The Great War That Largely Passed Us by in the Netherlands

'If we want to understand and ultimately to put behind us the cataclysmic record of European history in this century, we must revisit the war that set in motion these enduring centrifugal and centripetal forces, propelling us away from and towards a unified Europe'.

Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History,* Cambridge 1995, p. 1

During a conference for the Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD) in 1997, I gave a lecture on 'The Great War' that passed us by – a blank spot in the historic consciousness of the Netherlands.

My lecture focused on the question of how far we in the Netherlands were aware that the First World War had opened a chasm between the world before 1914 and the world afterwards, and where that chasm could be seen.

Did the World War perspective penetrate the Dutch consciousness, and if so, to what extent? In other words, did we begin to realise that this war had been a watershed event in the history of Europe – and even in the history of the world? This brought about, amongst other things, the end of stability in Europe, now this *Urkatastrophe* ('great seminal catastrophe')[1] had caused so many chain reactions in Europe.

It is the Second World War that is ingrained in the collective memory of the Dutch as a national trauma. There can be no misunderstanding: when people in the Netherlands talked – and talk – about 'the war', we mean the Second World War. That is *the* great caesura in our own national history.

This sets the Netherlands apart from neighbouring countries where 'the Great War' still means the First World War. This war, a watershed event for the whole of Europe, has not become – or hardly – part of our collective memory in the Netherlands. For the Dutch, what the Germans refer to as historische *Erfahrbarkeit*, or experience of history, does not extend back as far as 1914-1918; it goes back no further than the Second World War.

That is why November is not a month of remembrance in the Netherlands. In our country, the poppy has not become an especially symbolic flower. There are very few First World War monuments in the Netherlands, in contrast to other countries such as France, where the Great War resulted in a veritable monument industry.

Belgian soldiers in the Smitskerkje, Bergen op Zoom, October 1914

In his great work on the 20th century (1988), the French historian René Rémond wrote:

'La célébration du 11 Novembre éclipsera toujours celle du 8 mai 1945.... Ce n'est que vingt ans plus tard que l'affectation d'un numéro d'ordre, à l'instar des Anglo-Saxons - World War One, World War Two -, déclassera cette guerre unique, réduite à n'être plus désormais que la première d'une série désignée par des adjectifs numériques.'[2]

For the Netherlands, it was and is an inestimable privilege and advantage that the Great War passed us by. But this has its disadvantages too. By not experiencing this trauma first-hand, our country missed a crucial turning point in the modern history of our continent. The decline of the old Europe passed almost unnoticed. Consequently, after 1914, the Netherlands kept to its own chronology that continued until the next caesura: the Second World War. Our historical timeline diverged from that of all the countries that had experienced the *Urkatastrophe*.

Partly for this reason, the 'short' 20th century (1914-1989) was even shorter in the Netherlands, and many lines of development from the 'long' 19th century (1789-1914) continued uninterrupted. Consequently, our picture of the violent

Otto Dix, *Dance of Death Anno* 1917. (Der Krieg, 1924)

20th century has remained largely incomplete, compared to our neighbouring countries. We can even speak of an 'amputated', truncated perspective, as a result of which the Second World War has remained centre-stage. It resembles a Greek tragedy of which one sees only the second act.

And that is certainly the case in a country where historical awareness is poorly developed and historical questions in general do not play an important role in day-to-day, public life.

Knowledge of history from books is a poor substitute for first-hand experience. There can be no doubt about it: the First World War is 'beyond our national sphere of remembrance'. Events that people have not experienced for themselves are not internalised, or only to a limited extent, and do not become part of the national historical experience.

In that respect, it is a serious disadvantage, in terms of knowledge, to have underestimated the significance of WWI, or have even overlooked that great watershed event in the history of Europe – and even in the history of the world – for so long. As a result, we in the Netherlands were less aware than our neighbours of not only what was called a 'new Europe', but also of the *Selbstentmachtung* (self-disempowerment) of Europe. This also meant that the Dutch

failed to perceive the Second World War as one of a series of disasters in what historians call the 'short twentieth century', and this did nothing to help the Dutch towards a more realistic understanding of the balance of power in Europe and of Europe's position in the world after 1914.

