

## **The liminal spaces of liberation: Remembering 1945 in pandemic times**

*Jennifer L. Foray*

Positing the year 1945 as a liminal moment in time and space, this article examines the end of the Second World War as experienced by contemporaries in the newly liberated Netherlands. Rather than serving as an unequivocally joyous moment for celebration or a “Zero Hour” signaling the dawn of a new day, 1945 constituted a transitory, fluid period, filled with uncertainty, destruction, confusion, and sadness alongside hope, optimism, and the promise of rebuilding. In the Netherlands, as in many other European nations, the year 2020 was supposed to be filled with commemorative events marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of war’s end, that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic brought daily life to a standstill in March of that year. This article argues that 2020 constitutes another liminal space, albeit for starkly different reasons than those seen in 1945. It examines a number of commemorative events able to proceed in the weeks and months before the global spread of COVID-19, focusing particular attention on the National Holocaust Commemoration held in Amsterdam in January 2020, and King Willem-Alexander’s historic visit to Indonesia two months later. In these events, I argue, we can discern motion and activity, an attempt to craft an honest appraisal of past events, informed as much by evidence and scholarship as by a sense of shared humanity and compassion. On the other hand, we can discern a powerful undercurrent of resistance and dogged pushback, marked by an unwillingness to consider alternate perspectives and contemporary realities. Taken together, these events reflect both the complex, evolutionary nature of memorial culture in the Netherlands and our current uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation engendered by the ongoing pandemic.

Key terms: Netherlands; commemoration; liberation; monuments; Second World War; Indonesia; decolonization; COVID-19; holocaust; liminality.

The year 2020 was supposed to be filled with commemorative events, whether joyous liberation festivals celebrating the end of the Second World War in Europe or solemn remembrance ceremonies honouring the millions who lost their lives during the war. Importantly, these might have been the last commemorative events to include those individuals with direct experiences of the war, as the youngest of them are now octogenarians. Like every year, the Netherlands' "commemorative season" in early May would serve as the focal point for such events, but in 2020 both large national ceremonies and modestly scaled neighborhood gatherings were expected to be bigger, more frequent, and more well-funded than in a typical year. In May of 2019, the Dutch cabinet announced that, on top of the 9 million euros already designated, it had approved an additional 15 million euros for the following year's festivities, which would bring people together to celebrate that "we live in freedom" and to commemorate the war's victims. As noted in the official press release, the country's celebration of "75 years of freedom" would begin on August 31, 2019, with the commemoration of the critical Battle of the Scheldt, which helped clear a path for the Allied liberation of the occupied Netherlands, and conclude on October 24, 2020, when the Netherlands, one of the organization's founding member states, would celebrate United Nations Day (Nationale Comité 4 en 5 mei 2019; Rijksoverheid 2019).

Instead, most of these long-planned events would fail to materialize, since, beginning in March 2020, the novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, brought daily life in the Netherlands to a standstill, just as it did it throughout Europe and indeed much of the world. Large commemorative events scheduled through the late spring and summer months of 2020, as well as those planned for the fall, were cancelled, modified, or moved online. The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of war's end, then, has been marked by uncertainty and disappointment, to be sure, but so too can we witness creativity, flexibility, and resilience in action. This, I would argue, is oddly fitting, especially if we consider the year 1945 as a liminal moment in time and space, neither a strictly joyous moment for celebration nor a "Zero Hour" signaling the dawn of a new era. Rather, it constituted a transitory, fluid period, filled with uncertainty, destruction, confusion and sadness alongside optimism and hope. This particular war had ended, to be sure, but the period now known as the "post-war" had begun. As such, the year 1945 constituted "neither here nor there," a liminal space and moment in time, holding out both unlimited possibilities for change and profound anxiety concerning both the present and the future (Ashcroft et al. 2000, 130-131; Bhabha 1994, 3-4; Tames 2016).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ismee Tames' work applies the concept of liminality to World War Two-era resistance activities, drawing primarily from seminal studies in both political science and anthropology. It is worth

The 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in the Netherlands also had to acknowledge that 1945 signified the end of one war but witnessed the onset of yet another one. After August 1945, when Indonesian nationalist leaders proclaimed the Republic of Indonesia independent from both their Japanese wartime occupiers and Dutch colonial authorities, members of the Netherlands' newly installed provisional government prepared to send forces to restore "law and order" in the colony. Four years of military conflict interspersed with mediated negotiations and tentative agreements followed in short order. In some respects, then, and as historians such as Peter Romijn have recently argued, the Netherlands remained in a state of war for nine long years (Romijn 2017; Romijn 2020; Salm 2020).

This article examines the formative year of 1945, as viewed through the lens of our current global pandemic, which has forced a rethinking of how and why we remember this past. Focusing on a number of commemorative and memorial events that occurred both before and after the spread of COVID-19, I argue that, in 2020, we occupy a similarly liminal space as that of 1945. Our present circumstances are marked by uncertainty, confusion, ever-changing medical directives, and, increasingly, public protests against the implementation of public health measures such as mask-wearing and business closures. Meanwhile, the global death toll shows no sign of slowing in certain areas, and this as Europe and North America prepare for subsequent waves of infection lasting through the winter months and beyond.

