

Shooting from the Trenches

On the Impossibility and Inability to think about the War

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In this essay Chris van der Heijden (*Dat nooit meer* [Never Again]) answers his critics. He accepts in general what Bob Moore says, although his criticism is rather abstract. He does agree partly with Koes Aerts, but not on some crucial points – for example the method. Van der Heijden doesn't agree at all with Wielenga, not so much because of arguments but exactly because of the lack of it. In the debate with Wielenga, he contends, the trench warfare, which is going on since almost ten years, simply goes on. According to Van der Heijden it leads to nothing.

The three reactions to my book *Dat nooit meer* [Never Again]¹ published above are very different in character and tone. Bob Moore's is the most subtle and the most positive, but it is chiefly a meta-criticism and is about writing history and narrativity. Only when dealing with the Shoah does Moore go into details. In the meta-criticism Moore brings up a few interesting but, in a general sense, difficult to answer questions. In connection with the Shoah he makes at least one remark about my book that does not hold water and one that says much about the way in which my work, in my opinion unjustifiably, is read by some.

The reaction from Friso Wielenga is at a different level – and has a different focus. It is a replica of those written by a number of Dutch historians on *Dat nooit meer* (DNM) and very negative; here and there I feel he is consciously abusive. My first inclination then is not to react. I have already done that, in detail (www.datnooitmeer.blogspot.nl). Moreover, in most cases I cannot react because the criticism consists not of arguments, but statements. However, not reacting is not an option, or as Moore, in the first sentence of his contribution writes: 'historians make a living from disagreeing with one another'.

Finally the critique of Koen Aerts I find the most challenging. This is due, I think, to the fact that the author combines three characteristics. Of the three authors he is the best informed of the international debate on the

aftermath of the Second World War – and the only one who has published extensively on it. He knows the Dutch situation, but he is still an outsider. Obviously the fact that Aerts' contribution constitutes challenges implies that I do not always agree with him. It begins with what he calls a characteristic of *DNM*, an aspect that is also criticised by others – the narrative structure. According to Aerts, I swear 'by the narrative plain and simple'. In my opinion, that is grossly exaggerated and cannot be confirmed by the text. It is true that there are a great many 'stories' but there are more analyses in the book. Let me give an example – and with it examine a second related point of criticism.

Aegle and mouse

Aerts writes that I go too far 'by simply raising the tone of a particular source to the attitude of an entire epoch'. At first sight I understand that reproach and, to be honest, I have also continually wrestled with the attempt to find a balance between 'sources' and 'epoch'. Let me try to explain what I mean.

My method is based on – if I can so call it – an eagle and mouse-principle. That means I usually combine a great vaulting ('despondency about the Netherlands, the West, the future [...] after the liberation was *de rigueur*')² with illustrative stories or tales, preferably about individuals. If one does not do so, then, in my opinion history remains abstract and becomes something like in the book *Nederland in de twintigste eeuw* [The Netherlands in the Twentieth Century] by Friso Wielenga, a world of events and developments from which people have as good as disappeared and are reduced to cogs in an abstract wheel. Sometimes this is unavoidable, but that does not change the fact that thereby the past becomes too intangible in my view. I think this can only be prevented if you regularly translate abstractions into concrete cases. To keep to the metaphor – if the eagle swoops down to the field.³

This can be very dangerous: to begin with, because it is usually impossible to explain why you swoop down on one field and not another or why you take one mouse and not another. Moreover there is the danger that in your descent you lose the overview. There is something to be done about it. Such a descent should not last too long. You must get air-born again: but equally such a descent should not be too short otherwise it is useless. It is not my place to say whether I have been successful in this game of zooming in and out, and from reading the criticisms at least a number of

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 *DNM*, 161.

3 'Le bon historien ressemble à l'ogre de la légende. Là où il flaire la chair humaine, il sait que là est son gibier', this is the famous statement of Marc Bloch in his *Apologie pour l'histoire ou métier d'historien* (Paris 1952) 18.

historians – including Aerts – this is not the case. But I disagree with the (few) examples he gives. For instance, Aerts mentions a brochure by the otherwise unknown H.G.J. Verschuur, which he dates as 1945 (it is 1946) and which I do indeed say ‘is characteristic for the greater part of the first post-war period, the years up to around 1960’. This seems, as Aerts says, a bold statement about an unknown little booklet of forty or so pages. The statement is really less bold as you regard it as it was intended and, I think, argued.