Some degree of understanding of the century's history and the structural problems that led to major conflicts in Europe is indispensable in order to make sense of the post-Cold War Europe in which we live today.

Umwertung aller Werte

There are many issues in history on which historians do not agree, and in many cases they are the subject of a never-ending discussion. However, it can be said that there is consensus among today's historians on the significance of the First World War. They nod in agreement at terms such as *Umwertung aller Werte* ('transvaluation of all values'), and agree that the First World War was the major catalyst for the many disasters later in the 20th century; the beginning of an era of tyrannies and dictatorship, a war that continued its natural progression into another war, and yet another – albeit a 'cold' one.

The First World War gave birth to a tradition of mega-violence. What other event prompted mobilisation on such a scale as WWI? It was a new dimension of horrors that Karl D. Bracher described as 'the paradigm for the great wars of the future'.

The 1914 war was therefore the first 'democratic' war in history. The war affected people at all levels of society in every country that was involved. It was a war not only of motorisation and mechanisation, but above all of large numbers: soldiers, resources, materials and deaths; a *Materialschlacht*, a 'war of resources'.

When the war finally ended, Europe found itself in a state of profound sorrow and confusion, but at the same time it eagerly anticipated and had great expectations of a better world. Modris Eksteins highlights the explosion of artistic creativity unleashed by and after this uprooting.

The war had abruptly undermined the idea of steady progress. Politics fell into the grasp of totalitarian ideological movements, political schools of thought in which everything became an issue. The 'old' had lost its significance; in the world that replaced it people were swept along by increasingly extreme opinions.

It was the birth of an age of extreme consequences and cumulative extremism (Hans Mommsen). Sensibilities were heightened, partly due to an extensive friend/enemy propaganda machine. At the same time, these years were characterised by a strong urge for a return to stability – an urge so strong that it only made things more unstable.

A new era of European instability had begun, in terms of the balance of power, national borders and social and political regimes.

A peace made for the dead

The war had dragged on endlessly in the mud. For years, the powers that be proved unable to bring it to an end.[3] Europe changed in all respects. The old empires had crumbled, and many new states were constructed at the end of the war, as if on a drawing board or with a Meccano set. 'It was the thought of the new Serbia, the new Greece, the new Bohemia, the new Poland which made our

hearts sing hymns at heaven's gate', the British eye witness Harold Nicolson wrote about Versailles in his *Peacemaking*, 1919 (p.33).[4]

The Fabian, Beatrice Webb, saw everywhere 'new things around which all who are discontent with the old order foregather' (Beatrice Webb, quoted in Mayer, p.390).

What was still referred to in 1919 as the Spring of Nations, Masaryk's *The World Revolution*, a liberation from the 'prison of nations', was seen as the opposite ten years later. The history of Europe is a constant battle between stability and freedom. After 1919, stability was based on revolutionary principles (A. Sharp).[5]

Contemporaries, among them the Dutchman Ernst Heldring, spoke of a 'scandalous and impracticable peace treaty that will keep Europe in a state of unrest'. In Paris, on 2 March 1919, Heldring wrote in his diary: 'I have the impression that all the discussions of the diplomats and statesmen here will soon

Lloyd George,
Georges Clemenceau,
Woodrow Wilson.
Versailles, 1919

be swept away by the great wave of revolution that is about to engulf the world. The French, in particular, are proving largely unaware of the serious times that are ahead of us'.

The Dutch historian H.Th. Colenbrander spoke in 1919 of 'a peace – made for the dead – that we, the living, must now submit to'. In the words of Paul Valéry during a lecture in Zürich in 1922: 'The storm has abated, yet we are still restless and do not feel at ease, as if the storm could break again at any moment'.

