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Focus: History and memory
Introduction

MADELON DE KEIZER

Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, Herengracht 380, 1016 CJ Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: m.de.keizer@niod.knaw.nl

The story goes that in the 1980s and 1990s no publisher in Paris was prepared to issue a historical study that did not have the word 'memory' in the title. Identity, a congener of memory, was equally popular in the same period. One of the experts in the field, John Gillis, claimed that identity has become no more than a cliché and that memory has lost a lot of its precision, but both terms have remained key concepts. 'The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity'. Memories and identities are anything but certain facts; they are 'representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena. […] "Memory work" is, like any kind of physical or mental labor, embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end'.[1]

It has been suggested that the demise of the vainglorious future-orientated ideologies in the late 1980s brought about a shift in focus towards the past. However that may be, the wave of interest in memory did receive an enormous impulse from one of the most controversial studies in this field, the seven-volume series *Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1984–1992), published under the direction of the French historian Pierre Nora. In the last volume he argued that France had gradually disappeared as a 'memory nation'; the national memory had been supplanted by a series of *lieux de mémoire* and the conflicting social identities that this entailed. *La France*, according to Nora, had entered the 'era of commemoration' as *Les Frances* as a result of what he called a 'democratization of the commemorative spirit'.[2]

The relation between national identity and collective memory is highlighted by the many commemorative events organised in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980, the French, British and Brazilian governments had a Year of National Heritage, while in Israel a 'memory industry' specially devoted to the Holocaust got under way.

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The Austrian government called 1988 the Year of Reflection, and in 1992 many commemorative events were held in Spain and the Americas to mark the 500th anniversary of the landing of Columbus. The last decade of the 20th century, when the relaxation of the pressure of the Cold War created an opportunity for a fresh view of past history, was marked by the need to clear the conscience of past errors. The Second World War was an important benchmark, and celebrations were held all over the world in 1995 to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

The four articles presented here are derived from a conference that was held in Amsterdam in 1995, at which historians from every corner of the globe evaluated the way in which the memory of the Second World War had evolved in the past 50 years.[3] They concentrated on the public memory, that is, on the way in which a complex tissue of meaning is conferred on the past in the context of the political demands of the present and the future.

It is evident that the question of whether a country was on the winning or the losing side – a victim or a perpetrator in the terminology of Friso Wielenga – was crucially important for the postwar construction of memory. Pieter Lagrou presents a comparative analysis of the politics of memory in France, Belgium and the Netherlands – countries in Western Europe that can be considered to have emerged as victors of the conflict. On the other hand Friso Wielenga, writes about the country that was the main European loser, West Germany. Another loser, though not in Europe, was Japan, and the article by the Cooks deal with the politics of memory there. The Soviet Union, whose politics of memory is analysed by Nina Tumarkin, with 30 million dead in four years and the destruction of 1700 towns and 70 000 villages, can be regarded as the ultimate example of a totalitarian victim country.

It is fascinating to read in these articles how a certain shared conjuncture can be distinguished in the development of the politics of memory in Europe. As the experience of the Second World War receded more and more into the background, a fairly rapid construction of a cult, legend or myth of the War began in the early 1960s. This was when the construction of the national myth reached its apogee; the case of the Netherlands is emblematic, as Lagrou shows.

In the Soviet Union, the political memory constructed almost immediately after May 1945 attributed the victory to Stalin, the Red Army and the Socialist system. There was no room in the reconstruction for individual heroes, there was only one hero, Stalin. Victory Day was already declared a normal working day in 1947 (an idea that the Dutch government also regularly toyed with from the 1950s). Nina Tumarkin notes how a transition took place in the Soviet Union after 1945 from a 'national trauma of monumental proportions to a cluster of heroic exploits that had once and for all proven the superiority of Communism over Capitalism'. In West Germany, as elsewhere, all eyes were fixed on the future in the 1950s, even

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though the past continued to play a part in literature (700 000 copies of the diary of Anne Frank were sold between 1950 and 1958) and in historiography. Nevertheless, this period of a 'gewisse Stille' fostered the smooth integration of the millions who had supported Hitler into the German democracy.

