THE TRAUMA OF A LOST WAR

A painful past as a problem of historical consciousness

Half a century ago German armies overran the Netherlands. From 10 to 14 May 1940 there were five days of often fierce fighting. Then Rotterdam was bombed, and in the afternoon of Tuesday May 14 the Dutch supreme command decided to capitulate. There was no general armistice, for the navy and what remained of the airforce took refuge in Britain to continue the fight, together with the colonies. Queen Wilhelmina and her cabinet established themselves in London.

The German attack and the subsequent sudden defeat came as a great shock to the Dutch people. I was a young fellow of nineteen then, and I still have a vivid memory of these days and in particular of the moment the capitulation became known. Together with others I was just busy unloading a train with wounded soldiers; many of them wept or were furious because the fighting had ended. Opposite the ramp where the hospital-train stood many Jews lived. They also wept, but for another reason too. There were many suicides in the days after that Tuesday. It all seemed incredible.

The Netherlands since 1839 were a neutral country. They had remained neutral during World War I, and then we had not become involved. The word 'neutrality' had acquired an almost mythical meaning; because we were neutral, we simply were entitled to be left in peace. After all, weren't we the country of Grotius, the country where international law had originated? So, when in September 1939 World War II began, neutrality was proclaimed again. Not many persons realized that in 1914-1918 our neutrality had not been violated only because the surrounding powers saw no advantage in attacking us. This time it might turn out otherwise. But public opinion was quite sure that it would work again. On May 8 an American newspaper wrote that two German armies were massing on the Dutch frontier; the cabinet, however, gave it out that this was stark nonsense. Two days later these two armies invaded the country.

After a short period of the utmost confusion following on the defeat and the German occupation of the country, a vigorous mental reaction set in. It was nation-wide, and nobody knew who started it. The leading idea was that there was really nothing to be ashamed of. Brutally and without any warning, Nazi Germany had fallen upon an innocent neutral country. She had attacked us with forces far superior to our own. The vanguard of the invading army had been formed by crack divisions, in particular highly trained and fanatical SS-Standarte.

The Germans, as a war-loving people, were thoroughly experienced fighters whereas the Netherlands had not known war for far more than a century. Totally new methods of warfare were used against us; paratroopers and airborne troops had landed in the west of the country with the order to occupy all the bridges between Brabant and Rotterdam, and after the conquest of The Hague, to bring the Queen and her ministers to Berlin, so that the war would be over on its very first morning.

But the Germans had reckoned without their host. Our unexperienced and badly equipped soldiers put up such a fierce resistance that the war did not last a few hours but five days. This made the German command nervous, for the delay began to upset their plans for the attack on France. In order to speed up the affair they did not shrink back from committing atrocities. Prisoners of war were shot, captured soldiers were used as a shield for advancing German troops. And to crown it all, in the early afternoon of May 14, the inner city of Rotterdam was destroyed by a terroristic bombardment that caused thirty thousand casualties. When the Germans threatened to do the same with Utrecht and a number of other cities, the supreme command really had no choice.

True enough, we were defeated. But the Germans had had to pay an enormous prize. Everybody knew stories about their gigantic losses. Car loads of fallen men were transported back to Germany every night. Nobody might come near the Meuse because innumerable German corpses were drifting in it. And hundreds, perhaps even thousands of German soldiers had lost their lives when storming the Dutch stronghold at the Frisian end of the IJsselmeer dam between Holland and Friesland. Equally disastrous were the losses the German airforce had suffered; these aircraft the Luftwaffe sorely missed during the Battle of Britain, one of the causes of its defeat.

The foregoing is a perfectly coherent story. Already in the summer of 1940 it had become generally accepted. Everybody was convinced that it was true, and everybody could embellish it with picturesque details. At the same time, it is a brilliant example of oral, anonymous, and above all, mythical history-writing.
Many elements of it have remained part and parcel of the national myth up to this day. But its function was not at all to establish the truth about what we are wont to call 'the May days of '40'. The whole set up had a psychological aim, it was meant to be anodynic. The wounds inflicted by the defeat had to be healed; the trauma of the so quickly lost war had to be explained away. And as an anodyne it did its work well. I suppose that there probably would have been not much of a resistance movement, when this trauma had been allowed to undermine our national

pride. The war story - mythical as it is - helped us to raise our heads again and not to give in to the Nazis.

In the past decades a lot of historical resarch has been devoted to our short May war. Learned publications have appeared most of which did not reach the general public. In the first volumes of his enormous work on the whole period of 1940-1945 in the Netherlands the national historiographer, Dr. L. de Jong, exploded a number of these myths, and he had the ear of the nation. Thus it became known that 'our boys' had not fought everywhere as heroically as was supposed. It also became an accepted fact that the bombardment of Rotterdam had not cost thirty-thousand but eight hundred victims. The public also began to believe that German had not been so catastrophic as had been thought at first. But other parts of the myth remained intact and are cherished items of quasi-knowledge still. Until only a very short time ago, I myself, although being a professional historian, was firmly convinced that the German losses in aircraft had had ill effects on the further conduct of the war.

