

Review

Erik Somers and Laurien Vastenhout: *De Tweede Wereldoorlog in honderd foto's*

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Reviewed by Dave Warnier



On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Netherlands during the Second World War, a national project was initiated in which people searched for the most evocative war photographs of the Netherlands and its former colonies in the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch Antilles and Surinam. Archives, organizations, and private individuals sent in massive numbers of pictures, many of which had been unknown up to that point. This book, *De Tweede Wereldoorlog in honderd foto's* ('The Second World War in one hundred pictures'), is the result of a unique participation experiment that eventually led to a large exhibition in the House of Representatives of the Dutch Parliament, which was, unfortunately, thwarted by the coronavirus crisis.

The introduction deals with the importance of imagery in general, especially in modern lore, with all the problems that entails and it recounts the course of the search for the one hundred chosen photographs. The photographs themselves are divided over five logically chosen thematic chapters: military struggle, war violence, and liberation; domination, collaboration, and adaptation; exclusion and persecution; resistance and repression; daily life. Each part is preceded by a brief general introduction. Why some photographs were assigned to a specific chapter, when they might just as well have been featured in another, is open to discussion, but I suspect that an approximately proportional distribution of the number of photographs per chapter (between sixteen to twenty-four each) may have played a role here. What does disturb me personally is the very strict chronological representation of the images. This means that among the photos from the Netherlands there are suddenly emaciated Indonesian forced labourers. A combination in which first the motherland and then the colonies are featured, while then putting the pictures in chronological order, or even in a separate chapter about the colonies, might have been a better choice.

The section on exclusion and persecution surprised me in terms of originality, because it was the first time that I saw photographs depicting the Dutch persecution of Jews that were not exclusively taken in Amsterdam. A number of rather unique images can be found in this section, such as a photo from Albert Gemmeker's personal archive. At the end of the war, this camp commander of Westerbork destroyed as many documents as he could to leave as little evidence as possible, which makes the image of Jews being transported to the death camps in the East special. The portrait of the twenty-two children between the ages of four and seventeen from the Jewish school in Deventer is both moving and shocking when you realize that only one of them survived the Holocaust.

There is also a supporting website, <https://in100fotos.nl/>, where in addition to the one hundred selected photographs, albeit without the contextual explanation offered in the book, one can see the fifty original entries from each of the twelve provinces, as well as the fifty national entries and those from the former

colonies. This demonstrates the impossible task of the jury of having had to reduce some 700 images to 100. In this case, choosing is quite clearly losing. Although the jury relied on the choice of the general public, which had been asked to vote for the local photos, the book clearly states that the public's preference was sometimes ignored when it came to particular images – and rightly so in my opinion. This was true for the difficult to view images of excesses during the liberation, such as the shaving of the so-called “kraut girls” (women who had had a relationship with a German) or the removal of children of collaborators, none of which were selected by the public but made it into the book, after all. Unfortunately, the website is only in Dutch, while English as a modern *lingua franca* was ignored. This is a pity, as pictures of captured or killed Allied aviators, for example, and the liberation in which British Commonwealth troops, such as the Canadians, were heavily involved, are not only of interest to the Dutch general public.

As a non-specialist of Dutch history during the Second World War, I found it a very interesting book. Some of the photographs were new to me. Its main strength lies in the combination of photographs that are accompanied by an informative explanation, providing a necessary context. Even the more well-known photographs benefitted from a detailed description, adding a new dimension of understanding. This is one of the aims of the book: to counterbalance the contemporary flood of images – whether moving or not – on the various (social) media platforms by encouraging viewers to look at them critically and to try to fathom the background and the real meaning of the images. By the way, this is an old gripe: many explanatory texts for well-known photographs from the Second World War contain errors that are passed on from book to book or from website to website. As far as I'm concerned, the judges' comments regarding some of the images are hardly essential, but I can understand that this provides the link with the 21st century and contemporary social media. The book is therefore more a reflection of how people are inclined to look at the Second World War in current times. Nevertheless, it is certainly recommended for anyone interested in the Second World War in the Netherlands and its colonies.

About the reviewer

Dave Warnier is senior captain in the Belgian army, which he joined in 2002. He obtained a master's degree in history at Ghent University (Belgium) in 1999. Upon completion of his officer's training, he served as a platoon commander with the armoured reconnaissance troops of the 1st Regiment *Jagers te Paard* in Leopoldsburg, with which he carried out a NATO operation in Kosovo in 2005. After attending the Centre for Basic Military Training, he became a military

assistant to the Chair of History of the Royal Military Academy in Brussels, where he studied and taught military history. Under the guidance of Prof. Dr. Em. Luc De Vos of the Catholic University of Leuven (Belgium) and together with Tom Simoens and Franky Bostyn, he coauthored the books *'14-'18: Oorlog in België* (Davidsfonds, 2014), *Waterloo: 1815, de val van Napoleon* (Davidsfonds, 2015), and *39-45: De Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Sterck & De Vreese, 2019). He is currently working on his joint Ph.D. at Ghent University and the Royal Military Academy and is focused on the battlefield performance of the Belgian army during the Eighteen Days' Campaign against the invading German forces in May 1940.