

Regimes of Memory: the Case of the Netherlands

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The Netherlands is not known for its opposing regimes of memory. There are two exceptions to this rule: the history of the German Occupation during the Second World War and the Dutch participation in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery. The relatively low numbers of survivors of the Holocaust in the Netherlands, as well as the volume and the profitability of the Dutch slave trade and slavery, and the importance of slave resistance in abolishing slavery in the Dutch Caribbean have produced conflicting views, especially between professional historians and the descendants of slaves living in the Netherlands.

Introduction

The modern history of Switzerland has sometimes been described as uneventful. Since the Napoleonic period, the Swiss have not participated in wars, have not been affected by civil strife, and have not suffered invasions or occupations. This stimulated Orson Welles in the film *The Third Man* to go beyond his script – written by Graham Greene – when talking about the ravages of war and exclaim;

You know what the fellow said – in Italy, for thirty years under the Borgias, they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland, they had brotherly love, they had five hundred years of democracy and peace – and what did that produce? The cuckoo clock.¹

If that is so, the Netherlands must be placed high on the list of boring countries. However, there are a few differences between the Netherlands and Switzerland. First, the struggle for independence from Habsburg Spain between 1568 and 1648 was successful, but resulted in a religiously deeply divided country with a Protestant majority and a large Roman-Catholic minority. That minority was not only concentrated in a number of specific regions as in Switzerland, but also present in the cities with a protestant majority.

Second, the French occupied the Netherlands during the period 1795–1813 and the Germans between May 1940 and May 1945. The historiography regarding these two periods differs widely. As far as the French occupation is concerned, the many innovations legislated by the new elite, and in spite of their collaboration with the

French, are generally seen as a breath of fresh air, necessary to rid the country of some particularistic institutions inhibiting progress, not as treason. In fact, the new monarchy that came into being after the French had left did not eliminate the collaborators, but rather incorporated them into the new administration in order to profit from their modern administrative skills. Historiography followed suit and saw the new elite that came to power in 1795 as the harbinger of liberalism.²

The difference between the French and German occupations – in popular opinion as well as in historiography – could not have been greater. Without exception, the collaborators during the German occupation were and are still viewed as traitors and the Dutch government in exile in London at the time announced that after the defeat of Germany there would be no place for them in Dutch society. That was easier said than done and the legal process aimed at punishing those who had been a member of the Dutch national socialist party, had served in the German army, or had collaborated in another way, showed many shortcomings. Of the retroactively instituted death penalty meted out to 151 persons, only 39 resulted in executions as after a lapse of time most death sentences were commuted into sentences of life-imprisonment and usually even these were shortened to a limited number of years. Only two prison inmates, originally sentenced to death, served a prison term of 44 years each.

Historiography followed suit. During the first decades after the Occupation, most Dutch historians writing about this period continued to use the division between ‘good’ and ‘wrong’ Dutchmen that had come into existence during the Occupation. Only recently has a growing number of publications stressed the fact that most of the population in the occupied country should not be split into these two categories, as the silent majority had a strong urge to survive the turmoil and did not actively choose between collaboration and resistance.³

Last, but not least, the Dutch, like the Swiss, realized that their country belonged to the smaller nations of Europe. However, unlike the Swiss, the Dutch were very much aware of the fact that they owned an immense colonial empire in Asia (the Dutch East Indies) and in the Caribbean (Suriname and the Dutch Antilles) and that this empire made them the fifth largest colonial power in the world. The conquest and loss of the colonies has created a controversial historiography with unexpected nuances.

In Europe, however, the Netherlands experienced no civil war, no lengthy occupations, or internal ethnic strife. The two large religious groups in the Netherlands, the Protestants and the Roman-Catholics did not use violence, as in France and Northern Ireland. The same applies to the groups speaking different languages. Officially, the Dutch recognize two languages within their borders, Dutch and Frisian, but unlike Belgium or Spain, these two languages do not produce any conflicts, as the number of Frisian speakers is minute and all are able to speak and read Dutch. On the other hand, the Dutch never took any interest in the Flemish struggle to use Dutch as an official language in Belgium. After the Belgian secession in 1830, the southern neighbours were forgotten, with the exception of the First World War, when more than a million Belgian refugees, the majority from Flanders, took refuge in the Netherlands. Their stay, however, left no trace in public memory.

