

‘Towards a New History of The Second World War ?’

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Introduction

On the 21th of April 2015, seventy years after the liberation, Belgian and Dutch historians discussed the historiography of the Second World War during the Spring conference of the Royal Netherlands Historical Society. This conference took place in The Hague and was co-organised by CegeSoma and NIOD; the Belgian and Dutch study centres originally founded for the study of the Second World War. A welcome and an introduction were given by Susan Legêne (RNHS, VU University Amsterdam). She chaired the proceedings of the day. Several weeks before the conference, the four session-leaders gathered statements in a position paper, which was widely distributed.

Keynote Martin Conway: The History of War is over but Histories of War remain



In his opening lecture, Martin Conway (University of Oxford) firstly described in three stages the history of the historiography. In the first stage, directly after the war, he distinguished an official, national and patriotic historiography. In the second stage, starting in the end of the 60's and the beginning of the 70's, the temperament changed and new research themes emerged: the study of the 'losers', the study of guilt on different levels, the study of horror and the study of memory. In the third stage, which Conway called the *old new history of the Second World War*, the historiography became wider in a chronological and a geographical sense. Approximately from 1989 till 2001, new, structural and less detailed issues were raised.

Secondly, in the contemporary context of historians losing their sovereignty on World War Two, Conway gave some suggestions for the 'new' *New History of the Second World War*. On the one hand, he mentioned the importance of finishing uncompleted tasks such as the study of political parties before, during and after the war, proper local histories and the remaking of the state. On the other hand, he suggested four research themes that still hold great potential: the concept of the warfare state in general, the study of capitalism and why it won the Second World War, the study of marginal stories to change the still 'too male and white' history of the war and the study of psychological and emotional history. The question remains: how to concretise the 'new' *New History of the Second World War*?

Session 1: Frameworks

In the first session (from the left to the right on the picture) Marnix Beyen (University of Antwerp), Hinke Piersma (NIOD) and Geraldien von Frijtag (Utrecht University) spoke about national war historiography, political culture in the Netherlands and Belgium and the use of new concepts. The session was chaired by Piersma. The first part of the session was centred on the plea of Beyen for more comparative research. He stated for instance that interesting differences between Belgium and the Netherlands are visible in

different meanings of the concept of 'national' war historiography, comparing what he called Belgian centrifugal and the Dutch centripetal historiography. Furthermore, Beyen concluded that our understanding of experiences and memories can be increased by the focus on how groups of people identify themselves with a certain *moral community*, whether national, transnational or subnational.

Von Frijtag was in favour of a comparison, but rather than comparing national identities, she pleaded for conceptual broadening of the Second World War historiography. In the context of supranational concepts, she defended the use of the *concept of empire*, which is not only relevant for Eastern Europe but for Western Europe as well. In addition, she argued for the use of *micro-history* to investigate the relation of ordinary people to supranational concepts. Micro-history could give us insights in how ordinary people came to embrace imperial mind-sets.



Session 2: Research agendas

The second session was chaired by Nico Wouters (CegeSoma) and the speakers were Ilse Raaijmakers (Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group Diemen), Remco Ensel (Radboud University Nijmegen) and Bruno De Wever (Ghent University). By answering the question if others outside the academic world impose research questions on us, war historians, all three speakers referred to the complex relationship between the academic world and the public domain. According to Raaijmakers, there is a false contrast between historical research and applied science. Historians should participate to public debate and provide historic context. In this view, the notion that research agendas are created by a public forum is not problematic at all, also because historical research must have a wider public impact in order to be relevant. De Wever agreed that academics have to stand firmly within society but nevertheless warned that academic historians should safeguard a certain level of academic autonomy, creating their own agendas. Ensel mentioned the importance of debate on historical research and research questions. He stated that interesting debates often emerge in the margins. But he was also strongly in favour of public debate. Following the viewpoint of Raaijmakers, he suggested that the divide between the academic and public domain is artificial.

Another issue of discussion was the topic of research funding. Some felt that increasingly, research projects almost have to integrate a conclusion in advance in order to get funded. Do current structures of funding favour more consensual research and is it still possible to get highly innovative research proposals on WWII funded? Indeed, one remark confirmed that trends of lack of autonomy or imposed agendas lie as much, if not more, within the world of academia itself rather than in a false

opposition with the more 'public' domains. Before we can discuss new research agendas, we need to define academic autonomy, in relation to the public domain but perhaps even more in relation to current trends of research within the academic world itself.