In the weeks and months before the global spread of COVID-19, some 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary events were able to proceed in the Netherlands. But these, too, reveal the year 2020 as a kind of liminal space, with the legacies of 1945 still discussed, debated, and contested. On the one hand, we can discern motion and activity, an attempt to craft an honest appraisal of past events, informed as much by evidence and scholarship as by a sense of shared humanity and compassion. On the other hand, we can discern a powerful undercurrent of resistance and dogged pushback, marked by an unwillingness to consider alternate perspectives and contemporary realities. These two trajectories – occasionally intersecting, but often divergent or oppositional – were on display earlier this past year: first, in January 2020, during the National Holocaust Commemoration marking 75 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, and then, two months later in March 2020, during King Willem-Alexander's historic visit to Indonesia. Taken together, these events reflect both

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noting, however, that postcolonial theorists and literary scholars such as Homi Bhabha employ a similar but not entirely identical understanding of the term.

the complex, evolutionary nature of memorial culture in the Netherlands and our current uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation engendered by the ongoing pandemic.

### **The promises, and problems, of 1945 for the Netherlands and its empire**

A return to “normality” remained elusive in the newly liberated Netherlands of 1945, even if some would have preferred that life resume where it left off in May 1940, when the Germans invaded and subsequently occupied the country. Nor did the events of May 1945 demarcate a clear boundary between war and peace, life and death, then and now (Lagrou 2000, 306). For one, thousands of men, women, and children who had been deported from the country languished and continued to die in German concentration and labor camps, factories, and displaced persons centers long after the formal surrender. To the east of its national borders, millions of people remained on the move, although the Netherlands did not directly experience the massive “population transfers” observed in other recently liberated and war-torn countries such as Poland and Czechoslovakia. The physical destruction experienced in the Netherlands was not as extensive as that seen in these eastern territories or in vast swathes of France. Such comparative observations, however, would have served as small consolation to those surveying the tremendous damage done to the country’s infrastructure, institutions, and civil society. The German surrender of May 1945 signaled the official end of military engagement in Europe, with the daunting task of rebuilding on the immediate horizon. Massive amounts of money, resources, and energy would need to be mobilized to these ends.

As an Allied nation, the Netherlands obviously did not number among the defeated, but the sheer scope of destruction reveals the tremendous price paid by the war’s winners and losers alike. Bridges, railroad tracks, schools, businesses, and hospitals had been laid to waste, while hundreds of thousands of homes had been destroyed or otherwise deemed uninhabitable. During the final months of the war, German military forces intentionally flooded Dutch land, which made approximately 11% of farms unworkable and prompted the evacuation of 200,000 civilians from these inundated areas (De Jong 1982, 1385-1390; Lagrou 2000, 101). In 1945, imports to the Netherlands – like those to the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and neighboring Belgium – stood at about half of their pre-war volume, although, as foreign aid arrived on the continent and European imperial metropolises resumed trade with their overseas colonies, this number soon rose dramatically with each passing year. Inflation, however, remained a problem: at war’s end, wholesale prices in the Netherlands stood at 150% of their pre-war level, with these prices continuing to rise to about 250% percent over the course of the next few years (United Nations Department of Economic Affairs 1948, 162,

171). Western Europe's "economic miracle" would soon bring nearly unprecedented development and prosperity to the Netherlands and other countries, but, for now, uncertainty, privation, inflation, and instability dominated everyday life. This was particularly the case for those major metropolitan areas located in the northwestern parts of the country, which had been subjected to the worst privations seen during the devastating "Hunger Winter" of 1944-1945 (De Zwarte 2019; De Zwarte 2020).

Significant as they were, these economic figures can only hint towards the tremendous sense of loss experienced by vast segments of the population at war's end. By May 1945, daily life bore little resemblance to that seen five years prior, when German forces invaded and subsequently occupied the Netherlands. As was the case elsewhere in Europe, the demographic shifts caused by war and occupation were massive. In 1945, nearly two million Dutch men, women, and children – civilians and soldiers alike, in both Europe and the Dutch East Indies colony – awaited repatriation after having been forcible relocated or evacuated, detained, or deported (De Jong 1978, 118-121, 843-844; De Jong 1982, 1392; Lagrou 1997, 206; Lagrou 2000, 101; NIOD 2020). Those able to return to the Netherlands from Germany and other destinations spoke of a chaotic and unorganized repatriation process, with Dutch agencies, officials, and infrastructure apparently unable to handle the sheer scope of this massive relief effort (Lagrou 1997, 206-208; Lagrou 2000, 92, 96-104).

With limited housing stock and supplies, returnees and repatriates occupied a liminal space, too. They were "liberated" and "freed," to be sure, but hardly reintegrated into Dutch society or able to resume what now passed for "normal" daily life. This was especially the case for those who, having survived the Germans' attempt to annihilate the Jews of Europe, returned to find that their extended families, their religious communities and institutions, sometimes even their entire neighborhoods, no longer existed (Hondius 2003, 47-48; and, for Europe more broadly, Cohen 2011; Grossman 2007; Stone 2015). Of the approximately 107,000 Jewish men, women, and children who had been deported from the Netherlands to concentration camps and extermination centers located in Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, no more than 5,500 survived. An additional 16,000-17,000 survived the war in hiding in the Netherlands—and this out of a pre-war Jewish population of 140,000 (Brasz 1995, 17; Moore 1997, 146-147, 260).

