**Review**

**Mieke Kirkels and Chris Dickon:**

***Dutch children of African American liberators: Race, military policy and identity in World War II and beyond***

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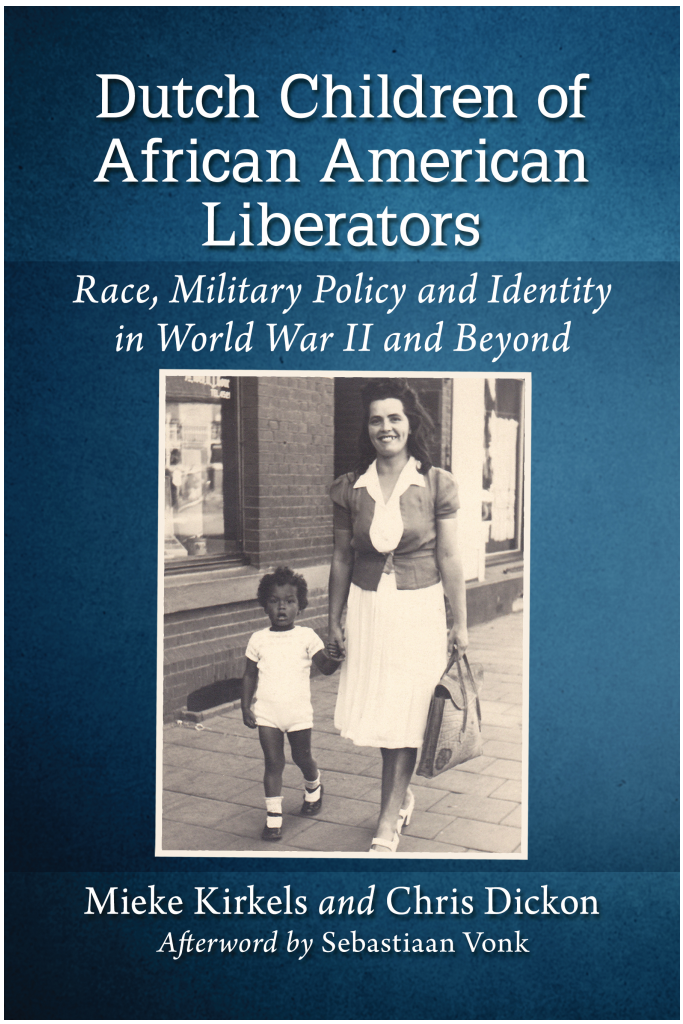


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This book is an English version of the book *Kinderen van zwarte bevrijders* ('children of black liberators') by Mieke Kirkels, published in the Netherlands in 2017, and here revised and translated with coauthor Chris Dickon. Although it would be unrealistic to expect any book to cover the full scope of its ambitious subtitle, this work does succeed in highlighting a dimension of the human cost of WWII in the Netherlands that has not received the attention it deserves. Its narrative centers on the lives of 12 out of an estimated 70 bi-racial children born just after the end of WWII in the Dutch province of Limburg, who were the offspring of relationships that developed between African American soldiers and Dutch women in that region during the period when American troops took the lead in freeing the Netherlands from German control there. As signalled by the title, the authors give special attention to the role that racial thought and racism have played in this story.

For the sake of comparison, the authors also look at analogous developments in Germany, England, and Austria by devoting two brief chapters on England and another whose focus is Germany. The number of what the British called "Brown Babies" was estimated to be around 1,700 that about 22,000 British women and American men overall had parented over the course of the war. The source for the respective numbers in Germany is a news report on a conference convened in 1953 to discuss the disposition of some 3,000 black "Occupation Children" in West Germany then entering elementary school, out of around 90,000 with a parent from among the Allied troops that had passed through during the war. The very rough estimate for Austria is that out of the occupation children of American servicemen, around 500 were bi-racial. The chapter on Germany, "Occupational babies," characterizes the German disposition toward the mixed-raced children, including Austria as well, as focused mainly on adoption as a solution – either within Europe or in the United States.

In the Netherlands, the Liberation Children's Association was founded in 1984 by children of white liberation soldiers from the United States, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Canada, for mutual assistance in locating their fathers. They estimated that in the early years of the 21st century there were about 8,000 liberation children in the Netherlands, with over 6,000 of those by Canadians, who had contributed heavily during the war's final stages in Normandy, parts of Belgium and the southern Netherlands. This Association had little luck tracking down the fathers. A summary remark by the authors regarding the fate of the "Brown Babies" of England seems equally apt for those in the other countries treated: "Most would lead lives as outsiders starting in childhood and without the full force of social, religious and government support available to all children and parents in those circumstances" (11). In all the countries some of the descendants

have remained active in trying to find out more about their fathers into the 21st century.