As far as international politics are concerned, the neutral Netherlands again had a peaceful history, with the exception of the period 1940–1945. During those years, the

Dutch national-socialists and their fellow travellers protected by the German occupation authorities did create their own regime of memory, but failed to impress popular public opinion, let alone the professional historians at the time.⁴

The national-socialists stressed the heroic achievements of their ancestors during the war of independence against Spain (1568–1648), highlighting the strong links with Germany and trying to belittle any foreign and – after the German invasion – any Jewish influence on Dutch culture. In their interpretation, the history of the northern and southern Netherlands clearly showed that in future the North should reunite with the Dutch speaking parts of Belgium. That would enable the ‘greater Netherlands’ to become a strong ally of Germany and part of a league of national-socialist Germanic nations. The majority of the Dutch national-socialists were not in favour of the complete incorporation of their country into a greater German Reich once Hitler had won the war.

Overseas, the Dutch colonial expansion was seen as a civilizing mission of the superior Dutch-Germanic culture, benefiting the inferior Asians in the East and the ex-African populations in the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. The Dutch national-socialists deplored the fact that, temporarily, the Dutch government in exile had agreed to surrender their sovereignty of the Dutch Antilles to the English and of Suriname to the Americans in order to safeguard the oil refineries and bauxite mines in these colonies, as they were essential for the allied war effort. No doubt Anton Mussert, the leader of the Dutch national-socialist party, viewed the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies in the same negative light. In one blow, the Japanese had undone any effect the Dutch civilizing mission might have had during the past three centuries. Officially, however, the Dutch national-socialists kept quiet about the Japanese, as Japan was an ally of Germany.⁵ After the end of the Second World War, the elite of the Dutch national-socialist movement and their collaborators were put to trial and their regime of memory – if it could be called that – was quickly forgotten.

That the history of the Netherlands has not led to two opposing regimes of memory is demonstrated by the attempts to create a Dutch National History Museum. There certainly existed different views among the experts asked to give advice, but these were the result of the usual variations in the scholarly interpretation of the past. That the project came to naught was the result of a sudden cut in the government budget for culture. Before the economic crisis hit the Netherlands, several cities competed to house the new museum. The city of Arnhem won, but when it appeared that the construction of a parking lot for the Museum alone would cost more than €40 million the project was shelved.

Are there really no ‘regimes of memory’ in the Netherlands? Yes, there are, but these regimes were, are and will be the consequence of the normal changes over time that are part and parcel of the general pattern of change triggered by nationalism, conservatism, liberalism, and the like. Even the immigration of ‘guest workers’ (migrant labourers) and their families from Turkey and Morocco during the 1960s did not produce a separate regime of memory in spite of the fact that this immigration produced a new, populist anti-immigration party that gained about 10 to 15% of the votes during the last elections. Yet, it is possible to identify two sensitive areas in Dutch history that are prone to discussion if not to opposing views: the German Occupation between 1940 and 1945 and the history of Dutch colonialism.

The German Occupation of the Netherlands, 1940-1945

As far as the Occupation is concerned, it took some time before different regimes of memory came into existence. Right after the Second World War, the popular and scholarly views on the history of the Occupation did not deviate from one another. As has been mentioned already, the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (or ‘wrong’) Dutch continued to dominate the historiography. Yet there was one important institutional innovation. Immediately after the end of the Second World War, the government provided the funds for a national War Documentation Centre in order to collect archival materials and books regarding the Dutch wartime experience, in addition the Centre should undertake and publish studies regarding collaboration and resistance. The Dutch War Documentation Centre has been instrumental in raising the historiography of the Occupation to an academic level.

