



Spring conference

Towards a new history of the Second World War?

21 April 2015, Royal Library The Hague. Register at info@knhg.nl

70 Years after the end of the Second World War, research into its history continues to blossom, grow and diversify, both in academia and the larger public arena. In both Belgium and the Netherlands the historiography of the Second World War is well-established, strongly institutionalized, supported by a plethora of highly diverse local initiatives in museums, memorials and heritage centres and accepted as an essentially legitimate endeavour by the larger public, policy makers and funders.

This success however also poses fundamental questions on the future of 'The History of the Second World War' as an academic (sub-)specialism in the twenty-first century. The 2015 Spring conference of the [Royal Netherlands Historical Society](#), organised in collaboration with [CegeSoma](#) and [NIOD](#) (the Belgian and Dutch study centres originally founded for the study of the Second World War), wants to stimulate the debate about the future of the specialisation. Are new orientations and methodological innovations required? How will the field connect to current trends in representations of the past in digital forms, in museums and archives? Should researchers leave the comfort zone of their own specialisations and relate to other fields and disciplines in order to deal with the 'big issues' of the history of the Second World War? Provocative statements on the present state of the historiography of the Second World War within the larger perspective of current historical cultures will be offered in a *position paper*.

This position paper will be pre-circulated amongst all participants and offer a starting point for the keynote address by Martin Conway. He will place the Second World War historiography in the Low Countries in an international context and relate it to broader fields of War Studies. The keynote will also provide a link to the four individual sessions. The four sessions will each take one specific angle to stimulate debate amongst three or four Dutch and Belgian speakers, followed by a plenary discussion.

This conference aims to **provide a fundamental reflection on the agenda of Second World War-historiography in the Low Countries** for the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

The entrance fee (including coffee, tea, lunch and drinks afterwards) is € 30,- for members KNHG, € 15,- for students (members). Non-members pay € 50,- and students (non-members) pay € 30,- . The amount can be wired to IBAN NL25 INGB 0006 9343 91 (BIC INGBNL2A), KNHG, The Hague.

Programme

9.30-10.00	Welcome
10.00-10.15	Introduction Susan Legêne, day chair Royal Netherlands Historical Society and VU University Amsterdam
10.15-11.00	Keynote lecture 'The History of the War is over but Histories of War remain' Martin Conway - University of Oxford Discussion
11.00-11.30	Coffee
11.30-12.30	Session 1 <i>Frameworks</i> Chair: Hinke Piersma - NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide, Studies, Amsterdam
12.30-13.30	Lunch break
13.30-14.30	Session 2 <i>Research agendas: questions or answers?</i> Chair: Nico Wouters - CegeSoma Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society, Brussels and University of Antwerp
14.30-15.30	Session 3 <i>Representing a past war for whom?</i> Chair: Kees Ribbens - NIOD Amsterdam and Erasmus University Rotterdam
15.30-16.00	Tea
16.00-17.00	Session 4 <i>Interacting with Collections</i> Rudi Van Doorslaer - CegeSoma Brussels and Ghent University
17.00-17.30	Closing remarks Peter Romijn - NIOD Amsterdam and University of Amsterdam
17.30-18.00	Drinks

Outlines sessions

Session 1 Frameworks

Chair: Hinke Piersma - NIOD Amsterdam
Speakers: Marnix Beyen – University of Antwerp
Geraldien von Frijtag Drabbe Kunzel – Utrecht University
Remco Raben – Utrecht University

The history of the Second World War continues to be subject of fierce polemics among professional and lay historians, as it confronts national and/or local narratives and creates collective identities for social communities which are tied to a common past. To understand how 'war-history' works, a comparative look across Belgo-Dutch borders can be illuminating, both in content (which themes, which perspectives etc.) and in methodology. Concerning the content, we will discuss the dynamics between political culture and the historiography in the Netherlands and Belgium from 1945 onwards. Which topics are/were controversial and how do/did they relate to their specific national or local background. Defining convergent and divergent trends between both countries might open new perspectives on how the history of WW II functions within its specific time and place. Such a contextual approach has methodological consequences too. How, for instance, does the successful field of transnational justice relates to the political history which explored (and explores) regime changes? Should we embrace the judicialisation of history? And will newly defined disciplines from which transnational justice is just one, help historians to come out of their methodological box to be ready for the history of WW II in the 21st century?

Session 2: Research agendas: questions or answers ?