The book's Chapter One, "War babies," starts off a bit slowly due to an unusually detailed elaboration on the local Dutch history and geography, ranging back to 4000 BC. While thoroughly interesting, there and in some later places in the book such digressions may distract some readers from the book's main subject matter. However, Chapter One plus Chapter Two, "Social reality and military policy," a concise commentary on racism against Blacks in American history and the treatment of African Americans in in the U.S. military, and Chapter Three, "Liberation and slavery," set the stage for an engaging discourse through the rest of the book on its main motif: a clash between Dutch tradition and pragmatism and American racism against Blacks, including Black American soldiers serving abroad. Through this approach this work provides insights concerning racism from an unusual perspective that is broader than the standard treatment. Describing what life in the Netherlands was like for the bi-racial children who remained, the authors compared it to:

> The middle ground journey of *Zwarte Piet* through the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of the Dutch people might describe the adult experiences of the children of the Zwarte Bevrijders, the Black American liberators, since coming of age in the 1950s and early 1960s. For many, they were present, but not entirely so. Their identities were confused. Some struggled for most of their lives, and most would look for their fathers, or whatever they could at least learn about their own identities, with varying degrees of success. (155)[1]

Those descendants who have been associated with the American Cemetery established in the village of Margraten in the southeastern corner of the Netherlands have played the central role in this project of identification and commemoration. The third largest in Europe for soldiers who died in WWII, this cemetery holds the remains of by some counts as many as 10,000 buried or memorialized on a wall listing the missing. The burials there first began in late 1944 when 260 Black gravediggers were tasked with burying between 4,000 and 5,000 unidentified soldiers (69). The authors have identified 172 African Americans among them. The liberator descendants treated here have made this site a rallying place, especially on American Memorial Day. Some have written

[1] Black Pete ('*Zwarte Piet'*) in Dutch folklore is their Santa Claus figure's black servant. See Blakely (2000) regarding its racial history.

books mentioned in this one that represent a form of catharsis for some of the authors.

The special attention the two authors devote to the racial dimensions brings out some facets of the historical developments and notable personalities most readers will find new. Some passages are especially powerful in contrasting the liberation of the Dutch taking place and the glaring display of the lack of freedom of Black American soldiers, such as in the grateful acceptance of the Black liberators by the Dutch in their celebrations, as opposed to the U.S. Army's persistent exclusion of its Black soldiers. To its credit, the Army had published a classified pamphlet titled *The command of Negro troops* in February 1944 that acknowledged inherent challenges in the appropriate assignment of Black troops. For instance, it pointed out that while there were stark disparities in the performance of black troops on the Army General Classification tests given to all inductees over a six-month period in 1943 (aimed at determining which would be technicians, and which physical laborers), there were mitigating circumstances. The Army admitted that the disparity in education alone could support its presumption that the consistently lower scores of black soldiers did not mean they could not be trained and overcome those weaknesses. However, the pamphlet went on to conclude that, while it was not advancing a theory of racial superiority, for practical reasons it insisted on what it considered the practical, positive value of segregation. Some of the bi-racial children pointed out the inferior treatment of the Black troops in housing and job assignments in the immediate aftermath of the German occupation. The black soldiers were assigned as watchmen and kitchen workers; and were sleeping in barns with concrete floors while whites were in houses. And the Dutch also noticed a tension between the Black and white soldiers.

In the officially still fully segregated military forces, Black American soldiers were in general restricted to such non-combat duties as cooks, mechanics, road building, digging ditches, and unloading supplies from docks, trucks, and airplanes. The soldiers who fathered the children in this study were part of a storied truck convoy system popularly known as the Red Ball Express, that provided Allied forces over 400,000 tons of supplies in the late months of 1944 under harrowing road conditions as the Allied forces moved swiftly across Europe in the wake of the D-Day Normandy Invasion. Around 75 percent of the drivers were African American, notwithstanding their portrayal in the popular movie *The Red Ball Express* (1952) that celebrated that heroic war effort. It featured Sidney Poitier as a Black driver, alongside Jeff Chandler as a captain, but gave the impression that most of the drivers were white. This was consistent with the fact that little note has ever been made of some 900,000 African Americans having served in Europe alone during WWII, leaving the impression that it was an almost

exclusively white victory. Some suffered injuries from the pace and long hours of that effort that troubled them for the rest of their lives.

The authors do a good job of giving concrete examples of just how complex and contradictory the War Department's racial policy was. The most colorful figure of all used to illustrate this is General George Patton, who is shown to be a staunch white supremacist, but whom they describe as a "conditional racist" (79) in practice. Because of his fierce determination to win military victories at all costs, he at times employed black soldiers in combat roles, contrary to the Army policy of restricting them to menial duties, and was even willing to giving them emergency field promotions in rank in combat situations where white officer ranks were depleted through casualties to a point where what was most needed was a soldier with demonstrated leadership skills, regardless of colour or the standard rules. This happened to one of the soldiers who fathered one of the bi-racial children featured here. Jefferson Wiggins was a 19-year-old farm boy, just promoted to first sergeant before the Battle of the Bulge when he was given a field promotion by General Patton to first lieutenant against his own will, placing him in command of 960 men without having had any prior leadership experience close to that level of responsibility. War necessities would also result in some 2,000 Black soldiers being reassigned to combat roles toward the end of the war. Several of these are among the 172 buried at Margraten. Patton also took pains to have some Black judges in courts martial trying black soldiers, and was responsible for developing Black tank battalions despite privately expressing the belief that Blacks were not quick minded enough to function on a par with whites.