A case in point is the historiography regarding the deportation and the subsequent murder outside the Netherlands of those persons labelled as Jews by the national socialist occupation regime. For a long time, the Dutch saw themselves as powerless bystanders, who did not actively support the expulsion of the Jews, but, instead, did everything possible to obstruct the German deportations. Virtually every Dutch attic seemed to have been a secret hiding place for Jews and resistance fighters.

Slowly, however, this favourable image of a small, courageous, but helpless country began to crumble. Research showed that the percentage of deported Jews in the Netherlands was the highest among all of the occupied countries, while the percentage of those who survived the war turned out to be the lowest. That seems to constitute ‘a Dutch paradox’, as before the war anti-Semitism was not common in the Netherlands. During the pre-war years, the Protestants and Roman-Catholics had developed a high degree of tolerance towards their mutual religious differences in order to avoid civil strife by creating separate schools, hospitals, broadcasting corporations, newspapers, and societies in virtually all branches of civil life. That had allowed the relatively small Jewish community to profit from the institutionalized tolerance between the two larger religious groups.

Over time, the ‘Dutch paradox’ became the subject of various historical hypotheses. Was it possible to blame the effectiveness of the expulsion process on the almost flawless population records in the Netherlands, which not only contained the names and addresses but also the religious affiliation of the registered? The authorities only had to use these records in order to catch most of those they had labelled as Jews. Another explanation could be the fact that most Dutch Jews were transported to Sobibor rather than to Auschwitz, as the trains to the latter camp were irregular and that would not have allowed the German authorities to deport so many of their victims so quickly, pre-empting possible resistance.

Yet another explanation for the effectiveness of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands could be the fact that the Germans were not alone in rounding up the Jews, but that a number of Dutch police assisted. Some police officers refused, however, without – as it turned out – danger to their lives or careers. In addition, the archives reveal that a small number of Dutch acted as ‘Jew hunters’ in order to avail themselves of the various financial rewards promised by the German authorities for denouncing Jews that had gone into hiding.

Yet, the idea that most of the Dutch were tacitly sympathetic to the anti-Jewish policies, if not active collaborators, seems as exaggerated as the interpretation that most Dutch tried to help and hide Jews. Only the German occupiers could have initiated the expulsion of the Jews. In some cases the Dutch authorities were able to sabotage the deportation, in some cases they remained neutral, and in some cases they actively collaborated for various reasons and because the German authorities were more strict in one place than in another. A minority of the Dutch helped the Jews to go into hiding despite the draconian punishments, a smaller number of Dutchmen actively supported and participated in the anti-Jewish actions, while the large majority of the population, who might have been opposed to the deportations, did nothing. It took many decades to arrive at this conclusion and to institute a 'grey' area in the history of the Occupation outside the traditional pattern of 'good' and 'wrong'.⁶

Over time, professional historians have increased the 'grey' area. They calculated that the number of resistance fighters had been somewhat smaller than the number of collaborators, and that more than 90% of the Dutch population tried to survive without taking sides. That the average Dutchman at the time seemed so lethargic in opposing the anti-Jewish policy of the Germans was in part because the Dutch did not know what happened to the deportees after they had left the Netherlands. A study, published in 2012, shows that most Dutch were unaware of the existence of the extermination camps in Eastern Europe. Most seemed to believe that the deported Jews had to perform heavy physical labour in camps where they would have to face extremely difficult conditions and where the mortality among the very young and the very old would probably be high. The Dutch public, whether collaborating, resisting or simply trying to survive could not imagine that the majority of the deported Jews were gassed in an almost industrial process immediately upon arrival.⁷ Yet, not everyone in the Netherlands accepts this conclusion, and these people keep to their opinion that 'some must have known'.

That leaves us with two regimes of memory existing next to one another: that of a small, brave nation, willing to resist, but hampered by the fact that it did not have the arms or the knowledge to do so. Others see the Dutch as a guilty nation that 'did not do enough' in order to protect its Jewish citizens.