In May and during the summer of last year a great number of books appeared all of which have as their subject the war of May '40 or some aspect of it. It is a remarkable fact that the best selling book of this whole offer is the most critical of them all. It is a collection of essays written by experts in military history *. The avowed intention of this work is to make an end of the myth regarding the 'May days of '40'. The ready reception of this book may be a sign that the nation at last is willing to look the facts in the face.

The German attack was not a surprise. Queen Wilhelmina always knew that Hitler would attack us, and already in 1935 the Dutch general staff too adhered to this idea. By the same token, staff officers were convinced that Hitler would not take the trouble to declare war. Furthermore, German plans for the attack had been cancelled because of bad weather at least ten times during the winter of 1939/1940; the staff was informed of this. The news that the Germans would definitely attack on May 10 was passed on by our military attaché in Berlin whose informant was the German general Oster, an opponent of Hitler. The result was that on the evening of May 9 all necessary precautionary measures were taken; the troops knew that the enemy was coming.

The operation was executed by two German armies, the 18. and the 6. Armee. Between them they counted fewer soldiers, some 220.000 men, than the Dutch army

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* Mei 1940. De strijd op Nederlands grondgebied (The battle on Dutch territory.) H.Amersfoort and P.H.Kamphuis editors. The Hague, 1990.

(280.000 men). There is no question of an overwhelming majority on the German side. The main thrust was entrusted to the 18th German army; the 6th army was ordered to cross the Meuse in Dutch Limburg and then to throw its bulk on the Belgian army. The only division that might be dubbed a crack division were the paratroopers of the 7th Fliegerdivision; they had undergone special training. The 22th Luftlandedivision which landed on the airfields around The Hague consisted of normal infantry, men with little battle experience or none at all. It was of course a fine feat of arms that the German attack on The Hague utterly failed and that all three airfields around the city were reconquered by men who were little more than recruits. But it is usually forgotten that, nevertheless, two groups of Germans, each of a few hundred men, succeeded in entrenching themselves, one in the dunes south of Katwijk on Sea, the other in the village of Loosduinen. At the moment of the capitulation they were still holding out.

Another thing that is constantly overlooked is that the SS in 1940 had not yet acquired the reputation of toughness and fanaticism that it still has. At that time the German High Command considered SS troops as enthusiastic but badly trained and unruly amateurs. The commander of the 18th German army, gen. Küchler, was not really happy with the two SS-Standarten, both motorized, that had been thrust upon him. One of these, the Standarte 'Der Führer', had not yet seen battle, the other, the SS Leibstandarte 'Adolf Hitler' had fought in Poland but had cut a poor figure there.

With regard to the heroism of the Dutch soldier, in many places where determined officers were in command remarkable results were booked. But elsewhere the men were all too soon discouraged by the myth of German superiority, toughness, and cruelty. Especially when positions were submitted to bombardments by dive bombers, panic often was the result followed by a precipitate flight. Some commanders gave the bad example. At least two generals each of them commanding a strategic sector came very near to a nervous breakdown.

The German troops had been very expressly briefed to commit no war crimes, to spare as much as possible the civil population, not to plunder but to behave civilly, and to pay for what was bought. They faithfully carried out these orders. That prisoners were shot and that captured soldiers were used as a shield before the advancing Germans is pure legend. There were isolated offences on the German side, but then there were isolated transgresssions on the Dutch side too (for instance, one Dutch sergeant, although made prisoner, shot an SS-man). In general, the German commanders had no reason at all to become nervous because things went according to plan.

Finally Rotterdam. Even here the authors wanted to debunk a legend. True enough, this bombardment was a cruel thing. But the town was not an open, undefended city. It had been fiercely defended by the Dutch since the early morning of May 10; fighting was still going on in the city itself at noon on May 14. This means that Rotterdam was a military object. Probably the city of Utrecht would have been the second target for an air attack. But there is not the slightest indication that a plan existed to bomb a number of Dutch cities. This too is pure legend.

Let us end with those enormous German losses. The overall losses in German manpower during the campaign in the Netherlands are not known. At the Frisian end of the IJsselmeer dam only 24 men fell; their commander would not risk his men in an attack against a very strong position along a narrow open dyke. The 7200 paratroopers who landed between Rotterdam and the Moerdijk bridge lost 1200 men, wounded and prisoners included. The attack on the main defense line in the centre of the country, the so-called Grebbeline, cost the Germans 387 dead. Very probably the number of those fallen during the whole campaign lay between two thousand and twenty-five hundred which certainly is not excessive. The German losses in aircraft were indeed extensive but not catastrophic; the major part of the 382 destroyed planes were transport-planes that had flown over the Luftlandedivision. They were not missed during the Battle of Britain.

One of the principal functions of a modern historian is to act as a therapeutist. The authors of this volume practise psychotherapy. They try to clear away the anodynic myth that obscures the view of the Dutch on reality. Will reality be the victor or the myth? I believe that now, fifty years after the events, and with already the third generation going to school, the nation will be able to cope with its past and that realism will win.

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