

From Memory Repression to Memorialization: The Bombardments of Nijmegen 1944 and Mortsel 1943

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On February 22, 1944, tragedy struck Nijmegen, a Dutch city in the south east of the Netherlands near the German border. American B-24 bombers, Liberators as they were called, dropped their fatal cargo on the city center. More than 760 people, including a few German soldiers, were killed in a matter of minutes. Hundreds of houses, five churches and most of the commercial center of the city were destroyed. On the same day, the Dutch cities of Enschede and Arnhem were hit as well, with less dramatic results. Alongside the flood of 1953 in the Dutch province of Zeeland and the bombing of Rotterdam by the Germans in May 1940, the Nijmegen bombing was the deadliest catastrophe in 20th-century Dutch history.

Despite the catastrophic scale of the bombardment the Nijmegen disaster did not become part of Dutch collective memory. The circumstances which led to the disaster remained unclear for many years. Many stories about the perpetrators and their motives circulated. Still, in the official history of the Netherlands in the Second World War by Loe de Jong only a few pages were devoted to the event (de Jong 1976, 1259–1262). It was not until 1984 that two studies appeared which examined the circumstances which had led to the event (Korthals Altes; Brinkhuis). These caused a flood of responses: there were feelings of recognition, of resignation and indignation, but also and especially they gave rise to many new questions. It now seemed clear what had caused the bombardment and who the perpetrators had been: American bombers had erred and mistaken Nijmegen for a German city.

Sixty years after the bombardment, the popular TV program *Andere Tijden* (*Different Times*) made a documentary about the disaster, which stated that for forty years there had been virtually no commemorations of the disaster: “Nothing was heard about it, unlike about the bombardment of Rotterdam. The big difference with Rotterdam, of course, is that this bombardment was a mistake, and one made by friends to boot. This makes the bereavement process much more complicated” (*Andere Tijden*). This set of assumptions will be the

central focus of the present essay.¹ In particular I will examine two aspects: the presumed lack of commemoration, and the explanation for the bombardment. First, why was the bombardment not commemorated for so long? Or, more precisely, is it true that no commemorations were held? Secondly, is the explanation given in 1984—that the bombers had the intention of bombing a German city—correct? Or is this a consoling vision, accepted to make it easier to cope with the loss of lives and the material damage caused by our Allied friends? The case of Nijmegen may illuminate a more general issue: to what extent did self-censorship and political correctness inhibit the processing of a traumatic Allied bombardment? In order to find an answer to these questions it may be useful to offer a comparison to the bombardment of the Belgian town of Mortsel.

On April 5, 1943, about ten months before the Nijmegen tragedy, American bombers—79 B-17 Flying Fortresses and 25 B-24 Liberators—began a mission to hit the ERLA-factory, a German aircraft industry building, near Mortsel, a town south of Antwerp. Due to German fighters, the Allied formation got in disarray, and was not able to bomb the target with the necessary precision. Only four or five of the 600 bombs hit the factory. The rest of the bombs destroyed the residential area Oude-God, killing 963 people, of whom 209 were younger than 15 years old. Although the factory had been hit, schools, houses and shops had been destroyed as well. As in the case of the Nijmegen disaster, this Mortsel tragedy did not obtain a place in the national war history or collective memory of Belgium (Serrien 2013). In many ways both events and their memorialization can be compared.

In order to discuss the first aspect, the commemorating of the Nijmegen bombardment, we should first ask how the national authorities reacted to the bombing of the three Dutch cities on February 22, 1944. Regarding the Dutch government-in-exile, the answer is simple yet rather shocking: it hardly reacted at all. No formal complaint was made to the Americans (Rosendaal 2009: 66–69).