Chair: Nico Wouters - CegeSoma Brussels and University of Antwerp
Speakers: Bruno De Wever - Ghent University
Ilse Raaijmakers - Arq Psychotrauma Expert Group Diemen

The most critical point of view possible at this time is that the current academic discipline of WWII is developing towards being an applied science at best: purely catering to societal interests and dominated by actors from outside the academic discipline. A harsh assessment would be that the field has no longer sufficient legitimacy as such, and thus may be a victim of its own success? It may now have reached the point that it is unable to innovate its own particular set of questions, approaches and separate longer term goals.

This sessions tackles the questions WWII historians ask: which questions and approaches should define the new research agenda, to which purpose, and what kind of answers do we expect them to provide?

- How exactly do we assess the interconnectedness? of present-day and future social demand (in its broadest sense) for our work on the one hand, and the advancement of academic research on the other? Is the current situation really fundamentally different than the one during the ‘golden era of WWII-historians’ in the 1960s-1980s?
- From the beginning, the institutionalization of the production of narratives on the Second World War has served purposes of fostering fundamental moral and political notions (democracy, freedom, human rights, nationhood). This may have changed over time, but has not exactly diminished. If we accept that a critical stance towards current fields such as memory education or commemorative policies and memory legislation is required, in what concrete ways should such a critical position reflect on the kind of questions we ask in our fundamental research ?
- Does the field need new paradigms and if so, should such a paradigmatic shift constitute a move ‘inward’ – free from any short-term societal demands – or on the contrary a bold move ‘outward’ (towards non-academic actors or transnational history). In this context, the recent Cambridge History Manifesto might be an interesting point of departure for debate. Herein, a return of the *longue durée* and grand narratives approach is defended, albeit in the explicit support of a more public role of the historian. May the programmatic purpose of presenting well-informed ‘disruptive narratives’ be the challenge that WWII history needs? Or, on the contrary, would this ‘flight’ into the *longue durée* (cf. Fernand Braudel) lead to total detachment from the manifold WWII-histories that develop outside of the academic field and to detached specialism?

Session 3: Representing a past war for whom?

Chair: Kees Ribbens - NIOD Amsterdam and Erasmus University Rotterdam
Speakers: Judith Keilbach – Utrecht University
 Chantal Kesteloot – CegeSoma Brussels
 Roel Vande Winkel – University of Leuven

World War II continues to play an intriguing role in contemporary societies across Western Europe. Seventy years after the end of this conflict, the need for experiences and stories, for discoveries, revelations and interpretations is still strong. Numerous post-war conflicts and other historical developments, from the Cold War to the fall of the Berlin Wall, and from Decolonization to the War on Terror, have not led to a noteworthy decline of this historical public interest (other significant developments may even have contributed to an increased interest in certain aspects).

The impact of these post-war political developments on the content and imagination of the war was perhaps as limited as the influence historians had on the representation of World War II. To what extent does the historians’ familiarity with text, their pursuit to follow the sources as closely as possible, yet a rather distant focus on often larger-scale issues match

with the public need for war representations? Is the increased dominance of the visual, the need to 'experience' (the recreation of) the war, to see it from an individual perspective, still compatible with academic historiography? Both old and new media, and visual media - from comics to games - in particular, are breaking new grounds here. But their popularity raises two key questions: What have we gained analytically from these new dominant forms of public history? And has this resulted in a new hermeneutics that connect the audience(s) more profoundly with the past, leading to a better understanding?

Session 4: Interacting with Collections

Chair: Rudi Van Doorslaer - CegeSoma Brussels and Ghent University

Speakers: Charles Jeurgens - Leiden University

Karel Dibbets - University of Amsterdam

Veerle Vanden Daelen - CegeSoma (EHRI) and University of Antwerp

These last two decades, the professional disclosure of WWII-related archives – documental as well as audio-visual – has been revolutionized. Classic academic archival research – and archival institutes such as NIOD, CegeSoma and the Belgian and Dutch National Archives are active players in innovating practices of digitization and as such giving shape to the new research perspectives that result from it. In this session, we want to reflect on the future consequences of these rapid changes.

- Will the disclosure of archives become transnational by definition and what are, in this perspective, the lesson's learned from EHRI?
- In light of the enormous public investment in WWII-history : how (and to what extent) can professional institutes integrate users' perspectives and participation?
- Will the Digital Turn make any national framework obsolete in the near future? Will it even replace national WWII-chronologies, making the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949 a more acceptable terminus ad quem than 1945? What about the reunification of Germany in 1989-90?
- Is there still a need for institutes such as CegeSoma or NIOD, national centres for war-studies, that combine an archival and documentation function with a research agenda? Does the digital revolution itself necessitate a newly defined relationship with other (larger) institutes or networks in both countries?