

## HOLLAND: THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE IMAGE OF OCCUPATION. WITH A COMPARISON OF BRITAIN

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In Holland we love the war. And by war we always mean the Second World War. Since Napoleon, it was the first time that foreign troops invaded the Netherlands and that is perhaps one of the reasons why this war is so important for us. Not only as part of our history, but as part of our society, as part of our existence. Friends of mine who love soccer, still remember the final match in the World Cup in 1974 against Germany, West Germany at that moment. It was seen as a repeat of the war of our parents and our grandparents. Half the set books for secondary school pupils are novels about the occupation. The most significant films in Holland concern the war. And in this decade of image, the moving image of the war is becoming more and more important.

Why does the war still haunt the Netherlands? When the guns fell silent in May 1945 and the German soldiers and civil servants had to walk back home, they did not leave a devastated but a violated country behind them. Of a population of just under nine million, about a quarter of a million Dutch people lost their lives, including more than 100.000 Jews murdered in German concentration camps. But the heroic people which had resisted the Germans was to put its shoulders to the grindstone and jointly set about reconstructing the country in an atmosphere of renewal after dealing rapidly and severely with traitors and collaborators. That was the plan... As I said, my country never had experienced a war on its own territory since Napoleon.

The Netherlands had been a conservative bourgeois country before the war, where, despite the privations of the depression, a fascist or national-socialist 'solution' had never made any headway, if we ignore a national-socialist success in 1935 when this party gained 8 percent of the votes in provincial elections. The Netherlands was a divided country, where Protestants and Catholics on one side and socialists on the other had constructed tightly-knit strongholds of organisations precluding contacts with members of the other groups. Only the leaders of these groups maintained the absolutely necessary contact. This was important because for instance the parliamentary system of proportional representation ensured that a coalition was always needed to rule the country. It was 1939 before the socialists were 'permitted' to supply any ministers. At a lower level they had already borne administrative responsibility.

Attentism, collaboration, resistance and other forms of human behaviour developed during the occupation period. More than 20.000 Dutchmen joined the Waffen-SS, about 25.000 people joined the resistance and more than 100.000 Jews died in German camps. The number of Jews killed is one of the highest in Europe, contrary

to the widespread believe that the Dutch were so brave to help and protect their Jews. The liberation for the western part of Holland came in May 1945 after a harsh and hungry winter.

In April 1945 when the eastern part of the Netherlands was liberated, a couple made a journey by bicycle to register the extent of the damage with a film camera. These shots were first used in 1954 in the documentary film *Regaining by Work* (*Herwinnen door Werk*). A Dutch daily paper *De Volkskrant* was impressed by their 'lifelike image': "This is the great experience of this film which remained hidden for so long: It all really happened. We stood and queued for a bag of peat, the shop windows were all that empty and we were all so empty we were too tired to walk better".

The first Dutch film about the resistance, *Occupied Territory* by Frans Dupont had its premiere in November 1946. 'Right' and 'wrong' were clearly present in this rather confusing movie which reviewed many forms of resistance. Resistance fighters were daring individuals with a steady gaze, traitors looked shifty, and the plump Germans liked showy offices with plenty of (undoubtedly stolen) antiques and the only readily credited thing they said was the cry that "All Dutch are terrorists".

The apparently clear distinction between right and wrong was to play a central role in depictions of the Occupation in the coming decades. The former is emphasised as self-evident yet brave, while the latter should be ignored. No attention at all was paid to the majority group on the fence between these two.

A tendency in the Dutch courts of justice towards milder punishment and pardoning less serious offences could, however, be seen soon after the Liberation. During the Cold War former members of the *Waffen-SS* who fought against the Soviet Union started wondering what they had done wrong. While people were hard at work reconstructing the Netherlands, the prewar divided society returned. This reconstruction was largely accomplished thanks to considerable Marshall Aid from the United States, which also engendered close relations with America.

At the end of the Forties a film appeared which has been commissioned by a major resistance organisation which helped people to go into hiding and which carried out raids to acquire the necessary ration stamps and money. The cooperation shown between Catholics and Protestants, between priests and pastors was most remarkable, a unique breakthrough for the polarised prewar relations in the Netherlands. There were, however, signs of 'war weariness' as early as 1949. As a Dutch newspaper wrote: "The resistance has become a rather difficult topic for both literature and film, one which no longer appeals to a mass audience. This has repeatedly been apparent and it would be interesting to investigate the reasons... But there is reason to believe that the vast quantity of resistance film and resistance novels, which are also not always of tolerable quality, has made a considerable contribution to this aversion".

Publishers of war and resistance novels started facing problems in selling their wares. Anne Frank's *Diary* was first published in the summer of 1947 after having been refused by several publishers.