What to make of this passive response? First of all, the Dutch authorities in London only found out about the bombardment on the 24th of February. According to an agreement with the forces, any operational plan, which could include the bombing of Dutch cities, was to be brought before the Dutch ministerial Committee on Air Raids in the Netherlands. This had not happened and the Dutch cabinet members were therefore very surprised to hear about the disaster. Still, Queen Wilhelmina did not want to make an official protest to the American government. She was more occupied with a German bombing raid near her home a few days before, which had killed two of her guards. It is also possible that she had not been informed of the full extent of the disaster

1 The ensuing examination is based on Rosendaal 2009.

and that her entourage wanted to protect her from any further strain. Later, it was said that the American ambassador had been severely questioned in the Queen's presence by the Dutch diplomat and cabinet member Michiels van Verduynen. But this story is incorrect: that particular interview actually took place after the earlier bombing of Enschede in October 1943. At the time of the February 1944 bombing, there no longer was an American ambassador to the Dutch government-in-exile in office. The Dutch government had hoped that a successor would be sent, which would have the added effect of confirming its (the government's) legitimacy. Thus, it is likely that for that reason as well, the ministers played down their reaction. In retrospect, their restraint can be seen as a form of self-censorship: the Dutch government-in-exile was afraid it would lose its recognition by the American government and kept quiet. Yet it is reasonable to ask, given the cabinet members' self-centered attitude, whether they would have made a firm protest had diplomatic relations not been at stake. At the same moment, for example, three of them were on the verge of resigning, for they felt ignored and were dismayed by the queen's authoritarian attitude (Rosendaal 2014: 61–62; Van Esch 239–248).

The reaction in the Netherlands was equally muted. Although posters appeared after the bombing protesting the 'Anglo-Americaansche Oorlogsvoering' ['the Anglo-American Warfare'], the German occupiers and the NSB [the Dutch National Socialist Party] made only limited use of it for propaganda purposes. The NSB burgomaster Van Lokhorst was in no working condition, officially because of his health, but in fact because he was afraid of an attempt on his life. His deputy, Deputy Mayor Harmanus Hondius, as convinced a National Socialist as the other aldermen of Nijmegen at the time, was doing his best to protect the unity of the Nijmegen population. He saw to it that post-bombardment aid was not monopolized by the national socialist *Nederlandse Volksdienst* [the Dutch Public Aid Service] and also ensured that the public funeral of the bombardment's victims and the concomitant memorial service were not organized by the NSB. Thus the memory of the bombing took on a politically neutral character almost from the outset (Rosendaal 2009: 87–105).

This is not to say that no attempts were made in the Netherlands to politicize the bombing. Celebrating Hitler's birthday in Nijmegen, a mere two months after the event, for instance, *Reichskommissar* Seyss-Inquart compared the bombardment of the city with terrorist attacks on Germany and described them as a mode of cultural barbarism perpetrated by ill-informed Americans. The resistance, for its part, did not discuss the bombardment at length, but in its illegal papers it was always spoken of as an unintentional mistake made by a friend.

The postwar reaction to the bombing can be divided into four phases. In the first period, from 1944–1959, the city government did nothing to

organize commemorations; individuals and organizations took the initiative instead. It was really the churches that first heeded the call to remember the dead: they began holding annual commemoration services in 1947. The churches offered reasons drawn from the Christian tradition for the suffering that had taken place: God, they said, had had a purpose in allowing the bombardment to take place. The first memorial plaque, erected five years after the bombing, was for the victims who died in the Molenstraat church. Efforts to erect a national monument for the victims, however, were unsuccessful. It took ten years before the city officials finally organized a memorial ceremony, and it did not become an annual tradition. It was not until 1959 that a monument was finally erected to the memory of *all* of the civilian casualties in Nijmegen: Mari Andriessen's *De gevallen engel* [The Fallen Angel] (Rosendaal 2009: 167–242).