And that is what happened: the war continued after 1918, albeit in other ways. Revisionism became one of the highly destabilising factors after Versailles. At best, the perception was that Versailles had created at least as many problems as it had solved. At worst, Versailles was seen as dynamite that made stable relations impossible.

In the words of John M. Keynes in his book about Versailles that was as critical as it was famous: 'The Treaty includes no provisions for the economic rehabilitation of Europe - nothing to make the defeated Central Empires into good neighbours, nothing to stabilize the new States of Europe, nothing to reclaim Russia; nor does it promote in any way a compact of economic solidarity amongst the Allies themselves; no agreement was reached at Paris for restoring the disordered finances of France and Italy, or to adjust the systems of the Old World and the New' (I. Clark, *Globalization*, p.52).

Versailles lacked what was known as an 'oblivion' clause, that salutary peacemaking 'forgetting', the amnesty clause of earlier peace treaties that were oriented to reconciliation rather than to retribution and reparations. In the aftermath of war, a policy of letting bygones be bygones is a prerequisite for an effective peace treaty that restores stable relations. In his classic work, *The Twenty Years' Crisis: 1919–1939*, the British historian E. H. Carr speaks of 'the unprecedented vindictiveness' of the peace treaties of 1919 (p.61).

The League of Nations was a plaster that was too small for the large, deep wounds of war. Critics referred to the League as a pill to cure an earthquake, but their objections did nothing to quell the 'No More War' sentiment.

Not only did the European state system unravel in 1919, but also, as contemporaries were already pointing out, Europe's position in the world was seriously undermined by this self-disempowerment. According to A.J.P. Taylor, 'In January 1918 Europe ceased to be the centre of the world'. In 1924, the French historian René Grousset spoke of a 'réveil de l'Asie' – a reawakening of Asia. He argued that, following the Europeanization of Asia, Asia would revolt against Europe. The 'old continent' continued to rule its colonies but it was the beginning of the end, although few noticed.

In order not to give the impression that everything was new after the great *Umbruch* of 1914, it should be emphasised that, despite this 'earthquake', many lines of continuity in institutions, behavioural patterns, mentality etc. remained. As the German historian H.U. Wehler once remarked, the two World Wars worked as an accelerator as well as a brake.

Germany was an extreme example of the overlapping of continuity and discontinuity. German history in general is characterised by a continuity of fractures. Karl D. Bracher's crucial question: 'Wie tief ist der geschichtliche Bruch, wie stark die Kontinuität der Vorkriegswelt?'- 'How deep the historical fracture, how strong the continuity of the prewar world?' - would not be out of place in the library of many a historical institute.

Cognitive maps need to be revised

What consequences did the First World War have for the position of the Netherlands in the fabric of the European state system that had been so drastically rent asunder, and what were the consequences for Dutch colonialism?

Few Dutch contemporaries saw the consequences of the major changes in the years after 1919.[6] In his short memoirs of the post-World War Two period, Beyen (1897-1976), the Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs and a great European, compared 1914 with the fall of Constantinople, the discovery of America and the French Revolution. In his view, 1914 had been a much clearer caesura, but he emphasised that 'back to normalcy' soon became the motto again after 1918. With regard to the Netherlands, he added that it was governed between 1918 and 1940 by what he referred to as two 'nineteenth-century' figures: Colijn and De Geer. 'They ended on the debris of their politics. But people did not see this until the next war' (p.117). Unlike most of its neighbours, the Netherlands did not lose its naiveté and innocence in the period 1914-18.

During and after the First World War, the Netherlands was accused, mainly by the British, of using its professed neutrality to camouflage a pro-German stance. Publications such as *The Economist* calculated how much profit the Netherlands had made from the war. In short, the world was not terribly impressed with us in 1919. It is even more surprising, then, that the government, aware of how vulner-

able the Netherlands was during those years, remained so obstinate regarding the German emperor's controversial escape into exile in the Netherlands.

Since 1945, the historiography of the First World War has remained largely incomplete; too little attention has been paid to this area of research. There is still a great deal of lost ground to make up in terms of our knowledge of WWI and the post-war period.