As if these losses alone were not sufficiently horrifying, Jewish survivors in the Netherlands experienced both overt and covert forms of anti-Semitism as they attempted to return to the homes, neighborhoods, and jobs they had lost during the course of the war. Former colleagues and friends refused to relinquish the real estate and physical property, ranging from valuable works of art and furniture to

more mundane but no less precious family keepsakes, which they had once promised to protect. The Dutch government officially refused to acknowledge different categories of wartime victims, since, by singling out particular groups for special recognition, the state would leave itself open to seemingly limitless financial claims that would deplete the national budget at this most critical point. Postwar authorities also may have wished to avoid the appearance of re-inscribing Nazi racial policies that had differentiated between Jews and non-Jewish “Aryans” (Gans 2014, 77-81; De Haan 1997, 61-77; De Haan 1998, 204-205; Hondius 2003). These painful homecomings appear all the more so when seen against the laudatory and even preferential treatment accorded to other groups, particularly those who had belonged to the anti-Nazi resistance. Jewish survivors, then, were caught between these two realities: persecuted on account of their religious status, they could not seek redress on account of this same status. In this sense, the thousands of Jewish survivors who returned to the Netherlands or came out of hiding after “liberation” occupied a uniquely tenuous position within post-war Dutch society.

As in other formerly German-occupied countries, years would pass before semi-official death counts and rosters of wartime victims were available in the Netherlands. In the meantime, death notices and requests for further information about deported and imprisoned family members continued to appear in both national and local newspapers. Still others may have been physically present in postwar society but remained excluded from the body politic for much different reasons. Tens of thousands of former Dutch Nazis and volunteers who fought with various German military units awaited trial and punishment on account of their wartime activities. Those found guilty were typically shorn of their civil rights, passports, and access to certain professions and institutions, but they remained physically present in society even if marginalized by the taint of collaboration. The trials of wartime collaborators, which commenced with liberation and continued for the next few years, became a regular feature of post-war life and society, as did disinterment and reburial ceremonies honoring resisters and victims of German reprisal actions who had been executed and buried in shallow, unmarked graves. The war, put simply, remained a constant presence for years after liberation, just as the reconstruction and rebuilding efforts would continue for years to come.

Not only did the specter of the Second World War loom large, but the Netherlands soon embarked on another war, this time against the Indonesian nationalists who had declared their independence two days after the Japanese surrender. After May 1945, as Dutch authorities in Europe planned and initiated the formidable task of reconstruction, they also sought to return to the Netherlands’ prized East Indies colony, which had spent the last three years under

Japanese occupation. However, on August 17, 1945, a group of Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared the existence of a Republic of Indonesia independent of both its wartime occupiers and its longtime colonial rulers. Lawmakers in The Hague refused to recognize this new political entity – let alone Sukarno’s personal authority – as legitimate, and, instead, proceeded to implement their wartime plans to reestablish Dutch political, military, and economic control throughout the archipelago. For the next four years, the Netherlands remained at war with the Republic, even as Dutch political and military leaders tried to pursue a negotiated solution with their Indonesian counterparts. Over the course of this conflict, approximately 150,000 Dutch soldiers would be deployed to Indonesia, most of them conscripts. Of this number, approximately 5,000 would die in battle or as a result of illnesses and injuries sustained during the conflict. For good reason, then, as historian Peter Romijn has recently argued, “the long Second World War” came to an end only in late December 1949, when the Queen and her government formally signed the transfer of power agreement by which the Netherlands handed off political sovereignty of the archipelago to Sukarno’s Indonesian government (Salm 2020). The year 1945, then, served as the starting point for a brutal colonial war that would ultimately result in both the transformation of the Dutch empire and international recognition for the independent nation of Indonesia.

### **The 2020 commemorative season, abridged and interrupted**

If 1945 served as a liminal moment in the Netherlands, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations planned for 2020 occurred in a uniquely uncertain moment, coming between expected “waves” of COVID-19, mandatory lockdowns and travel bans, and voluntary quarantines. In spite of these conditions, however, the ubiquity of Internet-based technologies has allowed many of this past year’s scheduled memorialization events to proceed, albeit in modified form, with viewers able to watch from a safe distance on their computers, smartphones, and television screens. The National Remembrance Ceremony, held annually on May 4th’s *Nationale dodenherdenking* (‘National day of mourning for the dead’), usually consists of a service with readings and music, held in Amsterdam’s *Nieuwe Kerk* (‘new church’), and is followed by a procession to Dam Square, where representatives of the Royal Family, political parties, government agencies, organizations, and foreign governments lay wreaths and flowers at the National Monument. The portion of the ceremony held in the church is closed to the public, but the open-air ceremony outside at the National Monument typically draws an audience of thousands who, crowding into nearby side streets and alleys, observe a moment of silence along with the official participants. This year, the speeches,

readings, and music were delivered as planned, albeit in front of empty chairs in the church and in front of a nearly deserted Dam Square. Every year, the entire event is broadcast live, so that, in theory, anyone with access to a television or internet can participate. To someone watching from, say, the more remote province of Drenthe in the northeast, this year's ceremony might have looked very similar to those of years past, whereas those who planned to attend, whether in an official capacity or as members of the public, would have had an entirely different experience than expected (Nationale Comité 4 en 5 mei 2020). This National Remembrance Ceremony, then, can best be described as simply modified and adapted to public health measures, such as social distancing, with speakers and other participants calling attention to the current circumstances necessitating this altered format. The delivery medium, however, remained the same: it was an event staged without members of the public physically present, but televised as if it occurred under normal conditions.