The Dutch Overseas Expansion, Colonialism, and Decolonization, 1600–1949: Asia

In the early history of the Dutch expansion overseas, there are remarkably few disputed issues. Before the Second World War, right-wing historians were not prone to discuss the acts of violence committed by the Dutch in establishing their global trading empire, while the opposite was true for those on the left. After the war, the historiography became more critical in general, in line with the new anti-colonial attitude of the time.

There has been some historiographical debate about the Dutch role in the nineteenth-century scramble for colonies. Were the Dutch imperialists like the British, French, Germans, and Italians? By looking at the map of the colonial world, the answer should be negative, as the Dutch did not conquer any new territories outside the borders of their earlier empire. Had every colonial power done the same, neither the scramble for Africa,

nor the nineteenth-century conquests in Asia and in the Pacific would have taken place. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Dutch used the same expansionist terminology as other nations when discussing their colonial policies.⁸ Yet, the Dutch abhorred the word ‘imperialism’.

A case in point was the British war against the independent Boer republics in South Africa (1880–1902), considered as an act of blatant imperialism by the Dutch. There existed a great deal of sympathy for the *Afrikaners* among the Dutch population, as they saw the *Afrikaners* as their distant cousins. Their language, Afrikaans, was seen as a branch of Dutch, just like Flemish, and the various protestant churches in South Africa had strong links with their sister churches in the Netherlands. In order to show their solidarity with the Boers, every Dutch city of any size named its new streets after the Boer leaders. Around 1900 anti-British feelings ran high and this explains the remarkably high number of people in the neutral Netherlands during the First World War who seem to have favoured the axis countries rather than the allies. During the Second World War, however, attempts by the Dutch national socialists to revive these anti-imperialist and anti-British feelings were not successful.

There should be no doubt that the Dutch – like virtually everyone else in Europe at the time – viewed colonialism as a self-imposed task of spreading Western values and – to a lesser extent – Christianity. These elements of progress would allow their colonial subjects to achieve self-government and eventually perhaps even full independence. In this, the Dutch did not differ from other European countries, whether they had a colonial empire or not. Before the Second World War, only the social democrats and communists criticized some aspects of Dutch colonialism, especially the violence used to ‘pacify’ parts of the empire, and also the exploitation of the population and the natural resources, as these benefited capitalist firms.

Some of this criticism abated during the interwar years, and after the allied liberation of the Dutch East Indies from the Japanese even the Dutch social democrats supported the effort to prevent Indonesia from becoming independent. Between 1945 and 1949, the Dutch waged a colonial war, euphemistically referred to as ‘police actions’, in order to restore their colonial rule. In the beginning, the Dutch were quite successful as their colonial and expeditionary forces were far superior to those of the Indonesian Nationalists, but the war was lost on the diplomatic front. A large majority of member states of the newly founded United Nations as well as the government of the United States supported the Indonesian Nationalists in an attempt to stop the advance of Communism in Asia. The threat that Washington would cut Marshall Aid to the Netherlands finally forced the Dutch government to accept the transfer of power to the Nationalists. In 1949, the Dutch East Indies became Indonesia, except for the Dutch part of New Guinea.

The Dutch felt that New Guinea was so different from the other islands in the Indonesian archipelago, and its population, the Papuans, so backward, that it should remain in Dutch hands much longer. Indonesia might have obtained independence, but it was poor and had little to offer New Guinea, while the Dutch were able to pour money into their last colony in Asia. In due time, so it was thought in The Hague, the Dutch and Australian parts of New Guinea should unite and become an independent country.