Our view of history urgently needs to be 'Europeanized', if only to bring it back into line with that of our neighbours after all these decades.

As mentioned above, there are still many questions relating to the Netherlands and the First World War that have not been researched. There is much that historical research can clarify, particularly with regard to the nature of Dutch neutrality.

Just as in 1919 we can now ask about the position of the Netherlands in today's Europe, after the great *Umbruch* of 1989/91, after the end of the division of Europe. Have our 'cognitive maps' of Europe been properly updated since 1989? Are we aware that we are now living in a completely different Europe?

The era of the Second World War – including its sequel in the Cold War – does not end until the revolutions of 1989/91. Not until then is the division of Europe – and therefore of Germany – come to an end, followed by the fall of the Soviet Union. It means the end of that exceptional period in which so many structural elements of European history were temporarily thrown out of action.

In the *International Herald Tribune* of 18 April 1997, the renowned American columnist Flora Lewis warned that 'History is not fatality, but European history has brought too many tragedies to risk slipping back into the old ways'.

There is not yet a clear answer to the question of how our continent must or can continue after the major crisis of 2008. At the very least, we should disentangle and analyse the lines of development that lead to the present.

Us too

There are historians who are almost unable to formulate a single sentence without using – either implicitly or explicitly – the terms 'construction', invention' or 'representation'. This school itself freely indulges in all manner of constructions and is consequently no longer hindered by constraining proportions of extent such as great or small. They frequently aim to give the impression that the Netherlands was involved – in one way or another – in the major episode in history known as the First World War. After all, this too is a matter of how you present it.

Although relatively little attention was paid in the Netherlands to the First World War before the 1990s, since then there has been a sort of 'appropriation' hype, with all its confusing reactions: an 'us too' sentiment, 'the war didn't pass the Netherlands by', 'we're part of it too, a lot of things happened here in 1914-18'. The revision of established views of history often leads to overemphasis.

But for goodness' sake let us not needlessly complicate things even further: in the years 1914-1918, the people of the Netherlands enjoyed a level of security, freedom and prosperity that was so painfully lacking in other countries – like Belgium, for example.

Let us not lose sight of the hard facts: the numbers of dead and wounded. Was a whole generation of men wiped out, as in Britain? 'More undead in the Netherlands', it was said in London at the time. How great was the destruction

of buildings and infrastructure in the Netherlands? Yes, the army was mobilised. But there were few victims. There were civilian casualties, however, in the merchant navy and the Navy. But there were no battlefields, no trench warfare, no air raids (as on Leuven), no minorities issue, no morbid absurdism in the arts. The end of the kingdom, the beginning of the republic.

We cannot speak of a collective experience of immense violence and slaughter. There was no urgent demand for women to work. There were many war refugees, and there were border incidents, but this did not make the Netherlands into one of the countries that had truly suffered during the war.

Is this not a form of 'levelling', of putting problems of widely varying importance on a par? Matters of life and death on the one hand, and on the other the question of how people survived. [7]

'The war was not a deluge which swept all before it, but at best a winter storm which swelled the rivers of change'. ■

Translated by Yvette Mead

NOTES

1. A concise summary of the many major effects of WWI can be found in Wolfgang J. Mommsen's introduction *Europe on the Eve of the First World War:*
'The debate about the First World War and its origins goes on up to the present day with unabated vigour. This is in no way surprising if we consider the momentous changes effected by the First World War and its political, social, economic and cultural consequences. It destroyed a system of culture dominated by an elitist intelligentsia closely interrelated with the rising commercial and industrial classes and reflecting their self-confidence and high self-esteem, but also a comparatively sophisticated life style. It resulted in the breakdown of the European system of powers and the rise of new superpowers, the U.S., and, with some delay, the USSR. It led to a long period of instability and political crisis which paved the way for the rise to power of Fascism and National Socialism on the one hand, Soviet Communism on the other. It also marked the end of the European hegemony over the rest of the globe and initiated the process which eventually led to the collapse of the older European empires, even though decolonisation began in earnest only after the Second World War.' (In: J.J. Becker and S. Audoin (eds.), *Les sociétés européennes et la guerre de 1914 - 1918*. Nanterre 1990, p.23).