One of the central propositions of *DNM* is that after a short period of euphoria about the liberation and clarity about what happened during the war, there followed a long period of despondency and uncertainty. This change was visible in all areas, also in what touches the main subject of the book – the public debate about the war. To begin with, that debate was about the position during the war of the institution in which just that post-war debate chiefly took place – the media. In the chapter in which Verschuur’s brochure is mentioned it is posited that in the course of 1946 the mood of the media changed. It is true that it took some time before this change was clear to all, but it was under way and Verschuur’s brochure is the first sign of it. Verschuur certainly reacted against the black and white view of the resistance press that was at that time in a dominant position and stated that during the war the situation was complex. I write:

It was a view that at that time, the beginning of 1946, was almost unheard of and from the 1960s even disappeared completely. Yet it is exactly this view that is typical of the greater part of the early post-war period until around 1960 (54).

This, as has been said, is one of the central propositions of *DNM*. Verschuur’s booklet, mentioned on pages 52-54, is thus a forerunner, as it were, of what is elaborated in the following two hundred pages. ‘Convincing arguments or indications why that [Verschuur’s] conclusion [that the war situation was complex] would transcend the anecdotal are actually lacking’, says Aerts. That is true in as far as page 54 is concerned: but I think you cannot retain this view if you read as far as page 300. Then so many examples of this complexity have been given that I am of the opinion that it is justified to characterise Verschuur’s brochure as ‘typical of an epoch’. Once again – the image of the war in the late 1940s to the beginning of the 1960s was different from that of early post-war years and the long period that started in the 1960s. To use a word that is always associated with my work – during the Fifties that image was grey, not black and white.

That ‘people’ – and here I mean a group of Dutch historians, in the previous three contributors represented by Wielenga – will not accept this view and thus disagree with me, is a second point. This also explains why, in his critique, Wielenga writes as if I do not do anything but repeat and defend my former book about the war, *Grijs verleden* [Grey Past].

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.

Wielenga writes: ‘Others who had a different view are repeatedly and peremptorily dismissed’. That is also the reason that he says that I raise Kortenhorst (who indeed had a grey picture of the past) to heroic status. Nothing could be further from the truth! If anyone from those years was ‘a hero’ to me it is Van Randwijk, possibly J.B. Charles. Kortenhorst as a person and his world view, in the main, arouse my disgust: but I try not to show my preferences in the text, I believe. Besides, what does it matter what I think of this or that person? The important thing is the historical picture. That Wielenga thinks I admire Kortenhorst must tell more about his reaction to my findings than about my findings itself.

During my research, time and again, I discovered that from the late Forties another view of the war was current than is often assumed, different too from what I had, until then, assumed. It is true that this view resembles fairly closely what I had suggested earlier in *Grijs Verleden*, it is possible that, among other things, due to that book I had a sharp eye for such a complex picture, but it was a secondary consideration. The grey image of the war in the Fifties came as a complete surprise to me. In *DNM* I try to elaborate as much as possible on that discovery, or surprise if you will, and therefore do give it a great deal of attention. That has nothing to do with preference, but with historiographical discovery, amazement and curiosity.

In his confirmation of the current view (that the dominant war narrative in the 1950s rested on the polarities of repression and resistance) Wielenga uses nothing but the authority-argument: others, in this case Rob van Ginkel and Frank van Vree, say that it is so and so it is (*ipse dixit*). In doing so he completely ignores the dozens of examples, context and arguments that are given in *DNM* and contradict such a view. The list is unending but almost nothing is given further consideration by Wielenga – the notable return of *De Telegraaf*, the work of the secretary of *Onderdrukking en Verzet* [Repression and Resistance], Jan Meulenbelt, the potpourri that this work eventually became, the dominant position in Dutch society of men such as De Quay, Kortenhorst, Lotsy and Hasselman, the judging of accommodators such as Hirschfeld, the

Union people and Louwes, the disappointment in the resistance about all these developments, and so I could go on. Wielenga also does not mention what I write about those on whom he bases his argument. I discuss at length the work of Van Vree who, in my opinion, has fallen into a classical propaganda trap and takes as the truth what was no more than a wish. Wielenga writes not a single word about the extensive note that I devote to Van Ginkel's latest book.⁴ That it was not possible to write more about it has a simple explanation: the book appeared after the completion of my manuscript. In brief, Wielenga confirms the current view because it is there, and is unwilling to give a moment's time to even consider another. As a result in place of a discussion we have trench warfare – the same warfare that has been waged for some time. I had hoped that it would not be repeated in a professional journal.

