

STAFF

HERITAGE AND MEMORY OF THE WAR: A NEW FIELD OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND SOCIETAL INTEREST. PROF. DR. ROB VAN DER LAARSE JOINS CLUE.



Prof. dr. Rob van der Laarse, new professor Heritage and Memory of the War.

Many historians claim that the interest in the Second World War only increases as we get further removed in time from the war past. Is this true, and how can it be explained?

You are right, but only a decade ago historians as well as politicians believed that the public interest in the Second World War would disappear with the fading away of the witnesses. That this did not happen is indeed remarkable. Besides, instead of continuity, from the 1990s onwards there has been a substantial growth in the number of war-related museums and heritage sites. This is often explained by generational factors, such as the idea that grandchildren are curious about the world of their grandparents, but I prefer a more dynamic explanation. Thus, in my view, three cultural trends might be significant: firstly, the so-called memory turn, more specifically the Holocaust memory boom and the identification with victims of terror and genocide, as proclaimed in the Stockholm declaration of 2000; in the second place, the experiential and spatial turn with its growing importance of memory and heritage sites, 'authentic' experiences, and root-tourism to historical places 'where it really happened', and thirdly, the recent digital turn, connecting memory and heritage by way of a dynamic process of mediatization and virtual experiences. More than ever, people are able and curious to experience personal stories from all parts of Europe on television, internet or iPhone before even visiting historical sites or reading a history book. In short, local memories of war and conflict have become universal, as they are stored in the memory of the world.

You introduced the concept "terrorscape" into Dutch research. Where does this concept come from, how widely can it be applied, and what is the added value of it for your own professorship?

Concepts, of course, have many inventors. I had already been interested for some time in identity, trauma and memory as well as in purity and wildness, related to 18th-century concepts of body and nature, late 19th-century fears of modernity, speed and degeneration, and the psychological shock of the First World War. Only later did I realize that traumatic memories could be seen as forgotten or neglected spaces or non-places, put outside our mindscape as something we do not feel to be related to, as in the case of Auschwitz and other sites of genocide. Yet, I felt a little uncomfortable with the Freudian connotation of trauma, suggesting traumatic memory as something deliberately hidden or sublimed. Therefore I found terrrorscape to be a more objective concept for a place where terror has happened or was prepared. In other words, we should study what happened as well as how it has been remembered or forgotten, irrespective of the traumatic experiences and memories of witnesses, survivors, and perpetrators, because it is precisely this afterlife that needs research and reflection.

What possibilities do you see to further expand the research into the heritage of war and conflict from within CLUE, in collaboration with NIOD, the University of Amsterdam and partners abroad?

The research agenda I would like to carry out at CLUE originates from the NWO research line The Dynamics of Memory, initiated by me and Frank van Vree, professor of journalism and media at the University of Amsterdam. Starting with a comparative volume under the same title in 2009, we were able within two years, with financial support of the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport and a range of museums and heritage organizations, to create twelve PhD and post-doc projects, of which four have already resulted in book publications, such as Dienke Hondius' Oorlogslessen (see page 49). At VU University, Dienke will initiate the following year's new international research on Holocaust education and memory, while I am trying, together with Georgi Verbeeck, professor of history at Leuven and Maastricht and a team of experts from other universities, to start up the international NWO project Terrorscapes on European postwar transnational memory. Besides the other projects of Dynamics of memory, carried out at the University of Amsterdam and NIOD, I am hoping for synergy with the new VU University projects on the digital representation of the Atlan-

tikwall, managed by Koos Bosma, and the archaeology of the Second World War, managed by Jan Kolen. If this becomes a success, then I think we have created one of the most flourishing European networks on war heritage and memory, of which many young researchers will profit in the future.

What role does the Memorial Centre of Westerbork play in your plans? For my own research at the Westerbork chair it is important to realize that Westerbork is not only a historic site of the Nazi topography of terror, but also a present-day site of Europe's postwar topography of memory, connecting the Jewish community of Amsterdam to tens of other Jewish camps in the Netherlands as well as the chain of West and Eastern European Jewish ghettos and concentration camps. Besides Westerbork, Vught, Amersfoort and most of the other camps in Europe also have a prewar and postwar history. From this perspective of their 'other lives' as internment camps for political prisoners or fugitives, such as the Dutch Moluccans, they appear to have become contested spaces, as will be studied at VU University by my PhD student Iris van Ooijen within a NWO project co-sponsored by the three Dutch memory camps. Although professionally familiar with Westerbork for some years, as a Westerbork professor I have gained more and more admiration for the enthusiasm and passion of its director Dirk Mulder and his team, giving all they get in research, education, remembering, exhibitions, and heritage management. What I realize, when speaking with them at staff meetings or with Jewish camp survivors at Friendship days, is that the war has not become historical culture, as it was for me as a historian, but a living practice, in which the fire of a barrack in Veenendam creates a world-wide support for a search for and replacing of authentic barracks, and the conservation of the last authentic building, the villa of the camp commander, an equal storm of protest! This makes Westerbork topical - a dynamic laboratory for (art) historians as well as for cultural and heritage students and scientists.

Contact: r.vander.laarse@let.vu.nl.

THE AMPHIBIOUS CULTURE: A VISION ON DISASTROUS FLOODS. THE INAUGURAL LECTURE OF PROF. DR. PETRA VAN DAM.

Petra van Dam



Prof. dr. Petra van Dam during her oration.

The Netherlands are prone to flooding, yet the number of casualties in the past was often very low. Since the first written messages about floods in the sixth century AD, hundreds of flood occurred, due both to high water levels in the rivers Rhine and Meuse and storm surges in the North Sea. Yet only a few floods, about one per century, led to a high number of deaths, the most infamous being the one of 1953 (nearly 2000 casualties).

This implicates that the Netherlands were not so vulnerable to this type of natural disaster. People had developed specific cultural adaptations to cope with floods: coping mechanisms as these are labeled in international environmental history research. People settled on natural and man-made elevations like river levees and dwelling mounds. Also, they divided the land with compartment dikes (earthen walls). As a result, the flooded surface area was limited and moreover, the flooding slowed down so that people had time to retreat and bring some of their valuable goods such as cattle in safety. A third major adaptation was transport over water. Every farmer had a boat. As a consequence, even if large areas were flooded, provision of goods, communication and mobility