Generally speaking, whether the country concerned was a loser or a winner, in the 1960s there was a strong urge to pass on the values of the wartime generation to the succeeding one.[4] Whether one considers the USSR or a country like the Netherlands, the wartime generation's motto 'It must never happen again' created obligations. In the Netherlands, the attitude of the wartime generation during the occupation of the country (1940–45) became a stake in a broader calling into question of the authority and culture of the older generations. Youth culture in the West demanded a new approach to the wartime past. An offensive of norms and values in the Soviet Union targeted what the wartime generation regarded as degenerate youth that no longer shared the ideals of their parents. The country and the Party were at stake. Victory Day was restored as a public holiday in the USSR in 1965. The same emphasis on the succession of generations in the memory conjuncture can be detected in the politics of memory of West Germany. At a time of rapid changes in the fields of politics, society and the economy, new generations sought a new identity of their own. A turning point can be discerned in the Federal Republic around 1960, both in prosecution policy and in the political and social attitude towards the Nazi past. The German people had engaged in the confrontation with its past not in 1968, but ten years earlier. It was the merit of this new generation that its lack of direct contamination by the past provided an openness about that past with a broader political and social basis. The past of the Third Reich was given priority, particularly in schools, with the result that a highly moralizing approach to that past became the dominant one. Less than a generation later – the time of the *Historikerstreit* – that attitude was replaced by a longing for normality.

In every country in Western and Central Europe the unique, personal memories of individual men and women or of a specific group were sacrificed on the altar of the national myth. This was reflected in histories of the war. In countries like the Netherlands, where the national memory was in the ascendancy, the contours of that national myth are easy to detect in history writing. In 28 volumes, Louis de Jong produced a master narrative that was to dominate Dutch historiography of the occupation until late in the 1980s.[5] Similarly, in the Soviet Union, the history of the Great Patriotic War remained uncontested until the late 1980s.[6] Lagrou's article analyses the politics of memory in France, Belgium and the Netherlands up to the moment in the 1960s when an unmistakable pluralism began to develop in memory – a phenomenon that can subsequently be seen all over Western Europe.[7] The Netherlands stood out for the early creation and long dominance of a virtually uncontested national myth. It was not until the 1980s that scope arose

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for a 'countermemory'. A good example of the long struggle against the dominant national myth is the politics of memory of Putten, a village in the Netherlands that was the victim of reprisals by the *Wehrmacht*.[8,9] It is the Dutch equivalent of Ouradour in France, and held a special place in the national memory of the Second World War for a long time.[10] Pluralism was kept out of the politics of memory the longest in the USSR. The year 1989 marked a clear turning-point in this respect, when Russia came to realize that the victory had been stolen from the people and one revelation followed another, not only to the detriment of Stalin and the Party, but even going back to 1917.

It has often been suggested that Japan has always had particular difficulty in coming to terms with its wartime past. The cultural difference – a Christian sense of guilt versus an oriental shame culture – has been adduced as an important factor. However, Japan was primarily embarrassed by the unprecedented problem of having to construct a narrative of defeat. At the heart of the Japanese post-war 'Legend of War' or 'Wartime Myth' lies a reticence about the war at the individual level, which still prevails in Japan today. Narratives that are not in harmony with the Wartime Myth are largely suppressed. The counter-memory of the Japanese who returned from China is but a footnote in the master narrative. The inability of the Japanese to come to terms with their recent past in the Second World War is in marked contrast to the way in which another loser, West Germany, dealt with its Nazi past after the fall of the Third Reich.

Unlike the situation in Japan, a debate on the significance of the war began in occupied Germany immediately after the hostilities had ended. The key issue in this debate was the question of the collective guilt of the German people. The thesis that Germany denied and suppressed its past for a long time will no longer stand up to historical scrutiny. Friso Wielenga's acute analysis shows how that thesis is incompatible with the political and cultural reality of the post-1945 period. 'The reality of the way in which the Nazi past has been dealt with has obviously been painful, but at the same time more capricious and subtle than the general theory of repression and denial suggests.' An important contribution was made to the debate by Karl Jaspers in 1946, when he developed a differentiated concept of guilt, because the Germans had all experienced the Third Reich in different ways. No less important was the *Stuttgarter Schuldbekenntnis* of the Evangelical Church of October 1945, whose impact was not confined to Germany alone. In the village of Putten in the Netherlands it was of great significance for coming to terms with the deaths of more than 500 villagers in concentration camps in Germany.[8] Jaspers concept of guilt was so influential because it was aimed at social action with regard to the recent past to arrive at a cleansing. He considered that purification was a condition of genuine political liberty. The low level of response that this received was due to the total defeat, the national paralysis that ensued, and the fear of being punished by the Allies. Still, this was by no means a total suppression or denial of the past.