By contrast, other scheduled events experienced a more profound transformation as organizers changed venues, cancelled planned speakers and solicited new ones, and transitioned to a virtual platform. *Open Joodse Huizen/Huizen van Verzet* ('Open Jewish Homes/Homes of Resistance,' or *OJH*) constitutes one such example: now in its ninth iteration, this program offers small-scale commemorative events held in intimate settings, such as private homes, throughout the country. Although primarily focused on "Jewish life in these houses before, during and immediately after the war," the initiative also stages such gatherings at sites of resistance and underground activity, showcasing the locations of hiding places and clandestine printing press operations, for example. According to organizers, the 2020 program was expected to be "the most extensive to date, with 27 locales and 164 addresses participating." However, with the spread of COVID-19 and the ensuing regulations meant to curb its spread, these small indoor gatherings, sometimes packing a few dozen people into a living room in order to hear accounts from now-elderly eyewitnesses, simply could not proceed as planned. Instead, *OJH* offered twelve different "stories," livestreamed from locations in seven cities and subsequently made available via the organization's Facebook page. These were accompanied by additional readings, podcasts, and videos. With this new format, a usually hyper-local event became more inclusive and accessible. In previous years, those who wished to attend these events had to carefully plot an itinerary allowing for travel time between locations. Simultaneously offered events, sometimes located in completely opposite parts of a city, ensured that participants could only attend a small sampling of the diverse events on offer, with some sites wholly or partly inaccessible to those with limited mobility. In 2020, *OJH* may have lost its intimate, neighborhood feel, but it gained a potentially much wider audience extending well beyond the selected cities. Indeed, as organizers



noted in their 2020 retrospective report, viewers tuned in from all across the country as well as from more distant locales. As such, it became a more global event than would have been possible had it been held “live” (Open Jewish Homes 2020; Open Joodse Huizen Facebook page 2020). At the same time, organizers expect that, in 2021 or 2022, *OJH* will return to the format established in pre-pandemic years: hyper-local, space-specific, and physically intimate.

A number of events that had been planned for early 2020 – that is, before the Netherlands’ “high commemorative season” in springtime – could proceed as planned, however. In late January, as the news coming out of Wuhan, China, adopted an increasingly dire and alarming tone, COVID-19 still appeared to be a regional problem, and Dutch authorities and members of the public adopted a “wait and see” approach.<sup>2</sup> In this environment, the National Holocaust Commemoration in Amsterdam was held on Sunday, January 26. Although an annual event for the last twenty-five-plus years, this year’s iteration would mark the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Allies’ liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp and extermination center. As such, it featured an expanded guest list and program, including speeches delivered by Prime Minister Mark Rutte; Femke Halsema, the mayor of Amsterdam; and Jacques Grishaver, the chairman of the *Nederlands Auschwitz Comité* (‘Dutch Auschwitz Committee’), which has organized this annual commemorative event at this particular location since 1993.

Of these, Prime Minister Rutte’s remarks garnered the most attention. Against those who would argue that the Netherlands was a nation of valiant resisters, Rutte emphasized that, over the course of the German occupation, Dutch individuals and institutions also played a part in the murder of the country’s Jewish men, women, and children. There had been resistance, certainly, but much too little. Far too many people had remained indifferent to the suffering of others, failing to extend protection, help, and recognition to those who needed it. Still others had betrayed their fellow citizens to the German occupiers for financial incentive or looted the houses of those who had been deported to their deaths. To these ends, Prime Minister Rutte offered his official apologies for the Dutch government’s role in the Holocaust. This was a historic admission of guilt, with

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<sup>2</sup> I was in Amsterdam at the time, since I was participating in the “Welke ‘VOC-mentaliteit’? Over koloniale ideeën, toen en nu” (‘Which “East Indies Company mentality”? About colonial ideas, then and now’) event hosted by the Spui 25 cultural and educational forum at the University of Amsterdam on January 27. The day before this event, I attended the National Holocaust Commemoration ceremony, where I heard Rutte’s historic speech. I departed for the United States on February 1, and at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport, I noticed some, but hardly a majority of international travelers, wearing protective face coverings. Four weeks later, local officials in the Midwest – where I am located – began cancelling all large gatherings and prohibiting all non-essential travel.

Rutte drawing attention not only to the government's cooperation with the German occupiers during the period 1940-1945 but the poor treatment accorded to those Jewish survivors who returned to the Netherlands after the war (Nederlands Auschwitz Comité 2020; Rijksoverheid 2020).

Nearly immediately after the speech, Dutch journalists, historians, and other observers described Rutte's words as "historic," while representatives from survivors' organizations and Jewish community groups hailed it as an important, if long-delayed, gesture towards those remaining survivors still struggling to process their trauma (Hulsman 2020; Muller 2020; Pen & Soest 2020; Pinedo & Musch 2020; Van Walsum 2020; and, for a more cynical assessment, Holman 2020). In one of his many post-ceremony interviews, Grishaver, the chairman of the *Nederlands Auschwitz Comité* and a Holocaust survivor, reacted to Rutte's apology with both enthusiasm and appreciation: "[It's] Fantastic. Here we've waited seventy-five years for this. And the fact that he said it today is truly something fantastic" (Nederlands Auschwitz Comité 2020). And, yet, I argue, even as we recognize the historic nature of Rutte's speech, we can also acknowledge that it does not constitute the final word on the subject. It is not simply the coda in a long history but, rather, the start of something new. Zoni Weisz, a Holocaust survivor and prominent member of the Netherlands' Sinti and Roma communities, implied as much during a conversation with reporters from the daily newspaper *Het Parool* after the event: "Can we close the book now? No. But apologies can help you process something that you've carried with you your entire life" (Weisz cited in Pinedo & Musch 2020). The official apology, obviously, cannot undo the past, but it might still set a course for the future, Weisz' words remind us.