Session 3: Representing a past for whom?

The third session was chaired by Kees Ribbens (NIOD) and a debate about public history took place between (from the left to the right on the picture) Judith Keilbach (Utrecht University), Chantal Kesteloot (CegeSoma) and Roel Vande Winkel (University of Leuven). The mutual relation between academic researchers, professionally trained historians working outside of academia and public history was extensively discussed. On



the one hand, media expert Keilbach stated that the media and the academic are too different and that public history does not need historians. If historians want to participate in public history, they need to engage actively in the media. In contrast, Kesteloot propagated the cooperation between academic historians and public history. By responding to a public demand, historians can transfer their knowledge to a broader public and hope to change stereotypical visions that circulate in the media. Apart from the idea whether cooperation between the academic and public world is desired or not, Vande Winkel remarked that historians can learn from public history as well. Firstly, the liberty to invent narratives in public history makes us -academic historians- aware of what we do not know. Secondly, historians themselves often receive their general history-knowledge from public history and the media as well.

The third session showed the complex and interesting relation between academic historians, 'commercial' historians and public history. Should academic historians become public history promoters, or not? And if academic historians want to have a certain influence in public history, what do they want to achieve? Do historians want to respond to a social demand, to change stereotypes or rather to reflect on the social functions of public history? Another question is *how* to participate in public history. During the session some examples – such as the exhibition '*Filmer la guerre*', the movie '*Verbotene Filme*' and the series '*Un village français*'- were mentioned as successful (academic) expressions of public history. It would be interesting to initiate further discussions on these concrete examples. Are they actually good examples to continue on?

Session 4: Interaction with Collections

The fourth session was chaired by Rudi Van Doorslaer (CegeSoma) and the speakers were Karel Dibbets (University of Amsterdam), Charles Jeurgens (Leiden University) and Veerle Vanden Daelen (CegeSoma). All speakers agreed that despite the fact that historians and archivists sometimes fear digital developments, it is necessary that they digitise and that digitising offers possibilities and advantages. Dibbets stated that historians can regain influence by digitising. Because it is impossible to digitise everything, we need to think about what we want to digitise, why and how. Jeurgens stressed that digitising needs standardisation and that next to the digitising of inventories, we also need to study our collections in order not to lose the information of the archivists. The study of renewed digital collections offers many possibilities. Vanden Daelen gave the example of EHRI to illustrate the possibilities of digitising and digital information on archival materials. During the EHRI project, collection descriptions, either existing descriptions or EHRI-authored ones, were entered on the EHRI portal. When multiple descriptions are available for the same archival materials, the portal provides them as parallel descriptions; in case of original and copy archives, the descriptions are interlinked. As such EHRI adds context and connects archives. Nevertheless, it is important to notice the limits of the technological possibilities. In the case of EHRI for instance, it is impossible to store scans of all archival materials on the Holocaust on one server.

The fourth session showed some opportunities and limits of the digital revolution. The current task for historians and archivists is to work more closely together and to learn from former digital projects. For example, to what extent can we realise a certain standardisation and on what scale?

Closing remarks by Peter Romijn

In his closing lecture Peter Romijn (NIOD) stated that although the conference has not created a new research agenda as such, it did propose some starting points for a future wherein a new historiography of the Second World War can take root. According to Romijn, the focus on emotions of hope and fear could be used as a starting point for research on the Second World War, but also in understanding the history of the 20th century in a more general sense. He also thinks topics such as the warring states (how societies adapt to war) and regional, local and individual histories should be included in future research, as well as the cooperation with legal studies. Regarding public history he suggested not to discuss the social demand, but to reflect on the social functions of historians and public history. Regarding the digital developments, Romijn called for the investigation of possibilities and tools the digital turn brings us, as well as looking at possible new ways of exchanging our knowledge. Romijn concluded that this conference can be seen a step forward in the development of a new historiography of the Second World War.

Evaluation and Conclusions



The pre-circulated position paper did not stir as much discussion in social media in advance as the organisers had planned. This might be explained by a combination of different factors such as the fact that the use of a pre-conference position paper is still not a well-known technique, the lack of visibility of the paper on social media, its theoretical and little provocative style and the absence of at least part of our target audience on social media.

