

Three Questions That Do Not Go Away

The Netherlands and the Shoah

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[M A A R T E N A S S C H E R]



There are some cruelties that over time seem to acquire more significance rather than less. As more facts about them become known and as the perspective of memory widens into history, their true proportions become more and more apparent and so their commemoration gains ever more significance. One such historical enormity was inflicted on the Dutch population, namely the five years of terrorizing occupation by Nazi Germany and especially the systematic murder of approximately 104,000 Dutch Jews in the years 1940 to 1945. There seem to be three crucial questions with regard to that period of Dutch history, three questions that dominate the historical debate up to the present day, three painful questions that – despite countless studies, articles, autobiographies and interviews – simply do not go away. Before addressing these three questions, let me make some preliminary remarks.

In the year 2010 it was 65 years since the German occupation of the Netherlands ended. This prompted the Dutch government to set up a publicity campaign under the title 'The Second World War is Retiring'. The idea seems to have been that The War was now so long ago that its commemoration would cease to be meaningful for new generations and that the time had come to put it away in the Retirement Home of history, among the many other historical episodes in our nation's past, like the 80 Years War with Spain in the 17th century

or the years 1810-1813, when the Netherlands was made a part of the French Empire. In another attempt to take the sting out of World War II memories, the Dutch government has in recent decades broadened the scope of the official yearly commemoration of wartime victims on 4th May to include Dutch citizens who died in subsequent wars and so-called international 'peace operations'.

In my view, these attempts to reorganise the collective Dutch memory of the war against Nazi Germany and the ugly years of occupation from 1940 to 1945 have had some alienating effects for individual groups of victims and their descendants. It is quite tragic for a family to lose a son or a grandson in a UN peace mission in Afghanistan, but it is a totally different tragedy from the tragedy of a man whose father was executed by the SS as a resistance fighter during World War II, or the tragedy of Dutch Jews who lost their parents or grandparents in the Shoah.

In an even more fundamental way, and from the very beginning of the Dutch post-war period, the Dutch government tried to appropriate the memory of the German occupation by establishing an official government agency in 1945 called the State Institute for War Documentation. The good thing about this official institute was its collection and preservation of many thousands of documents about the war period that would perhaps otherwise have been lost. The bad thing was that the State Institute was a state institute. The questionable role during the German occupation of so many state officials such as the police, the judicial authorities, railway functionaries etc. warranted a much more independent approach to the historiography of the wartime years in the Netherlands. As a consequence, many unpleasant truths or even downright scandalous episodes concerning the Dutch authorities in their dealings with the Nazis were not or not sufficiently covered by the 14-volume official Dutch national history of the war. Instead they were revealed over time by independent historians and publicists, whose work is still going on. In recent years, even since the so-called 'retirement' of the Second World War, new facts have come to light about the behaviour of civil servants, of state museums, of the Supreme Court, including the sometimes unjust or even inhuman attitude of the Dutch authorities towards victims of Nazi persecution after the war ended.

Out of all these books, studies and articles, and the many autobiographies and diaries that are still being published, three central questions emerge that continue to trigger fierce debate whenever an opinion is expressed about them. Together, these three questions seem to summarise the ethical dilemmas that underpin the story of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and of the genocide inflicted on Dutch Jewry.

The first question is: was it always possible for ordinary people, living in the midst of daily reality, to distinguish clearly between good and evil, to choose between resistance and collaboration? Over the years, as the heroic first-person narratives of former resistance men and women have died away, historians and journalists with more detachment have maintained that rather than a choice between black and white, living in the Netherlands under Nazi occupation was a question of nuances, that it was often impossible to distinguish between what and who was good, on the one hand, and what and who was bad, on the other. In the words of one of these recent historians, wartime reality was by definition a grey zone.

In my view, this line of reasoning is used more often than not to whitewash stories of collaboration, to quench a feeling of guilt or simply to blur the distinction







between perpetrators and bystanders on the one hand and victims on the other. In such a view of the years 1940-1945, all Dutch people become victims of history, the only difference being that some resisted more and others less, and that some survived and others did not. I must confess that I cannot accept this reductionist and opportunistic view of morality in wartime. There are undoubtedly many forms and nuances of morally reprehensible behaviour, but I think it is important to acknowledge and admire those who did act when it was necessary, who did protect other people at the risk or sometimes even at the cost of their own lives. There is nothing grey about that, and if the ugly history of Nazi occupation can produce anything by way of a moral lesson, it is that impossible dilemmas are the truest test of human morality and human courage. Those who did pass that test, for example those who helped the Anne Frank family, should be put on a metaphorical pedestal and not dragged down to the level of confusion, compromise and collaboration where so many others struggled.

The second uncomfortable question that does not seem to go away is the question: why did such a high percentage of Jews in the Netherlands perish in the Shoah, while in other European countries the percentage was much lower? In the Netherlands only 25 percent of the Jews survived Nazi persecution. In Belgium, for example, the figure was 62 percent, while in France, with its strong tradition of anti-Semitism, no less than 75 percent of the Jews survived. Even in Germany itself, a Jew had more chance of surviving the Nazi persecution than in the Netherlands. The reasons for these shameful statistics, especially for a country like the Netherlands that likes to pride itself on its longstanding tradition of tolerance and humanism, are quite complex, and they cannot be summarized in a few sentences. According to the most recent studies on the subject, the poor record of the Netherlands in protecting its Jewish population should be seen in the light of the characteristics of the civilian regime that the Nazis established in the occupied territory of the Netherlands and the all-powerful German police in our country, whose raids and deportation programmes met with little protest or resistance, and in many cases with indifference or even collaboration. But even if 10 or 100 more studies on the subject were to be undertaken, analysing still further the fate of the Jews in the Netherlands as compared to other European countries, ultimately there is only one conclusion to be drawn: in 1940-1945 the Netherlands failed its Jews; the Dutch people did not do enough to protect them. Everybody – including the Jewish population itself – should have done more to resist, to escape, to go into hiding. This conclusion is rarely drawn, for two reasons, firstly because it is too simplistic and secondly because it is useless, as history has already run its course and cannot be altered.