Rutte's acknowledgement came after years' worth of plans, meetings, debates, and discussions – some quite heated, and some still ongoing – concerning various Holocaust memorials and commemorative sites in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, and even with COVID-19-necessitated safety measures in place, construction on a number of these memorials and sites continues apace. In the area of the city now known as the Jewish Cultural Quarter (*Joods Cultureel Kwartier*), the long-planned permanent National Holocaust Museum is slated to open in 2022. A few streets away, on the busy Weesperstraat, the Holocaust Names Memorial (*Nationaal Holocaust Namenmonument*) first conceived by leaders of the *Nederlands Auschwitz Comité* in 2006 has begun to take physical form. Designed by Daniel Libeskind, the famed architect of such buildings as the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the new World Trade Center complex in New York, this labyrinth-style memorial will consist of bricks bearing the names of those 102,000 Dutch Jewish, Sinti, and Roma victims killed during the Holocaust (Contreras 2020, 59-86). On June 19, Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema joined Jacques Grishaver of the *Nederlands Auschwitz Comité* to break ground for the

construction of this Names Memorial. A small group of invited guests, mostly Holocaust survivors, looked on; the much larger ceremony originally planned to mark the occasion had to be cancelled (Holocaust Namenmonument Nederland 2020). Construction on the Names Memorial is scheduled to last until mid-2021. Whether it will be opened to the public at this time remains to be seen and will depend in large part upon the “second wave” of COVID-19 infections in late 2020 and early 2021.

### **Decolonization as contested memory: Commemorating Indonesian independence**

Even if still debated on account of their location or their artistic merit, remembrance ceremonies and sites focused on the Holocaust now constitute an integral part of the country’s commemorative landscape. By contrast, the history of Dutch imperialism and decolonization, and, particularly, the Netherlands’ relationship with Indonesia occupies a far more complicated and certainly more controversial position. To date, politicians and journalists, academics and scholars, military veterans, and former residents of the Dutch East Indies colony contest both the meaning and legacies of this colonial past. Within these very-much-ongoing debates and discussions, the significance of the year 1945 figures prominently. Every year, on August 17, the Indonesians celebrate Independence Day, since it was on this day in 1945 that Sukarno declared the independent Republic of Indonesia to be free of both Japanese and Dutch rule. However, nearly seventy years later, the Dutch government in The Hague continues to recognize December 27, 1949 as the official date of Indonesian independence, since this is when representatives from both nations signed the formal transfer of sovereignty that ended four and a half centuries of Dutch colonial rule.

For decades, the Dutch government has continued to emphasize the signal importance of 1949 over 1945, although fifteen years ago, some believed a change in position to be imminent when the Netherlands’ Minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot visited Indonesia. On the occasion of his August 2005 visit to Jakarta, Minister Bot declared that the Netherlands “stood on the wrong side of history” when, instead of recognizing Indonesian independence, it deployed military forces to fight the Indonesian nationalist government. With both his presence at the August 17 Independence Day celebrations and his delivery of a highly personal address recounting his own childhood in the then-colony, Bot articulated a new stance: he, and by extension, the Netherlands accepted the August 17 date in both a “political and moral sense” (Van Leeuwen 2008, 302-309; Het NOVA Archief 2005). But, as Dutch journalist Michel Maas expertly explained in a 2013 analysis, Bot had conferred *de facto* but not *de jure* recognition on the August 17 date, and

authorities in The Hague contested the meaning and implications of Bot's words long after his return home. Thus, his recognition remained strictly symbolic (Maas 2013; NOS Nieuws 2013). In the years since then, repeated petition campaigns and other advocacy efforts have urged successive Dutch governments to acknowledge, publicly and in no uncertain terms, that Indonesia's independence dates to August 17, 1945, but to no avail (Indonesië werd onafhankelijk in 1945: Erken dit 2009; Pondaag 2019). The Hague's official policy has remained firm and consistent: Indonesia became independent in late 1949, once Queen Juliana signed the official transfer-of-power agreement in an official public ceremony.

And, yet, earlier this year, the Dutch government marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1945 with an official royal visit to Indonesia. In early December 2019, the Royal Family announced that, at the invitation of President Joko Widodo, King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima would visit Indonesia in March 2020. The official press release issued in February 2020 explained that the three-day visit would affirm "the close, wide-ranging relationship between the two countries and will be geared towards future cooperation," with an itinerary focused on "the economy, nature conservation, culture, science, and the many ties that exist between the peoples of Indonesia and the Netherlands, based in part on their shared history." The king and queen would spend their first full day, March 10, in the capital city of Jakarta, where their activities included wreath-laying visits to two cemeteries: Kalibata Heroes Cemetery, the final resting place for thousands of Indonesian soldiers who died during the 1945-1949 war against the Dutch, and Menteng Pulo Cemetery, which contains the remains of approximately 4,300 Dutch victims of the Japanese occupation as well as Dutch casualties of the 1945-1949 war (Het Koninklijk Huis 2020; Oorlogsgravenstichting 2020).

