

Review

Rudolf Dekker:

Plagiaat en nivellering: Nieuwe trends in de Nederlandse geschiedschrijving over de Tweede Wereldoorlog

Amsterdam: Panchaud, 2019. 103 p.

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Plagiarism, fraud and whitewashing: The grey turn in the history of the German occupation of the Netherlands, 1940-1945

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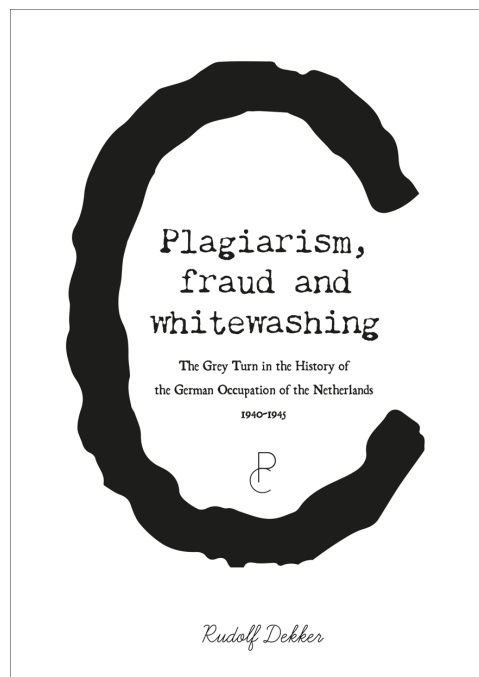
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Reviewed by Remco Ensel

Plagiaat en nivellering

Nieuwe trends in de
Nederlandse geschiedschrijving
over de Tweede Wereldoorlog

Rudolf Dekker



Rudolf Dekker made a name for himself as one of the figureheads of early modern cultural history, with a special focus on individual life courses and the use of autobiographical sources such as diaries, memoirs, and letters. In recent years he has broadened his attention to include contemporary history, including covering various current, sometimes thorny, issues. This latter qualification certainly applies to the case that is the focus of *Plagiarism, fraud and whitewashing*,¹ which involves potential instances of fraud and, more broadly, recurring violations of generally accepted ethical standards. The booklet is an indictment of the way in which the Dutch television maker and historian Ad van Liempt has built up great authority thanks to a long series of books that, in the form in which they were published and generated publicity, were either created by a questionable method or by a publicity campaign that dwarfed the work of less powerful colleagues. Van Liempt's influence as a public historian extends to spreading a revised view of World War II history, one that Dekker opposes. The questionable approach, the revisionist trend and Van Liempt's powerplay as media favourite are here succinctly yet judiciously examined in relation to each other.

Plagiarism is probably the original sin in the humanities. It is therefore also the most deadly and painful disgrace to an historian. Due to the weight of a public indictment, it is important to act with the utmost precision and prudence. However, it is certainly no reason to ignore complaints. Fraud is more than uncollegial and petty behaviour: incidents can be part of a pattern and closely intertwined with unequal power relations. Dekker points out in his book that this last aspect, power inequality, certainly was an issue in the case studies he has collected.

To be sure, Ad van Liempt is not some run-of-the-mill popular historian. He has regularly been compared to Loe de Jong, the patriarch of Dutch public history. Van Liempt is a powerful man who "writes faster than his shadow" (14).² One difference with De Jong is that Van Liempt's books and television work on WWII mainly functioned in the domain of public history. Somewhat to my surprise for example, none of his best sellers have been reviewed in the leading journal *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*. In this respect it has the same status as the work of Geert Mak. This changed when Van Liempt decided to turn one of his projects, a biography of Albert Gemmeker who had been commander of transit camp Westerbork, into a PhD project. Van Liempt and his supervisors came under academic scrutiny and already existing critics joined forces. Earlier in 2022, the *BMGN* decided to devote a special issue to Van Liempt's work and *the affair*.³ A

¹ The earlier Dutch edition is titled *Plagiaat en nivellering*.

² Quotations from the book under review refer to the English language edition: *Plagiarism, fraud and whitewashing*.