From 1959 to 1984, even fewer public commemorations of the bombing took place. A few memorial services were held during the 20th and 25th anniversary years, 1964 and 1969, but for the most part the disaster increasingly slipped out of the collective memory of Nijmegen. Only in 1984, on the fortieth anniversary of the disaster, was there a sudden upsurge of interest. A number of major memorial ceremonies took place, and two books appeared, written by Korthals Altes and Brinkhuis. The renewed awareness of nuclear threat caused by the projected stationing of cruise missiles in the Netherlands, which led to nation-wide protests, gave new cause to remember the bombing as a terrible example of the horrors of war. For the next several years In Paradisum, an organisation which takes care of the memorial cemetery where many of the bombing casualties were buried, organized the memorial ceremonies (Rosendaal 2009: 245–285).

The final significant change occurred in 1999, when the city at long last took it upon itself to organize public commemorations and memorials of the 1944 bombardment. New monuments were erected at the City Hall and at the graveyard on the Graafseweg, the location of the mass grave far away from the actual area of the bombing. From this moment on, the war and the bombing in particular were considered key moments in the history of Nijmegen (Rosendaal 2009: 287–305). The 65th anniversary in 2009 was held in the presence of representatives of the embassies of the U.S., Germany and the United Kingdom. For the first time a cabinet member, representing the prime minister, attended the remembrance ceremony. From this year onward, the ambassador or a *chargé d'affaires* of the U.S. held a yearly speech in which he offered American sympathy with the loss of lives.²

2 The Dutch government was not again present until 2016, and this was more by coincidence than planning.

A comparison to the bombardment of the Belgian town of Mortsel and its memorial history shows remarkable similarities in commemoration. Of course, in this case it was not a target of opportunity the American bombers intended to bomb, but the aircraft factory near this place. Nevertheless, with nearly a thousand civilians killed, this action was as catastrophic as the Nijmegen bombing. In the first decades after the war, many surviving victims and next of kin of those who were killed did not speak about the tragedy. Only in religious services those who died were remembered. The local inhabitants were outraged as local officials who had organized the aid in the aftermath of the bombing, were severely persecuted for their German friendliness. In 1955, the citizens of Mortsel collected money to erect a memorial cross on the mass grave. An official, national recognition of the tragedy was withheld probably because of the friendly fire that caused it.

As was the case in Nijmegen, in the 1980s a local historian, Achille Rely, reopened the debate by publishing his research on the Mortsel bombing. Fifty years after the tragic event, Flemish television made a first documentary—and people began to talk. In the year 2000, a monument was inaugurated on the central town square and, stimulated by the local historical society, annual commemorations started to be held, organized by the local authorities. As late as 2004, national recognition was obtained when the city of Mortsel received an official certificate from the Belgian government proclaiming it a “war victim.” Sixty-five years after the bombardment a new study was published and from then on the American embassy in Belgium sent a representative to the annual commemorations. Plans are in the making for a new monument and information center on the bombing (Rely 1988; Rely 1993; Debruyne 1995; Serrien 2009; Serrien 2013).

To conclude this first part, we can say that commemorations *did* in fact take place in Nijmegen between the years 1944 and 1984. From 1954 onward, a memorial ceremony was organized every five years. During the last fifteen years of this period, when the bombing was not publicly remembered, the victims were commemorated individually by their relatives. The same was the case in Mortsel, where the remembrance was kept alive by the local community.

Should we understand the passive attitude of the Nijmegen municipal authorities towards commemorating the bombardment as a form of self-censorship, or possibly a manifestation of political correctness? Neither appears to offer a satisfactory explanation. After all, official commemorations of the war and celebrations of the city and the country’s liberations had been taking place at five-yearly intervals at fixed moments over a long period of time. Moreover, municipal policy dictated that all commemorations as well as the installation of war memorials had to originate in private initiative and

could not be government-imposed. During the 1960s, and even more so during the 1970s, there was a notable decrease in public interest in commemorating the war. From this we may conclude that attributing the lack of interest in commemorating the Nijmegen bombardment to political correctness may be inadequate. The same could be the case in Mortsel. New research reopened the debate and stimulated the public interest in Nijmegen and Mortsel in the 1980s. After twenty years, local and national authorities in both cities finally embraced the commemorations.