There is there what is not there

What Aerts says in this connection is interesting. He is in partial agreement with Wielenga and states that 'it manifestly cannot be shown anywhere that this view [of a complex image of the war in the 1950s] was supported by the entire or even a significant part of the community'. That is true and I confirm this time and again, but it shows little insight in the working of the public sphere and culture to think that only that which is expressed is true or important. Perhaps I wanted to do too much, perhaps I have attempted the impossible, but the fact that something was *not* supported by the community does not prove that it did not exist, or even that it is not dominant. Silence, obfuscation, protection and such aspects, in *DNM* as throughout history, play a crucial role. Indeed during the Fifties the dubious role in the war of many mentioned above, in particular prime minister from 1959 onwards Jan de Quay, was seldom raised in public. That is exactly what it is about: the fact that it did *not* happen, while from the Sixties it did.

In the 1950s, on official occasions such as 4th May (Remembrance Day), a politically desirable viewpoint was expressed. That viewpoint did indeed balance on the polarities of repression and resistance. I do not deny this for a moment. What I assert with, I believe, an abundance of facts and arguments is that these politically correct expressions had little or nothing to do with what was going on in various groups and, except at those symbolic moments, was expressed in the press (my most important source). To paraphrase Nijhoff's great poem 'Awater' you could say; look carefully, do not be misled by politically correct speeches and other desirables, there is there what is not there!

4 *DNM* 870, n. 62. Here I note that Van Ginkel appears to confirm the image but mainly gives examples to the contrary.

Moreover it is not, as Aerts asserts, that I say that the good-and-bad narrative arose only in the 1960s. You will not find this anywhere in *DNM*. I repeatedly state the contrary⁵ – that such a good and bad/black and white narrative was to be found just after the war but after, except for official manifestations, it disappeared until about 1960.

Public opinion

Now I must deal with some erroneous readings. Bob Moore states that I describe the process by which the Shoah became the centre of interest as a predominantly Dutch phenomenon, while according to him it is an international one. In this case too, I cannot understand how he could have read this in *DNM* because the chapter in which I describe this development (26) is chiefly about other countries and even has a sub-heading ‘Gestuwd vanuit de vs’ [‘Driven by the USA’].

Public opinion, as is repeatedly said in *DNM*, is such a complex phenomenon that, as a historian, you can better leave it alone. Perhaps once again I wanted to do too much. At the other side, the subject is so important that you cannot ignore it. The misunderstandings (or in the eyes of some of my critics, mistakes) to which this can lead are illustrated by the passage on Max Blokzijl in *DNM*. In the book I argue that after the war political delinquents scarcely make themselves heard – and did not get the opportunity to do so. Other than in, for instance Flanders, the subject of a number of important publications by Koen Aerts, they played no role in public opinion. Given the subject of my book, it was therefore perhaps better if I had left them out until the moment, at the end of the twentieth century, that they, via their children and a new generation of historians, did speak out. But, as I said before, what is *not* said can be very indicative in understanding the mood of the moment. For this reason I chose to dedicate a chapter to those who had been on the German side during the war. As said, it tells a lot about the public sphere of the time that their voice was *not heard*.

In the chapter on the delinquent sector there is a relatively long passage about the virtually unknown diary written by Blokzijl in the months before his death, a diary that is not to be found in the archives. I believe this diary is significant because it has a number of notations that are seldom or never considered, and certainly at the time, just after the war, played no part in the public debate. One of these is the Shoah. On the basis of Blokzijl’s diary I suggest the possibility that indeed he was in ignorance of what was happening in the concentration camps and I write:

5 In particular chapter 13 and the epilogue.

The famous, even today, ‘wir haben es nicht gewusst’ is never believed. Nevertheless the diary makes one think, perhaps not so much about what Blokzijl knew of or did not know as about the complex scale that slides from indifference via egoism and heartlessness to crime. It is beyond doubt that Blokzijl is to be found somewhere on that scale. At the same time the diary shows that he himself never came even close to such an insight (93).

Like a number of others Wielenga reacts strongly to this passage and says that Blokzijl leads me by the nose. Critical evaluation of sources is ‘therefore’ not my strong point: and that while I state emphatically that Blokzijl’s apology during the trial was rightly set aside as ‘yet another attempt by a smooth talker to escape’ but it is ‘*more difficult*’ to say this about the diary that the man in the months before his execution wrote at the behest of his wife’ (89). I make the qualification *more difficult* for three reasons, that do not concern us here, but I do mention them. Wielenga might not agree, but in my opinion this is critical evaluation of a source. Led by the nose? Why would I be? I know what is repeatedly suggested (that I am attempting to defend my father’s political choice during the war) but such suggestions are not only unjust and malicious but, more importantly, not supported by the text. Partly on the basis of the recent book by Bart van der Boom – in which the knowledge of political delinquents of the Shoah, significantly, is not discussed – I want to go a step further and dare to state that the importance of Blokzijl’s diary is even greater than I had thought when writing *DNM*. Not a defence or a nose-ring – facts!