During the months separating the announcement and the royal couple's departure in mid-March, historians, journalists, and activists speculated about both the timing and the significance of this official visit. Writing in an especially nuanced and detailed assessment published in the daily newspaper *Trouw*, journalist Wendelmoet Boersema remained skeptical that the king would, in fact, apologize for the government's actions during the colonial period in the way that Prime Minister Rutte had apologized for the government's role in the Holocaust in late January 2020 (Boersema 2020). Others remained hopeful that the king might publicly recognize the significance of the August 17, 1945 date for Indonesian independence, thereby granting *de jure* recognition to Minister Bot's *de facto* recognition fifteen years ago. After all, this 75<sup>th</sup> year anniversary seemed to present the perfect opportunity to do so. Still, as numerous commentators pointed out, the king's visit was scheduled for March, whereas Bot's trip in 2005 had intentionally coincided with the celebration of Indonesian Independence Day in August. Alternately, King Willem-Alexander could elect to avoid these "sensitive

matters” entirely, instead opting to focus his efforts solely on the various economic partnerships, scientific projects, and cultural programs connecting the two countries (Frakking & Hoek 2020; Salm 2019). Some commentators remained skeptical about the visit itself, with one especially vocal Dutch critic calling the king a “wolf in sheep’s clothing,” since he was merely pretending to be interested in Indonesia while refusing to take responsibility for centuries’ worth of exploitation and violence. The Netherlands, according to the critic, continues to reproduce colonial attitudes and practices of old with its failure to recognize and make reparations for the damages wrought by centuries of colonial rule (Van Pagee 2020).

Admittedly, the king faced a fairly low bar for success with this particular visit, not only because he was tasked with promoting existing partnerships, but because Queen Beatrix’s 1995 visit – which included the then-twenty-eight-year-old crown prince Willem-Alexander – has been described as “one of her least successful state visits” and certainly “one of the most painful moments in the Dutch-Indonesian post-war relationship.” Among other uncomfortable incidents, Queen Beatrix spoke of generic “scars” left by past (Dutch-inflicted) acts of violence, while singling out contemporary human rights abuses in Suharto’s Indonesia (Boersema 2020; Frakking & Hoek 2020). But much has happened in the past fifteen years since Minister Bot’s historic admission, let alone in the twenty-five years since the king’s mother’s disastrous visit. Most obviously, and as critics of the royal visit have noted, Indonesian victims of war crimes committed by Dutch forces during the period of 1945 to 1949 have brought numerous – and successful – lawsuits before Dutch courts in search of financial compensation, public apologies, and other forms of redress, as have the surviving relatives of those killed by Dutch forces (Immler & Scagliola 2020; McGregor 2014). For the past decade, Dutch international human rights lawyers Liesbeth Zegveld and Brechtje Vossenbergh of the Prakken d’Oliveira Human Rights Lawyers group in Amsterdam have represented the various Indonesian plaintiffs. Meanwhile, the Committee of Dutch Debts of Honour (*Komite Utang Kehormatan Belanda*, or *K.U.K.B*), founded by Dutch-Indonesian activist Jeffrey Pondaag in 2007, ensures that Indonesian victims and their respective claims against the Dutch government continue to receive media attention, regardless of their legal outcomes (De Volder & De Brouwer 2019). Even as King Willem-Alexander and Queen Máxima embarked upon their state visit this past spring, a number of these cases continued to work their way through the Dutch court system (Prakken d’Oliveira Human Rights Lawyers 2020).

In the fall of 2016, and partly in response to the success of these lawsuits, the Dutch government agreed to fund a multi-year, multi-institution research project entitled “Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia,

1945-1950” (De Volder & De Brouwer 2019, 60-63). Its specific research design and organizational structure have evolved somewhat since its public unveiling four years ago, but as currently described on its website, the project “aims to provide academically substantiated answers to questions pertaining to the nature, scope, causes and impact of the violence used by the Netherlands as viewed in a broad political, social and international context.” Now, in late 2020, the teams of expert researchers directing the eight subprojects are writing the results of their investigations, with final reports expected in late 2021, or such was the projected timeline established before the pandemic (Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950, 2020). Since its inception, the project has prompted and, at times, actively solicited public debate and criticism (Dekolonisatie of rekolonisatie? 2018). Especially vocal opposition and pointed criticisms have come from members of the *Histori Bersama* (‘Shared History’) organization, which although primarily focused on producing quality translations of “recent publications from Dutch and Indonesian media that refer to the colonial past and the Indonesian independence war (1945-1949),” has served as a touchpoint for critical discussions concerning Dutch imperialism and decolonization writ large (Histori Bersama 2017; Histori Bersama 2020). Together with the researchers associated with the multi-year Independence and Decolonization Project, those scholars and activists associated with *Histori Bersama* have ensured that these subjects remain in the news. Perhaps more so than ever before, members of the general public remain aware, and involved, in this process of reckoning with a complex, violent past, with discussions focusing on an array of subjects, whether the Netherlands’ refusal to recognize Indonesian independence until 1949 or Dutch involvement in the centuries’ old global slave trade.