³ See volume 137.

second stimulus for the concentration of criticism was the storm that erupted after Van Liempt's firm endorsement of a family memoir in which the war crimes of a grandfather and father were whitewashed through flawed historical research and lack of reflection.⁴

Dekker demonstrates that Van Liempt's work is characterized by an absence of or at least inadequate recognition of other people's work, that is, historians with less media power. This is not the result of carelessness but of a structural approach that can exist in part thanks to a loose network of colleagues who do not speak out, out of disinterest, loyalty, or self-interest, plus an unwillingness on the part of Van Liempt to take up the charges. But are the three books discussed by Dekker indeed based on plagiarism as indicated in the title? As a member of my university's examination board for many years, I have seen many cases of classic plagiarism among students. By this I mean carelessly copying pieces of text under pressure without sufficient citation, occasionally disguised by, for example, translating English texts literally into Dutch. If the student is unfamiliar with the rules—a common objection at hearings—then the university is of course the place to learn the prevailing mores of the scientific community. This classic plagiarism is not the kind in question here – at least it is not discussed as such. Instead, in each of the more extensively dissected studies, there is a demonstrable lack of recognition and even a conscious concealment of earlier, often better, research.

Van Liempt either copies an idea or appropriates the research and then communicates how he came up with the idea and carried out his work completely independently. The book about the Red Cross is illustrative of this approach. A project was started for a book about the problematic history of the Red Cross in WWII followed by a complimentary jubilee book about the Red Cross in general, in the latter case with Van Liempt as co-author. Regina Grüter, who would be the researcher for the first book, agreed to submit chapters on behalf of the jubilee book because her in-depth study would be published first anyway. When the publishing order was reversed, Grüter's data ended up in a book without any acknowledgment for her work whatsoever. In the huge media attention that ensued, Van Liempt managed to not only *not* mention Grüter by name, but also to ignore his co-author, Margot van Kooten. Van Liempt has left a trail of similar incidents, some of which have gone public. In some instances, these border on classic plagiarism or extensive paraphrasing without giving due credit. In a book about the Maliebaan in Utrecht, Van Liempt's book follows the unique structure

⁴ See Isabel van Boetzelaer's *Oorlogsouders: Een familiechroniek over goed en fout in twee adellijke families*. A reply to this book came from Chaja Polak (2018). This case revolves around the "grey turn" – the tendency to minimize the difference between victim and perpetrator – that Dekker also discusses in his book.

of a previously published in-depth study by Wout Buitelaar (29-36). Dekker here introduces the strategy of the “pawn sacrifice,” the single footnote that operates as a cover up to a more extensive dependence on a specific work (33).

In the past year, the Royal Netherlands Historical Society (*Koninklijk Nederlands Historisch Genootschap* or KNHG) has turned the spotlight on fraud. Its findings have now been captured in a report (Noordink & Van der Zeijden 2022). The report speaks of plagiarism when an author creates ‘the appearance that the text is an original and personal contribution’ (“*de schijn wekkend dat de tekst een eigen en originele bijdrage betreft*”) (Noordink & Van der Zeijden 2022, 8-9), and furthermore classifies the ‘theft of ideas’ (“*ideeëndiefstal*”) as fraud (9). Both disqualifications fall under the heading of ‘(un)ethical reuse of scientific research’ (“*[on]ethisch hergebruik van wetenschappelijk onderzoek*”) (Noordink & Van der Zeijden 2022, 4).

Let’s return to the Red Cross. Van Liempt completely appropriated Grüter’s research, literally did not mention her name and instead always spoke as if he had collected the findings himself. When asked how he came up with the topic of the Maliebaan study, Van Liempt answered: “All (my books) start with the same question: why has nobody studied this subject before?” (34).

An allegation of fraud may require a delicate response, yet it should not be a reason to set the findings aside as too problematic. There is a growing awareness that the theft of ideas and data and the lack of acknowledgement should be understood in the context of structural unequal power relations, based on academic hierarchy, gender, or age. Doing research and writing ultimately should be done from a place of realization that the historian is part of a community, that historical research and publishing are based on a precarious balance between intensive research and individual creativity on the one hand and building on and contributing to a collective project on the other. Every text or public discussion must make this precarious balance visible. It becomes difficult to value research in cases where transparency is lacking. And the research becomes exponentially more problematic when transparency about sources is deliberately obscured.

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About the reviewer

Remco Ensel teaches cultural history at Radboud University in Nijmegen (Netherlands), and coordinates a research project on the history of science with the NIOD Institute of War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. He earned his PhD from the University of Amsterdam with his dissertation *Saints and servants in southern Morocco* (Brill, 1999). He has authored articles and books on 20th century visual nationalism, antisemitism, and Holocaust remembrance. Among his most recent publications is *Anne Frank on the postwar Dutch stage: Performance, memory, affect* (Routledge, 2022). He also co-edited (with Nancy Adler and Michael Wintle) *Narratives of war: Remembering and chronicling battle in twentieth-century Europe* (Routledge, 2019), and (with Evelien Gans) *The Holocaust, Israel and 'the Jew': Histories of antisemitism in postwar Dutch society* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