But if there is something like national pride, there should also be something like national shame, and I think it is proper and useful

for a country to express and to maintain this shame as an integral part of its national heritage. On a personal note, I should add that my own grandfather resisted his persecution and that of his wife and three children as much as he could. After a failed attempt to flee the country in May 1940, he succeeded in 1943, with the help of forged legal documents, in getting out of the transit camp Westerbork, where the family was taken after being arrested by Dutch policemen. Thus the family was spared further deportation to the East and was able to hide and avoid further torment at the hands of the Nazis. The lawyer who assisted my grandparents and their children to survive the war in this way was honoured, on the initiative of my father, by Yad Vashem as a Righteous Among the Nations. His name was Ysbrand Nijgh. His courage and determination to save people were unfortunately all too rare. That, to my mind, is the final truth about the high percentage of Dutch Jews exterminated in the years of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands.

The third question that persistently crops up, to the point that it will never fully go away, is the question: did people know about the fate that awaited Jews who were deported to the East? This is an important question, because if people were aware of what was happening or going to happen to the Jews, then their feelings of shared responsibility, even of guilt by association, and certainly their resulting shame should be greater in proportion to their knowledge. If, on the other hand, they knew nothing and could not have known, there is at least some possible justification for their not resisting harder, helping more and protecting more generously and more effectively. This issue is not just a Dutch question, and it is perhaps even more complex than the other two questions. So I cannot answer this third question by summarizing the literature on the subject, which is simply too vast to read even in a lifetime. Different historians come up with different interpretations, depending on their evaluation of documents, radio speeches, newspaper reports, diaries and autobiographies. Some authors say: at the time people did *not* know about the fate of the Jews, but in their heart of hearts, on the basis of persistent rumours, they feared the worst. Other authors say: of course many people *did* know; the reports and rumours were clear enough, but they did not want to accept the truth until it was too late. In my view, there is no real contradiction between these two interpretations.

This may sound strange to you, but it has to do with the semantics of two crucial words in the question 'Did people know about the fate of the Jews?' Firstly, what do we mean by 'people'? There are individuals, families, colleagues, friends, neighbours. All those people hear, read, tell others things. Under enemy occupation, without press freedom, without radios and under a perverted state regime, everyone is thrown back on a small circle that can be trusted. One of the pernicious consequences of an enemy occupation is precisely that no one is to be trusted until the contrary can be proved, and that the people in a general sense, or 'public opinion', ceases to exist. So it is impossible to say that 'people' knew or that 'people' did not know. Any such opinion is a construction in retrospect.

The second ambiguity in the question is the verb 'to know'. 'Did people *know* about the fate of the Jews?' What is 'to know'? Is it: 'to have strong indications'? Is it: 'to assume something'? Or is it: 'to be absolutely certain of something?' or 'to have no doubt about it?' Knowing comes in countless nuances of certainty, and in a time of war, a time of lies, disinformation and diabolical deceit, it is impossible to talk unambiguously about anything that is not before your very eyes. Even in our present time of peace it is difficult to act upon what you know.



For example, I know that our way of living, travelling and consuming gravely endangers the environment, that there is no solution to the problem of nuclear waste, that the world economic crisis will only get worse. But what does this knowledge mean for my daily conduct? I do my job and try to make a success of it. What do I tell my three children? I tell them to do their homework and to make sure they pass their exams. And I trust that sometime in the future, when grave problems present themselves, problems that may even threaten our very existence, we will together have the strength and resourcefulness to solve them. I hope for the best, and I prepare for the worst, but I do not tell my family each day that the end is nigh. So, as I said before, there is no real difference between '*not knowing* but fearing the worst', on the one hand, and '*knowing*, but not wishing to accept the truth', on the other.

I am aware that the three questions I have addressed may be too complex to tackle in a brief text. But I still wanted to talk about them, not only because in the Netherlands these historic issues keep coming back to trouble the conscience of historians and non-historians alike. In fact they are certain to obsess anyone who reflects on the history of the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and the persecution of Dutch Jews. But I also wanted to talk about them because these three questions illustrate so vividly the need to safeguard well-informed public opinion, an open and democratic society, in which the government at all levels can be held accountable for its adherence to and enforcement of the rule of law and its respect for the constitutional rights of its citizens. It is in such a society that we can hope to find citizens who are able to distinguish between resistance and collaboration, between good and evil, citizens who have the curiosity, the commitment and – if necessary – the courage to live up to their moral responsibility. ■

This is a slightly edited version of a talk given under the auspices of the Instituto Holandés de Buenos Aires at the 2013 Feria Internacional del Libro in Buenos Aires. Maarten Asscher is a writer and bookseller living in Amsterdam. His latest book is *Appels en peren. Lof van de vergelijking* (Apples and Pears. In Praise of Comparing), published in 2013.

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