In recent years, the academic study of these subjects has undergone a sea change of sorts, too. Writing in a seminal piece published in 2013, historian Remco Raben called upon his colleagues to work towards the creation of a new Dutch imperial history incorporating larger themes, comparative analyses, theoretical approaches, and the perspectives of non-European peoples (Raben 2013). Since then, a number of new historical studies have refocused attention on long-dominant narratives popular in both the public and academic domains, including the claim that the early modern and modern Dutch empires were unique or exceptional. Unlike the British or French empires, or so proclaims this well-entrenched narrative, the Dutch imperial project remained rooted in strictly commercial endeavors and, at the same time, highly responsive to and respectful of local Indonesian cultures and practices. Extended into the post-1945 period, this narrative acknowledges the Dutch and Indonesian casualties incurred during the decolonization process but also judges this same decolonization process to be far less violent than that seen in other European empires (Frakking & Hoek 2020;

Koekkoek et al. 2019; Welke ‘VOC-mentaliteit’? Over koloniale ideeën, toen en nu 2020). Historical analyses intended for both academic and popular audiences have increasingly refused such claims. So, for instance, writing in advance of the royal family’s March 2020 visit, Wendelmoet Boersema reaffirms that, in its difficulty confronting the colonial past, the Netherlands hardly stands alone. Rather, she argues, all other former Europe imperial powers – Britain, France, Spain, Belgium, and Germany – have struggled to recognize, apologize, and somehow make amends for their violent history; for all of them, this process remains incomplete but ongoing (Boersema 2020).

With these public discussions and academic interventions in the background, the royal couple embarked on their visit to Indonesia as planned for March 2020, albeit with certain precautions necessitated by the global spread of COVID-19. On March 10, King Willem-Alexander delivered his opening remarks, in English, to those present at the official welcome ceremony hosted at the presidential palace in the Javanese city of Bogor. Here, the king lauded the “wonderful, future-oriented” focus of his visit but also recognized the historic bonds connecting the two countries. He acknowledged the significance of the year 2020, noting that on August 17, “it will be 75 years since Indonesia issued its *Proklamasi* [Declaration of Indonesian independence] claiming its place among independent and free states.” Then, in a nod to Minister Bot’s 2005 speech, he stated that “the Dutch government explicitly acknowledged this fact, politically and morally, 15 years ago,” and he offered his congratulations to the people of Indonesia as they celebrated 75 years of independence. At the same time, he explained, “the past cannot be erased, and will have to be acknowledged by every generation in turn.” In particular, he described the violence that followed the Indonesian *Proklamasi* as “a painful separation that cost many lives.” To these ends, the king expressed his regrets and apologized “for excessive violence on the part of the Dutch in those years” (Royal House of the Netherlands 2020).

Here, then, King Willem-Alexander publicly acknowledged the significance of the August 17 declaration for the Indonesians, but, like Bot, stopped short of granting *de facto* recognition to this date. Both before and after this speech, the Dutch government’s official stance has remained consistent and clear: Indonesia became independent in late December 1949, when Dutch authorities signed the formal transfer of sovereignty agreement. Nor did the king apologize for the long, violent history of Dutch colonial rule, as some had hoped he might. Rather, he acknowledged the “excessive violence” seen during the decolonization conflict of 1945-1949.

As could be expected, this apology – qualified and partial, certainly, but an apology nonetheless – engendered a range of responses in both the Netherlands and Indonesia. For some, including Indonesian survivors and family members of

those killed during such acts of “excessive violence,” the king’s words rang hollow, particularly since they were unaccompanied by actual recompense, whether in the form of reparations, lost wages and pensions earned from years of colonial service, or compensation for pain and suffering. Nor has the Dutch government offered to repay the money paid by Indonesia as a condition for its independence in 1949; these extended payments were intended to compensate the Netherlands for debts it had incurred in Indonesia and for the loss of future colonial revenue (Indrawan 2020; Wijaya 2020). Still others have classified the speech as an important step towards the creation, and popular acceptance of, a more critical perspective concerning the Netherlands’ colonial history (Hoek 2020).

The king’s speech, then, seems to occupy its own liminal space: a partial recognition, neither here nor there. At present, we cannot know whether the speech will bear the same weight as did Prime Minister Bot’s in 2005, and whether it will pave the way for a more expansive discussion of Dutch colonialism, including and especially its most violence aspects. We may need to wait until the government-funded “Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia, 1945-1950” research project issues its final reports in late 2021 or 2022. Perhaps the project’s findings will prompt the Dutch government to grant official *de jure* recognition to the August 17, 1945 date, after years of activism to these ends. Regardless of this particular outcome, however, we can be sure of one thing: these reports will hardly constitute the final word on the subject.

## Conclusion

Seventy-five years ago, the Second World War came to an end, and we are right to celebrate this moment for what it signified to those who had survived the carnage, in both Europe and elsewhere. At least on paper and in name, the guns were put down, the camps were liberated, and Europeans could begin to reassemble their lives. Allied nations worked to actualize the various arrangements they had devised during the wartime years, and, after months of preparatory meetings and plans, the United Nations called itself into being. But this moment also constituted a liminal moment, with Europeans confronting an uncertain future, filled not only with the daunting task of physical reconstruction but the prospects of continued death and destruction, whether in the form of massive dislocations and migrations, the life-long illnesses caused by imprisonment and malnutrition, and, in the Dutch case, a colonial war in Indonesia. The year 1945 brought triumphant “liberation” but so too did it bring chaos, uncertainty, and trauma. The war was over, in other words, but what exactly did this mean in this environment? What did the future hold?



The year 2020 constitutes yet another liminal moment, albeit for very different reasons and under starkly different conditions. COVID-19 has claimed more than 2.3 million deaths worldwide, and both infection rates and death tolls continue to rise in certain parts of the world, such as North America and Europe. Nor can the pandemic's toll be measured solely in terms of its horrifying death toll. The lockdowns and restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the disease have caused tremendous economic hardship, ranging from job loss to housing evictions, as well as a profound sense of physical and emotional isolation. Medical systems and social services have struggled to meet the demand for routine care while reporting a marked increase in mental illness, including and especially anxiety, depression, and suicide. It is hardly surprising, then, that the events planned to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War bear little resemblance to those planned before the global spread of COVID-19. Much work remains to be done, both in curbing the spread and lethality of this disease and in confronting a complicated past. In today's environment, the unfinished business of 1945 remains as pressing and as timely as ever.