The Indonesian government, on the other hand, felt that it was the legal successor of the colonial government of the Dutch East Indies and that it should rule all parts of the former Dutch empire in Asia. Again, a war between Indonesia and the Netherlands seemed imminent. Once more, the United Nations mediated, and once more the Dutch gave in to the diplomatic pressure from the US. In 1963, the Dutch transferred their part of New Guinea to Indonesia via an intermediate period of UN rule. The agreement stipulated that five years after the transfer a plebiscite was to be organized, but that turned into a farce. In 1968, the Indonesians only asked for the opinion of those village heads that they had put in place themselves.⁹

In sum, the decolonization of Indonesia and New Guinea had turned into a disaster for the Dutch. None of their plans, such as a gradual transfer of power, the creation of a federal state of Indonesia, or the continuation of Dutch rule over New Guinea, had been realized. By fighting the Indonesians, the Dutch had lost important international prestige. Dutch firms in Indonesia had been nationalized without much compensation to the investors. In retrospect, it seems odd that between 1945 and 1949, the Dutch government had sent tens of thousands of drafted soldiers to the Dutch East Indies knowing that this would slow down the badly needed reconstruction of those parts of the Netherlands that had suffered from the war. The military campaign in Indonesia was extremely costly, and virtually all branches of the Dutch economy at home could have made good use of the foreign currency spent on supplies for the expeditionary army. In addition, it would be only a question of time before the soldiers, after their return home, would start talking about the atrocities inherent in warfare, that they had observed or committed themselves. In the early 1970s, some of these horror stories came into the open. Until then, the Dutch public stubbornly believed that their own soldiers could not ever commit war crimes. That was something for foreigners, especially Germans.

The loss of the Dutch East Indies resulted in a regime of silence, with professional historians and also with the public at large. During the 1950s and 1960s the nearly four centuries of Dutch rule in Asia seemed to have disappeared down a black hole. The 300,000 migrants from Indonesia (mainly composed of groups of mixed descent and of the Chinese minority) integrated extremely smoothly into Dutch society. Many had been involved in the colonial administration, deplored the end of the Dutch regime, and had refused to become Indonesian citizens, and upon arrival in the Netherlands found good jobs mainly in the rapidly expanding administration. These immigrants were not prone to criticize Dutch colonialism. For similar reasons, the professional soldiers of the former colonial army – unlike the drafted soldiers from the Netherlands – who had fought against the Nationalists, did not constitute the breeding ground for an alternative regime of memory.¹⁰

Special mention should be made of a group of 4000 professional soldiers from the Moluccas that served in the Dutch colonial army. They refused to transfer to the new Indonesian army, their former enemy. That refusal turned into a time bomb as these Moluccan soldiers and their families would lose the protection of the colonial government once the Dutch transferred power to the Indonesian authorities in 1949. In order to defuse this problem, the Dutch government allowed the Moluccan soldiers and their families to move to the Netherlands temporarily, with the tacit understanding that they

would return to Indonesia once that country had fallen apart into a number of separate republics. One of these, no doubt, would be the Republic of the Moluccas.

After some time, however, it became obvious that Indonesia would remain a unified state and would not allow the ex-soldiers and their families to return to the Moluccas. An independent Republic of the Moluccas in exile had been established in the Netherlands, but it failed to win any international recognition, not even from the Dutch government. Gradually, the Moluccan community accepted the fact that they would remain in the Netherlands. Some applied for Dutch citizenship and many moved out of their temporary barracks and into normal housing with Dutch neighbours. At the same time, some Moluccans strongly criticized the Dutch government for trying to improve its relations with Indonesia without a settlement for the Moluccans. After a spectacular hijacking operation of a school and an intercity train by a group of radicalized Moluccans of the second generation in 1977, the Dutch government subsidized a small museum in commemoration of the historical role of the Moluccans in the Dutch East Indies. In 2012, however, due to budget cuts, the subsidy stopped and the museum closed.¹¹

The Dutch Expansion in the Atlantic: the Long Shadow of Slavery

Over the past years, the Dutch colonial policies in the Atlantic and in particular in the Caribbean have become the subject of the kind of black–white discourse that has been going on in the US for much longer. The interest in creating a ‘black’ regime of memory is the result of the immigration to the Netherlands of a sizeable number of inhabitants from the Dutch overseas territories in the Caribbean, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. Currently, the ex-Surinamese community in the Netherlands totals about 350,000 first, second and third generation migrants, and the ex-Antillean community about 130,000.