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In Germany, reflection on the past was dominated by the value of learning from that past, as in the various trials of *Hauptkriegsverbrecher*. No less influential was the de-Nazification, the cleansing of government bodies, the economy, and social life in general. The integration of Germany in the West in the context of the growing Cold War, however, soon led to a change in what had at first been a strict policy. One of the effects of this was the way in which former Nazis could now be inconspicuously incorporated into the German democracy. However, like the Nuremberg trials, the process of de-Nazification, though not carried to completion, still led to a permanent condemnation of the former Nazi regime, not least in the media. And it was only because these views of the past were widely disseminated that the foundation was laid for a constructive dealing with the past. Whatever choice you made as a German – whether you sided with the conservative relativists or with the real guardians of a charged historical legacy – there was no way of evading the Nazi past, which was too much a part of German identity for that.

The era of universal confessions was ushered in with the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe and South-east Asia in 1995. The commemorations after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the ensuing unification of Germany were marked by the spirit of international reconciliation. The leaders of the Allies in the Second World War formally recognized the incomparably enormous losses of the USSR; President Clinton underlined that message in Moscow. The attempt to come to terms with the past was marked all over the world with the offering of excuses for crimes committed long ago (such as slavery) as well as during the Second World War.

The spotlight came to play on Japan. Although most Japanese felt that their government ought to do more to express its regret of the war, Tokyo remained silent. In the previous decades a strong lobby of veterans had emerged. They and their families considered that any excuse for the war would dishonour those who had lost their lives in that war. After months of debates and discussions, a rather vague parliamentary resolution was finally adopted in 1995, which recognized Japanese aggression and colonialism, but only in the context that other countries had also committed offences.[11] This partial resolution was largely an initiative of the Liberal Democratic Party, the largest party in Japan, and the Prime Minister, Tomiichi Murayama. This resolution recognized and expressed 'deep remorse', or rather reflection on Japan's behaviour (*hansei*), depending on the translation, but no apology.

This shift in the Japanese politics of memory was connected with Japan's role in the world of the 1990s. If Japan refused to come to terms with the destructive role it had played in Asia in the past, it would be unable to play a constructive role in Asia in the future. The colonialism referred to in the resolution was not the essence of the problem, nor was Japanese military aggression. After all, other states had been guilty of the same. The key problem was that of the killing of

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millions of Chinese, the medical experiments carried out on citizens, and the enforced prostitution of thousands of Korean and other women for the Japanese troops. More than a vague declaration of remorse was needed to satisfy the feelings of the victims of those crimes and their next of kin. By failing to offer proper excuses, Japan created a dangerous psychological rift between itself and the neighbouring countries.

Unlike Germany in Europe, Japan had, until then, played only a modest role in the promotion of new trade and security systems. During the Cold War, it had followed US policy, but that era was now over. With Tokyo and Washington growing apart over economics and China developing its military strength, Japan had to play a more forthright role in the region, and it had to start by squarely facing up to its record in the Second World War. The issue flared up again in 1997 when the Japanese premier Hashimoto visited China to celebrate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations between these two Far Eastern superpowers. On that occasion, Beijing demanded that Japan recognize the atrocities that the Japanese imperial army had committed in China during the Second World War (1937–1945). Four years later Koizumi was the first Japanese premier to refer explicitly to Japan in an excuse that explicitly mentioned 'our country'.

In the meantime, the world has witnessed the attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on 11 September 2001. Does that date herald the end of the politics of the memory of the Second World War? At any rate, it looks as though that war is hardly any longer relevant to the current political concerns of the West and South-east Asia. However, for historians of the 20th century, research on history and memory, especially with respect to the Second World War, has lost none of its relevance.

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11. The relevant paragraph of the compromise resolution, as transmitted by Reuters, is the following: 'Recalling many colonial rules and acts of aggression in the modern history of the world, we recognize and express deep remorse for those acts our country carried out in the past and unbearable pains inflicted upon people abroad, particularly those people of Asia' (*Herald Tribune*, 7 June 1995).

About the Author

Madelon de Keizer is a historian and a Senior Researcher at the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation in Amsterdam. She has written about the memory of the Second World War in the Netherlands (*Putten. De razzia en de herinnering*, Amsterdam 1998) and at present is engaged in writing about culture and modernisation in Europe 1900–40.

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