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### About the author

Dr. Jennifer L. Foray is associate professor of history at Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana, U.S.) and specializes in modern European and international history, with a particular focus on the Netherlands and its empire. Her publications include *Visions of empire in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and numerous articles focusing on imperialism, decolonization, Nazism, and the Holocaust. Her current book project examines those groups and individuals who opposed the Dutch-Indonesian decolonization conflict of 1945-1949.

Author's contact: [jforay@purdue.edu](mailto:jforay@purdue.edu)

## **La Libération comme espace liminal : commémorer les événements de 1945 lors de la pandémie de Covid-19**

Considérant l'année 1945 comme un entre-deux ou un espace-temps liminal, cet article s'intéresse à la fin de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale et examine plus particulièrement comment cette période a été vécue dans les Pays-Bas nouvellement libérés. En effet, la victoire de 1945 ne peut être réduite à un moment de joie univoque que l'on célèbre, ni à un événement de type « heure zéro » qui inaugure une ère nouvelle. La Libération de 1945 représente bien plutôt une période de transition plutôt instable remplie d'incertitude, de destruction, de confusion et de tristesse, mais faisant de la place également à l'espoir et à l'optimisme, et portant la promesse de la reconstruction. Aux Pays-Bas, comme en beaucoup d'autres pays européens, on avait prévu d'organiser de nombreuses célébrations commémoratives en 2020 afin de marquer le 75<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la fin de la guerre, mais la pandémie de Covid-19 en décida autrement quand elle mit brusquement la vie à l'arrêt au mois de mars. Cet article estime que l'année 2020 constitue un autre espace liminal, mais pour des raisons tout autres que celles qui s'appliquent aux événements de 1945. L'article se penche sur quelques événements commémoratifs qui se sont déroulés dans les semaines et les mois précédant la propagation à l'échelle planétaire du coronavirus, notamment la Commémoration nationale de l'Holocauste tenue à Amsterdam en janvier ainsi que la visite officielle d'une importance historique du roi Willem-Alexander à l'Indonésie deux mois plus tard. L'article juge que l'on peut discerner dans ces événements une certaine activité et mouvement. En effet, d'une part, on peut y voir une tentative d'en arriver à une interprétation honnête des événements du passé, fondée sur des preuves documentaires et de la recherche scientifique et ancrée dans un sentiment profond d'empathie et de solidarité avec l'humanité. Cependant, de l'autre, l'on constate la présence d'un puissant courant sous-jacent de résistance et d'opposition qui se traduit par un refus obstiné de prendre en considération de nouveaux points de vue ainsi que la réalité actuelle. Pris ensemble, ces développements démontrent non seulement le caractère compliqué et changeant de la culture commémorative aux Pays-Bas, mais aussi l'incertitude, l'anxiété et l'isolement que nous vivons en ce moment à cause de la pandémie qui perdure.

## **Bevrijding als liminale ruimte: Herinnering aan 1945 tijdens de coronavirus pandemie**

Dit artikel beschouwt het jaar 1945 als een liminaal moment in tijd en ruimte. Het doet onderzoek naar het einde van de Tweede Wereldoorlog

en hoe dit is ervaren door de generatie mensen in het pas bevrijde Nederland. In plaats van een eenduidig vreugdevol moment om te vieren of een 'nul uur' dat het aanbreken van een nieuwe dag voorstelt, stelde 1945 een veranderlijke overgangperiode voor vol twijfel, verwoesting, ver-warring, en verdriet, alsook hoop, optimisme, en de belofte van weder-opbouw. In Nederland, zoals in vele andere Europese landen, was het de bedoeling dat het jaar 2020 gekenmerkt zou worden door herdenkings-evenementen naar aanleiding van het 75-jarige jubileum van het einde van de oorlog, dat wil zeggen, totdat in maart de COVID-19-pandemie het dagelijkse leven tot stilstand bracht. Dit artikel stelt dat het jaar 2020 ook een liminaale plaats vertegenwoordigt, zij het om zeer verschillende redenen dan die in 1945. Het beschouwt een aantal herdenkings-evenementen die plaatsvonden in de weken en maanden vóór de wereld-wijde verspreiding van COVID-19 en legt bijzondere nadruk op de Nationale Holocaust Herdenking gehouden in januari in Amsterdam, alsmede het historisch staatsbezoek aan Indonesië door Koning Willem-Alexander twee maanden later. Ik stel dat wij in deze evenementen beweging en bedrijvigheid kunnen constateren. Het is een poging om een oprechte inschatting te maken van vroegere gebeurtenissen, beïnvloed zowel door bewijsmateriaal en wetenschappelijk onderzoek als door een gevoel van medeleven en verbondenheid met het mensdom. Anderzijds kunnen wij constateren dat er een krachtige onderstroming van weerstand en verbeterde oppositie te herkennen is die aangegeven wordt door een onwilligheid om alternatieve zienswijzen en de huidige werkelijkheid te beschouwen. Samengenomen tonen deze gebeurtenissen zowel de gecompliceerde, veranderlijke aard aan van een herdenkingscultuur in Nederland alsook onze huidige onzekerheid, angst, en ons isolement in verband met de lopende pandemie.