Things began to take shape in the Fifties. The Netherlands rapidly became a modern industrialised nation, governed by Catholic/social-democrat cabinet-coalitions. The absence of birth control for many people meant there was a tendency towards overpopulation and the government encouraged emigration. By the end of the Fifties, 300.000 Dutch people had left the country in search of a future elsewhere, which was regarded in Christian circles as an act of charity.

Although no Dutch films were produced, foreign films were to make some impression. In October 1953 the association of ex-political prisoners voiced its objection to plans for a 'Hollywood' film, *The True and the Brave*, to be made about the Dutch resistance. A film like that could never reflect the deadly earnestness of the resistance, according to statements by this group in the daily newspaper *De Volkskrant* in October of that year. Another former Dutch resistance organisation announced that it was pleased about the film and that the staff of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation had seen the script. The film critic of a liberal daily appeared to side with the film's opponents; the film was described as 'ridiculous Hollywood invention'.

On the opposite side, and years later, a short Dutch film was subject to a chorus of whistles at the Berlin Film Festival in 1961. It was *The House (Het Huis)* by Louis van Gasteren, which showed German soldiers occupying a Dutch house and then shooting the young tenant. The protesters described it as 'taktlos' and 'schamlos'.

It was not a feature film, but a series of Dutch television documentaries shown between 1960 and 1965 and entitled *The Occupation* which was very successful in reawakening awareness of the war and bringing it to the attention of a postwar generation. The historian and director of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, Louis de Jong was the driving force behind this project and the power of the broadcasts resulted from the countless interviews with those involved, excluding Germans and collaborators. The time was clearly not yet ripe to allow the other side to speak.

In 1962 the last real resistance film appeared: *The Silent Raid* by Paul Rotha, a 'realistic' reconstruction of a successful and nonviolent raid on a prison to liberate a number of resistance fighters. In this film you can see, as in a lot of other films, that the real hero in the Dutch war film is the lady's bicycle with a mostly blond brave girl struggling against the Dutch wind.

Two films with a different view on the war were made in the Sixties, one by Fons Rademakers and one by the Belgian writer and director Hugo Claus. The former adapted a book to produce *The Spitting Image*, which tackled the issues of resistance and collaboration in a complicated double game. This film had no more room for heroes. This could not be said of *The Enemies (De Vijanden)* by Hugo Claus, an anti-war film set during the Ardennes Offensive and depicting the attempts of an American, a Belgian and a German to survive. An attempt was made to show war as it really was, but not always successfully.

The first twenty post-war years were relatively painless in the Netherlands, apart from a colonial war. There was evidence of reconstruction and the harmony of an affluent society and a welfare state (of course not for everyone) and of voiced or tacit pride in the country's war record. In the second half of the Sixties so much changed, and so much at once, that Dutch items were constantly in the news abroad, a sure sign of success.

This time it was not just the windmills and clogs, but it was Amsterdam as a Mecca for youth, where you could sleep in the Vondel Park and even for a brief period on the steps of the National Remembrance Memorial in the capital.

The French documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (*Le chagrin et la pitié*) by Marcel Ophüls was also an eye-opener in Holland. It was shown on Dutch television; in France it was at first only shown in small filmtheatres.

Nevertheless, this film had a major impact in France, where people had cherished an illusion of four years of Occupation characterised by patriotism and resistance to the arch-enemy Germany. *The Sorrow and the Pity* revealed a different and much greyer image, where the 'ordinary' citizens went about their ordinary lives and obeying their superiors, creating the impression that little had changed.

Two years later, in 1974 Dutch television screened **Determined yet flexible and measured. 1938-1948. Memories of the Netherlands**. Just as in *The Sorrow and the Pity*, no moral judgment was presented; the viewers were to make up their own minds.

There was good reason to focus attention on these documentaries, because they would appear to depict the reality which was and is considered so important in feature films about the Occupation. That would appear to be no problem until the Sixties. The directors, actors and producers had experienced 1940-1945 themselves and all the films mentioned so far were 'real', each in their own way. This situation changed in the Seventies.

Firstly, young directors were obliged to refer to history books or to the knowledge of the staff of the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, while they also stated that they 'were continually active rewriting history'.

Filming well-known war books became the trend in war-film production after 1977. In that year Rob Houwer's film, *Soldier of Orange* appeared, based on a book by a well-known resistance fighter. It was a high-budget production by Dutch standards and, in part thanks to an active publicity campaign, it became a great success. Did the film depict 'dinner-jacket resistance', and adventurous time for student snobs or an exemplary piece of resistance? It was an exciting film, possibly the very last 'real' resistance film. It was full of swashbuckling adventure, a bit of sex and of course you saw the bad guys in German uniforms and even the Dutch queen.