2. 'The celebration of 11 November will always eclipse that of 8 May 1945. Yet only twenty years later the attribution of a number, in the Anglo-Saxon fashion – World War One, World War Two - was to downgrade this unique war, to reduce it from then on to nothing more than the first of a series referred to by numerical adjectives.'

3. cf. D.C. Watt, *How War Came. The Immediate Origins of the Second World War.* 1989, (p.12): 'What was disastrous for Europe was not so much the outbreak of the First World War, but the inability or unwillingness of anyone in the seats of power and authority to bring the war to an early end'.

4. In the introduction to *Peacemaking*, 1919 (ed. 1943), Nicolson wrote these pessimistic words: 'We succeeded in balkanizing Europe, although we Europeanized the Balkans'.

5. cf. E.H. Carr, *Crisis*, pp.129 and 123: 'The impulse which it (WWI) gave to the pursuit of autarky was immediate and powerful'. 'The victors of 1918 "lost the peace" in Central Europe because they continued to pursue a principle of political and economic disintegration in an age which called for larger and larger units.' (p. 230).

Homecoming, Australia, 1919

Otto Dix,
Near Langemark
February 1918.
(Der Krieg, 1924)

6. Colenbrander's opening sentence in 1920 was as follows: 'One of the most remarkable phenomena in the recent history of the Netherlands is the indifference that recently arose here with regard to our position and role in international politics. Although newspaper readers in the Netherlands were in the habit of saying that they read detailed correspondences on what was happening in the world, they had become unaccustomed to asking – let alone answering – the question of how events abroad might influence the fate and interests of their own country. It was as if it went without saying that no-one would trouble the Netherlands.' (H.T. Colenbrander, *De internationale toestand van Nederland tijdens, vóór en na den wereld-oorlog.* In: H. Brugmans (ed.), *Nederland in den oorlogstijd.* Amsterdam 1920, p.103).
Regarding the strong German orientation of the Netherlands, Colenbrander remarked: 'The Dutch had a high regard for Germany....Beatific admiration for all that was German was all too common, and slavish imitation was a real danger'. (p.110)

7. The Netherlands did experience these aspects of the war: mobilisation, a foodstuffs act, food distribution, civilian casualties (e.g. at sea), minefields at sea, smuggling, an electric fence between the Netherlands and Belgium constructed by the Germans, border incidents, air raids on towns and villages in the province of Zeeland (Zierikzee and Sluis were particularly badly hit), large numbers of refugees. In the end 80,000 Belgians stayed in the Netherlands for the duration of the war. They were housed in refugee camps.

Paul Schulten and Martin Kraaijenstein (eds) *Leven naast de catastrofe. Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Hilversum 2001,* p.169: 'The greatest and most famous monument to the reception of refugees is undoubtedly the Belgian Monument near Amersfoort. It is a symbol of Belgium's gratitude to the Netherlands for taking in so many refugees. Political difficulties between the two countries after the war made an official ceremony impossible. It was not until 22 September 1938 that the Belgian King Leopold III unveiled the commemorative plaque'.

I am largely in agreement with the criticism expressed by my colleague Piet Blaas. He wrote: 'For a long time we have lacked a 'First World War' perspective. We were unaware – or not sufficiently aware – of the serious structural consequences of conflict on international relations… In his lecture, Brands makes a second claim that could be regarded as more or less following on from the first, namely that since 1945, the historiography of the First World War has remained largely incomplete; too little attention has been paid to this area of research'. I think this statement could be more nuanced'. Blaas is right about this, and also about the fact that I should have mentioned the Utrecht historian and commentator G.W. Kernkamp. In: M. Kraaijenstein and P. Schulten (eds.), *Wankel evenwicht. Neutraal Nederland en de eerste Wereldoorlog.* 2007, p.15 ff.