Within these communities, various groups and individuals want their history rewritten and incorporated into mainstream history teaching in Dutch schools. They feel that the traditional historical sequence of Egypt, Mesopotamia, European Middle Ages, Early Modern and Modern history of Europe and of the US, as taught in Dutch schools, no longer does justice to the roots of the multi-ethnic population of the Netherlands today. Everyone in the Netherlands should familiarize him or herself with the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and of slavery, ‘the Black Genocide’.

The groups that advocate this new regime of memory also have a political agenda. The history of the slave trade and of slavery should force the Dutch government, preferably the king himself, to apologize for the fact that the Dutch once traded in slaves and owned slaves. In addition, some stress the importance of financial reparations to the descendants of the former slaves.

In many ways, these demands have been successful. The slave trade and slavery now feature prominently in Dutch history books used in both primary and secondary schools. In addition, the Dutch government paid for a statue in Amsterdam commemorating the end of slavery and for a research institute aimed at studying the legacy of slavery, albeit that the institute ceased to exist in 2012 due to severe cuts in the general budget. In a roundabout way, the Dutch government did pay reparations – without calling them such – by providing the newly independent state of Suriname (400,000 inhabitants) with a gift of €2 billion to

be used for the modernization of the infrastructure of the country. As far as the Dutch Antilles are concerned, the Dutch government also pays reparations without calling them such, as it makes up the yearly deficits of the islands as long as they remain within the kingdom of the Netherlands. Several cabinet ministers have expressed remorse about the slave trade and slavery, but offered no apologies, as these could lead to financial claims.

As in the US, the new 'black' regime of memory in the Netherlands does not always accept the new scholarly findings regarding the slave trade and slavery. Disputed areas include the size of the Dutch participation in the Atlantic slave trade (now calculated at 5% of the total Atlantic slave trade), its rather low profitability, the importance of African agency in supplying slaves, the relatively good diet of plantation slaves in Suriname, and that the role played by European anti-slavery agitation, and by the Dutch parliament, were more effective in abolishing the slave trade and slavery than actual slave resistance.¹²

Conclusion

The historiography of the Netherlands contains two areas where opposing regimes of memory have developed: the history of the Netherlands during the Second World War and the history of the Dutch participation in the Atlantic slave trade and in Caribbean slavery. As far as the history of the Second World War is concerned, the existing differences between a popular regime of memory and a more scholarly one have almost disappeared as the generation that was alive during that period has died. A recent TV series in nine (!) instalments about the Dutch during the war, based on modern scholarship, did not meet with much criticism.

That leaves us with the history of colonial slavery and of the slave trade. During the last decade, the existence of two different regimes of memory shows that the Dutch no longer lag behind other countries with a black minority.

An interesting example of the two regimes of memory regarding the slave trade and slavery occurred in France, where the denial of both the Holocaust and the Atlantic slave trade are now punishable by law. In another, unofficial, regime of memory, however, professional historians point out that the slave trade was not similar to the Holocaust. Those who transported slaves across the Atlantic were not inclined to kill as many slaves as possible. On the contrary, the slave traders were very keen to see as many surviving slaves as possible reach their destination, while the opposite was true for those who transported the deportees to the extermination camps.

In the Netherlands, a *communis opinio* on slavery and the slave trade is also some way off. A five-part TV series discussing the history of the Dutch slave trade and of slavery in the Dutch colonies met with much more criticism than the series on the War. Some felt that the presentation of slavery was too encyclopaedic and too apologetic, as the series included references to the captured and enslaved Dutch sailors in North Africa as well as to forms of indigenous slavery in Asia and Africa, and to present-day human trafficking in the red-light district of Amsterdam.

Are two regimes of memory better than one? No doubt they might increase public interest in the past. However, it should be realized that these regimes are only able to

continue in existence because they do not pay attention to one another and are oblivious to the results from historical research that do not square with their view of the past.

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