*Pastorale 1943* appeared a year later. It was also a resistance film, but less heroic than *Soldier of Orange* and also based on a novel. *Pastorale 1943* revealed for

the first time that resistance in Holland was not like that in France or Yugoslavia. There was no well-armed and well-trained Maquis or a Tito, but clumsy and almost impractical resistance. Someone is eventually shot dead - it is wartime after all - but he turns out to have been innocent. The film would appear to have been a rather belated translation of the disbelief in the heroism of resistance which had appeared ten years earlier, toning down the 'good'.

Adaptions and transformations from literature are not new (see for instance Eric Rentschlers book about German film and literature) but in Holland it is really a trend. The best Dutch film, *The Assault*, won an Oscar in 1987 for the best foreign film, and it is no coincidence that this film was a very moving adaption from a novel written by one of our greatest writers. It was filmed by Foss Rademakers, one of our leading directors who escaped during the war to Switzerland. *The Assault* does not stop in 1945, but gives a full view of the forty years *after* the five years of occupation in the Netherlands. The twelve-year old Anton Steenwijk is a witness at the end of the war to the shooting of his parents and brother, and the burning down of their home as a reprisal. He is unable to come to terms with this past. His own war-time experience can only be mastered after three other episodes of war and occupation - Korea in 1952, Hungary in 1956 and Vietnam in 1966- and one hopeful event: the massive Dutch peace demonstrations in 1981. The protagonist is not a hero nor a coward, neither right nor wrong, but nor was he ordinary; his war experience was far from ordinary.

*The Assault* is really an exception. Most films still concentrate on 'right' and 'wrong' and a deep-rooted gradation of this will only be possible when the Occupation has really been assimilated. Only then will the camera be able to tackle the largest group which had stood on neither the right nor the wrong side. Right or wrong, don't look back, it no longer seems to matter what the film is about; professionals and amateurs alike immediately tackle the level of realism in the films. The colours on the German cars are not green enough or the dresses are not properly wartime, etcetera, etcetera. I think the reality of swastikas, German helmets and the yellow stars on Jews cannot be captured by the moving image. In my opinion film directors should concentrate exclusively on the contents; how do and did people react to each other and their environment; how do you become a traitor or just stay yourself? I promised to compare the Dutch film with the British cinema. I will only give a hint on that subject.

One of the main missing factors in Dutch film is the lack of the fighting itself, no tanks, no guns, no slaughter, no real battle. *The Silent Raid*, a film from 1962, was partly famous because of its lack of violence. It is this fighting, on land, at sea and in the air, which was and is an important factor in the English World War II movie. And it was the Falkland/Malvinas War, ten years ago, which prompted discussion in Britain about the Second World War films. During the Falkland/Malvinas War the right wing government of Thatcher tried to mobilise the British by lying to them that it was Britain's 'Finest Hour', just as in the Second World War, now with the Argentines as the bad guys.

The most important difference between Holland and Britain is of course that the first country was occupied and the second not, with the exception of the Channel Islands. In Holland everybody always had to choose what to do; to cooperate or to collaborate with the enemy or to go into hiding or to join the resistance. In Britain there was no choice and no collaboration problem after the war, a problem which still haunts our country. In Britain you could be killed by German bombs, but everybody had more or less the same chance to get killed. In Holland you could be shot as an individual because you resisted voluntarily, with the exception of the Jews, which were killed en masse.

Another difference, much older than the war, is the two-class society in Britain, much deeper than in the Netherlands. The films made in Britain during the war to keep up the spirit, tends to deny those differences. Workers and students, farmers and gentry, shoulder to shoulder, had their finest hour in fighting for King, Country and Empire. The class differences are less in Holland and the World War II movies do not show any interest in them, but the Dutch were also fighting for Queen, Country and, later on, the Empire. For Britain, the Second World War was one of the many wars where men fought as soldiers. The First World War is still important in Britain and also known as The Great War; in Holland 'The War' is always the Second World War.

The British see the Germans as just enemies, no more and no less. Every year German and British fighter pilots have a reunion were they have a drink with each other and where they talk about the Battle of Britain, when they tried to kill each other. Unthinkable in Holland.

It is also unthinkable in Holland to make comedy films about the war; in Britain it is fairly common, think about *Dads Army*, a famous television-serial and *Allo Allo*, also a serial on television. Hitler or Goering making fun in *Monty Python* is normal in Britain, but even our most liberal televisionchannel would not dare to show such a thing.

While the occupation and resistance to Nazism are important in Dutch films, the war itself is most dominant in British films and, beginning a few years ago, what we call domestic problems. In *Hope and Glory* by John Boorman (1987) you could see them, problems of clothing, the invasion of Canadian and American soldiers, while the boys and husbands are fighting at the front or behind some dusty desk.

One film combines Holland and Britain: *One of our Aircrafts is Missing*, filmed in 1941 by Michael Powell. Brave Dutch citizen, all dressed in Edam or Volendam costumes, all of them on wooden shoes, are helping an English crew. In no time the fighter-pilots are on a boat back to England, ready to fight again.