The conference itself appealed to a broad audience and it was attended by approximately seventy people. There were many master students and doctoral students present, which demonstrates the vitality of the discipline. Nevertheless, the audience comprised significantly more Dutch than Belgian participants. The use of social media¹ during the conference was successful, but unfortunately there was less public debate than expected. An important reason seemed to be the program schedule, which was too heavy and full. The conference included too many different subjects and themes, which also explains the lack of a focused debate. The many interesting topics and debates that were raised remained rather superficial. Time restraints continuously plagued the debates. It is noteworthy that the public was more involved in the discussion when concrete examples were evoked. The use of more concrete examples could make a succeeding conference more interesting. Nevertheless, during breaks and after the closure conference, the audience continued discussing topics raised during the sessions. This confirms that the conference initiated interesting debates that deserve a follow-up.

Topics for further discussions

Many sessions directly and indirectly demonstrated that there is much vagueness and discussion about the position of WWII-historians and various definitions related hereon. By describing the most important topics and questions of debate and by referring to important topics that were not mentioned during the conference, we create suggestions for subsequent conferences or other activities. We also recommend organising them in another format, taking the lessons learned during this conference into account.

¹ <https://www.historici.nl/groepen/tweede-wereldoorlog> and <https://twitter.com/HistoriciNL>

A variety of topics

It was interesting to see that, on the one hand, speakers were calling for conceptual broadening at a meta-level. Subjects such as the warfare state, capitalism, empire, gender, legal studies and emotional and psychological studies were mentioned. On the other hand, there were also different calls for micro-history, for example in the form of local history, biographies or the history of mentalities. This variety of topics shows that the 'new' *new History of the Second World War* is not going into one direction, but into several directions. This is an interesting topic for further discussion. Can the combination of meta- and micro-histories be seen as a trend? Could the future historiography of the Second World War be one wherein both perspectives complete each other more systematically than they do now? And should the historiography of the Second World War indeed become less national, and support regional, transnational or supranational research?

Integration in 20th century-history and characteristics of WWII-historiography

The idea of studying the Second World War in a broader context of 20th century-history instead of the specific context of the war was also mentioned during the conference. More debate about the implications of this is needed. This issue necessitates a dialogue with historians that are experts on 20th century-history in general, and not specifically WWII. At the same time, it remains important for WWII-historians to focus on issues that are specific for the field of WWII, for example the large-scale use of 'living' testimonies. And, to conclude, are we currently able to investigate every topic related to WWII that we want, or are there still inaccessible archives?

Autonomy, marginality and financiers

Participants discussed the impact historical research of the Second World War should have. WWII historians should clarify their position towards principles such as autonomy and marginality, but also towards their financiers. Autonomous to whom or to what? What would it imply to have an autonomous agenda? Secondly, what should be the positioning of WWII-historians towards their financiers? Should our research questions respond to a political or social demand? Or do we want to be independent of other factors outside the academic world? And how do we make this so-called independency concrete?

Public history

WWII-historians should also focus on their positioning towards the public and public history. For whom do we want to work? During the conference, debates on the relation between academic historians and public history provoked the most reactions. Some stated that both should not work together because they are too different. In contrast, others argued both should work together to respond to a social demand or to change public views. How do they want to realise this participation with, for example, the

media or the heritage sector? Additionally, the question was raised if these two domains, -academic and public history- really are so different. Can we speak of an 'artificial divide' between the two of them or not? And what is the positioning of the many professionally trained historians working on the Second World War outside of academia in its strict sense?

Relation to other disciplines

An element that was hardly mentioned during the conference and that deserves more study and discussion, is the position of WWII-historians in relation to other academic disciplines. Specialists from other fields -for example from the field of sociology, psychology, media studies and legal studies- were too absent during this conference. They should be invited to discuss the possibilities and limits of cooperation.

Education

Although the future history of the Second World War will be created by future generations, the element of education was not discussed at all during the conference. How do we want to inform younger generations about the topics and research questions related to the Second World War? There are already a lot of initiatives on this topic. We have to involve the stakeholders and discuss with them questions such as the connections between 'academic' history and education. What are the expectations of the sector? How do they consider public history? What are the specific needs regarding WWII?

Belgian versus Dutch WWII-historiography

One of the aims of the RNHS-congress was to bring Belgian and Dutch historians together and to discuss similarities and differences between the neighbouring countries. Some comparisons were made during the conference, but it would be interesting to elaborate further on this comparative approach. Do certain older national differences between the two countries still have an impact for future research agendas?



(Photographs by Milo van de Pol)