Reluctance

Of the three critics Wielenga is not only the most unfriendly but also the most traditional. He is irritated by the fact that I do not begin *DNM* with a discussion of the present state of research and do not always name the person to whom I refer – that also applies to him at least once. ‘This is the way scholarship works’ he writes apodictically and totally ignoring the fact that nothing functions ‘this way’ and that science is an unusually hybrid phenomenon. Moreover I have done my sums for him. Indeed, a few dozen times I mention the name of a critic, historian or commentator only in the notes and not in the main text, but in far and away the most cases I do name them in the text. This is a stylistic matter without any further significance, as is my mention of the ‘little world of academia’ (which Aerts mentions). It has nothing to do with disdain for scholarship. In *DNM* I also talk about the little world of journalism, the little world of Amsterdam, the little literary world. It is a style that is probably based on fundamental scepticism, nothing more. The same applies to (not) mentioning names. I know this is not the custom; but I know even better that customs are there to be broken and that as a researcher I am only obliged to report my sources. I do that – in detail. If,

in doing so, I use another method than the usual, then that is exercising my freedom to do so.

Wielenga's criticism is full of ingrained opinions. He repeatedly brings up *Grijs verleden*, and forgets about *DNM*. So the story goes for example, that in *Grijs verleden* I try to ridicule Loe de Jong. I think that is far from the truth, I have and have always had a great admiration for the man: but I agree my picture of the war is different. And so, Wielenga states, in *DNM* I am continuing my old business. I must have a personal feud with De Jong, he says. This feud must be my life's work. My statement that De Jong even answered questions of school children would suggest that he did something offensive. I make it sound as if there was conspiracy in the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and of course in *DNM* I am still trying to prove I am right when I had failed to do so in *Grijs verleden* – in this case chiefly concerning whether De Jong had an eye for the shading between good and bad.


I can only read these and similar comments as a conscious reluctance to follow my argument. In the chapters before that dealing with the work of Loe de Jong I describe in detail how in the course of the 1960s the view of the war became univocal and De Jong's role in this. I do not believe that anyone contradicts the thrust of that argument. In the passage to which Wielenga refers, I say what he repeats: that De Jong's great work *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [The Kingdom of the Netherlands during the Second World War], has the reputation to be less black-and-white as is argued, among others, in *Grijs verleden*. In my opinion there inevitably follows the question of whether I had failed to hit the nail on the head. It says:

It seems a strange question in a book that aims to be descriptive, but it would be still stranger if, in this case with both subject and object of research in a divided position, I were to avoid such a question: is inherent complexity compatible with moral unambiguity? The question is all the more important because it concerns not only the work of De Jong but in a greater measure the reception of that work. Because suppose *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, despite its moral unambiguity, does indeed offer an inherent complexity, what then remains of it in the public sphere? (474).

The passage is too long to cite in its entirety but I think it gives a sufficient idea of what, for me at least, was the main question: to what extent had people in the 1960s an idea of the complexity of the war period, to what extent *could* people have an idea of it and what was De Jong's part in this? In my opinion it is of no importance what I or anyone else thinks. What *is* important is the question – and the answer. I have tried to give this as honestly as possible, but once again Wielenga does not even consider this. He is only concerned with my motives.

'Is Van der Heijden making the case for this relativisation or merely recounting the fact that this has happened in Dutch intellectual and public

debate?’ Bob Moore asks himself in connection with my description of the variety of groups that at the end of the twentieth century claimed to be war victims, including the children of parents that were on the German side during the war. This question disturbs me because (and this possibly explains in part the angry reactions) apparently I give the impression that I am dealing in politics rather than history. I really do not understand how such an idea could have arisen. Is it my tone? My style? Presentation? Has it perhaps not to do with me but with my environment? Or is it, as is most often the case, a combination? I do not have the answer. On the other hand there are two things I do know. One is that I do not want to make a ‘case’ for anything, just to know how things were. The other is that apparently I regularly appear to give another impression and therefore many people do not believe me. I have no idea how to deal with this contradiction. ◀



Chris van der Heijden (1954) studied history at the University of Utrecht, published on various themes and is most well known for a book about Spain in the sixteenth century (*Zwarte renaissance*, 1998) en a book about the Netherlands and the Second World War (*Grijs verleden*, 2001). He teaches journalism at the University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht. Email: chris.vanderheijden@hu.nl.