In Patton's case it was not just Blacks that he considered inherently inferior. The authors quote from one biography that states that in his early career, while serving in the Pancho Villa Mexican expedition, he observed that the Mexican poor peasants should be exterminated because: "they were so far behind they will never catch up they are lower than the Indians. They have absolutely no morals" (79). They also point out, however, that in Harry Truman's correspondence during WWII the words "nigger" and "coon" occur just as in Patton's and those of other white leaders of the time.[2] Truman would, however, evolve into a supporter of integration. Under the circumstances, Patton's views on Jews are particularly ironic and troubling against the backdrop of what would come to be the Holocaust. After an investigation of displaced persons camps Patton had been put in charge of in southern Germany, President Truman

[2] The terms "nigger" and "coon" are among several devices white supremacists have historically employed to dehumanize Black people so that the white public could find it easy to embrace their enslavement as property for hundreds of years, followed by their continued mistreatment based on skin color after formal emancipation.

complained in a letter to General Dwight Eisenhower that the liberated Jews were being treated little better than they had been by the Nazis. Having been made aware of this, Patton noted in his diary entry of September 15, 1945, that the criticism appeared to assume "that the Displaced Person is a human being, which he is not, and this applies particularly to the Jews, who are lower than animals" (80).

The well justified condemnation of racism Americans displayed in these events may leave the unfair impression on some readers that the European societies, apart from Nazi Germany, were far less racist than America. This is misleading in many respects. For example, the conclusion the authors draw from a comparison of the practice of slavery in American history and that by the Dutch is highly dubious in asserting:

> In Dutch sensibilities, slavery was an economic expedient. It was not *ostensibly* a racial or power subjugation of humans deemed to be inferior or subhuman. Without an apparent basis or racial animus, it would be easier for Blacks and whites to live and work together. The Dutch values of family were proactively transferred to Blacks with this kind of inclusion. (43)

A related recent study by Mosterman (2021), titled *Spaces of enslavement* and focusing on the Netherlands, persuasively refutes this widely held view. With respect to all modern European societies and those they founded in the Americas, it is important to keep in mind that they all draw deeply from the same Western tradition of racial thought. There is ample scholarly evidence that, while modern European societies where class is a more important basis for discrimination than colour eschewed the practice of slavery at home, their treatment of slaves abroad was just as inhumane as that practiced in the United States. Further evidence of the pervasiveness of this shared tradition of racism can be seen in the similarity between France's treatment of its Black troops in WWII and the example this book describes about the U.S. Army's behaviour in Margraten. In preparation for the victory march into Paris by French forces, General Charles De Gaulle issued orders ensuring that the soldiers marching in celebration of its liberation were overwhelmingly white French, as opposed to including the French Black colonial troops who in fact were the most prominent in the final surge to defeat the German resistance in the South of France (Echenberg 1990, 98-99).

The authors are also far off the mark in estimating that in 1939 England was nearly 100% white, with only around 8000 blacks that were centered mainly in port cities (113). Even conservative estimates posit a population of roughly that size in London alone in the late 18th century; and some estimate that for England as a whole the figure may have been as high as 30,000 by the end of that century (Dabydeen, Gilmore, & Jones 2007, 272).

The authors do allow that race relations there were not as good as the British media claimed; and they offset the singularly negative image of the United States by mention of Eleanor Roosevelt's courageous example of a prominent, influential American leader who was championing racial equality. This work is well worth reading as a reminder of how long-lasting the human suffering inflicted by war can be and it is an especially timely message in our present era when numerous world societies are experiencing major efforts to ban the reading and teaching of history, and to routinely engage in arbitrary warfare.

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## About the reviewer

Allison Blakely is a professor emeritus of European and comparative history at Boston University (US). His doctorate, in Russian history, is from the University of California at Berkeley. He is the author of *Blacks in the Dutch world: The evolution of racial imagery in a modern society* (Indiana University Press, 1994); and *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian history and thought* (Howard University Press, 1986), which was a winner of an American Book Award. Among his numerous chapters in edited anthologies is "Blacks in the U.S. diplomatic and consular services, 1869-1924" in *African Americans in U.S. foreign policy: From the era of Frederick Douglass to the age of Obama*, edited by Linda Heywood, Allison Blakely, Charles Stith, and Joshua C. Yesnowitz (University of Illinois Press, 2015). He is a former president of the Phi Beta Kappa Society and serves on the editorial board of its journal *The American Scholar*. He further serves on the National Council for the Humanities, to which he was appointed by President Barack Obama in 2010. In previous government service he was awarded the Bronze Star and Purple Heart medals for his service as a captain in Army Intelligence in Vietnam in 1967-1968.