotypes, in an interview with the German newspaper Die Zeit: “We need to look with open eyes to our own role [in the past]. The longer we have moved away from the events back then, the bigger the danger of black-and-white perspectives—we were the good guys, the others the bad guys. In this context one forgets that at that time, many Dutchmen also did not meet their human commitments and that innumerable Germans, like the Dutch, have also suffered from the Nazis.” These remarks make clear that, following the historians in the 1980s, the Dutch government in the 1990s pleaded for revisiting the past in a more self-critical way. The cozy image of a nation in which a large part of the population had been goed during the war and only a handful Dutchmen had been fout was publicly challenged. Instead, a narrative of shame and guilt was brought forward. A common insight in historiography for years was now presented in public debate as breaking a taboo.

In the debate about commemorating together with Germans, many advocates of a joint commemoration referred to the supposedly distorted national image of the war in public memory. With the same structure of arguments as the challenging of the goed
versus *fout* perspective, they questioned the dichotomy of the evil and guilty Germans and the good and innocent Dutchmen. According to proponents, the Dutch had cherished their role as victims too long, ignoring that there were among them also perpetrators, just as there were also victims among the Germans. This new narrative of the war proposed by the supporters of a Dutch-German commemoration was presented as a *correction* of the national (resistance) myth; their view would be a more nuanced and even “honest representation” of the past. Not surprisingly, a joint commemoration was, according to its advocates, the perfect occasion to express this image of World War II.

However, the supposedly more nuanced representation of the war in the debate has mythical elements as well. This becomes clear when looking at the role of Europe in the debate. “Europe” was only used with positive connotations. It was the concept that embodied postwar peace, freedom, democracy, reconciliation, and cooperation. The new narrative of the war included a foundation myth: “On the ruins of World War II the *European Union* has appeared,” ignoring the fact that there were several decades between these events.

Apart from stressing postwar European successes, proponents of a joint commemoration also underlined the common European present and future of Germany and the Netherlands. In the mid-1990s, the concept of an integrated Europe was presented as a *reality* that couldn’t be ignored by cleaving to the tradition of national commemorations. In this way, (united) Europe served as a spatial frame of reference that enabled a Dutch-German commemoration of World War II. Such a commemoration would reflect all positive stories about Europe—reconciliation between former enemies who are now working together on their future—without completely losing sight of World War II. In this narrative, the European terrorscape during the war was the ultimate negative contrast to the present peaceful and united Europe.

This use of Europe was clearly a product of its time. After 1989 European integration gained momentum, partly and literally, on Dutch soil with the treaty of Maastricht in 1992. The Netherlands considered itself part of the vanguard of postwar European integration. In this context, proponents of a joint commemoration had every reason to present the war as the birthplace of European integration. This supported the self-image of a *European* nation and gave a positive connotation to the commemorated past, just as the resistance had done in the immediate postwar period.

Nevertheless, this use of Europe was also part of the *correction* of a national myth and its replacement with a *more nuanced* image of the past, as presented in the debate in the mid-1990s. My aim here is not to criticize these actors in the debate—it is inescapable for societies to produce myths to account for their collective past—but rather to reveal the constructed character of Europe and the interests of the people it served. But it is problematic when such a dominant European memory discourse comes to replace rather than supplement a national memory discourse, as it did in the arguments of
some of these actors, leaving little room for nuance and ambivalence. Yet in the Dutch case, the European perspective did not replace national narratives of World War II. The basic consensus on the meaning of the war went unchanged, as Dutch historian Blom observed in 2007. World War II memory remains a “moral touchstone” in Dutch society, and even now this memory is mainly understood in national terms.35

Overall, then, the legacy of the debate in the mid-1990s can be seen as a correction of a national myth and its replacement with a more nuanced image of the past, opening up the geographic imagination referred to during “national” commemoration. “Europe” received a more important place in the Dutch memory discourse of World War II from 1989 onward, as was clearly visible in the debate about commemorating with Germans. Europe can allow for common themes—reconciliation, peace, freedom—but we must not forget that the memory underneath is still often understood in national terms. It is useful not to see a national and European perspective in memory culture as mutually exclusive. Both perspectives can coexist. The Netherlands and many other European countries are still in the process of overcoming the dichotomy of national and European memory. But maybe it would serve us well to remember that our nations are part of Europe, not its antithesis.

NOTES

14. Wagenaar, “Per ongeluk reed ik een heilige koe aan.”
15. Wagenaar, “Per ongeluk reed ik een heilige koe aan.”
34. Blom. “Nog altijd in de ban.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