We can now turn to the second aspect: the explanations for the Nijmegen bombardment. From 1984 onward, the bombing was generally explained as an error: the American bombers had mistaken Nijmegen for a German city. But many questions remained. What had really happened? Did the navigators in fact miscalculate? Many survivors and relatives of victims still wonder: if the bombardment on Nijmegen was indeed a mistake, why then did the Americans also bomb Arnhem and Enschede on the same day? Had the planes really intended to bomb German cities?

As part of Operation Argument, the combined American and British Air Forces planned to bomb several targets in Nazi-Germany on February 22, 1944. Through a concentrated attack on aircraft factories and airfields, the allies hoped to gain air supremacy, which they believed would be decisive in winning the war. On that day, hundreds of fighter-bombers took off from bases in England. During the night and in the morning, bombers of the Royal Air Force and the tactical American 9th Air Force attacked Dutch airfields to prevent German combat planes from taking off, thus preparing a safe flying zone for the bombers of the 8th Air Force. Shortly after these bombers went aloft, snow and storm winds arrived off the English coast, causing enormous problems, and the flight formation became chaotic. Indeed, although most of the first division's bombers continued their mission targeting the northern part of Germany, the third division had to be recalled almost immediately. Both divisions were composed largely of B-17 Flying Fortresses.

The commander of the second division hesitated, but decided in the end to order a recall of his planes in action. These B-24 Liberators were on their way to the German city of Gotha. Yet since the idea of Operation Argument was to overwhelm German air defenses with a massive attack, a partial force was more vulnerable. Two of the three Combat Bombardment Wings involved received the recall message in time but the commanding operational officer of the 20th Bomber Wing, Captain William Schmidt, did not receive the message. It was only half an hour later that he received word and ordered the three Bombardment Groups of his Wing to return. By then, the Liberators had already passed the German border, so the officer ordered them to search

and bomb a so-called “target of opportunity.” The commander of the 448th Bomber Group chose a town district with a lot of factories as a proper target for his group’s incendiary bombs. Luckily, his colleagues in the 93rd Bomber Group realized in time that he was in the Netherlands and they refrained from bombing. Some of the planes dropped their bombs near Deventer, without aiming at a specified target.

The commanding officer of the 20th Bomber Wing was directing the 446th Bomber Group. The first section of this group chose a big railroad yard as their target of opportunity. The third aimed at a marshalling yard with some factories in another town. The second section, which flew in the middle, was not able to bomb. We will never know for sure whether the pilots knew the exact name and location of their targets at the moment that they dropped their bombs. The factory quarter of the 448th Bomber Group appears to have been Enschede. The first section targeted Nijmegen, the last section Arnhem.

The crew’s subsequent accounts of their mission allow us to reconstruct their intentions to some extent. It can be stated as a certainty that most of the crews knew the names of the places they bombed. Still, some of them confused Nijmegen and Arnhem, or were in doubt about which city they had bombed. All of the pilots bombed on the ‘lead’, the commander of their section. Later on, the commanding officers made statements in which they asserted that they believed their targets had been German cities. But by the time they did so, they knew that they had attacked places in occupied territory, which were only supposed to be hit on explicit instructions. This protocol had not been known to all the pilots when they took off on their mission. Still, commanding Wing officer William Schmidt’s statement that they mistook Nijmegen and Arnhem for the German towns of Goch and Kleve does not dovetail with earlier assertions by him and the other pilots. Wittingly or unwittingly, he gave a false account. Indeed, it seems most likely that the precise localization of the targets took place *after* the command “bombs away” had been given. The unexpected turning back and the necessity of choosing a target of opportunity caused such confusion that the crews could not really determine what places they were bombing (Rosendaal 2009: 47–61).

It is not correct, then, to use the term “*vergissing*” (“mistake”) for this line of action. Although the bombings of Nijmegen, Arnhem and Enschede were not the result of a premeditated plan, the order had been given to bomb targets of opportunity. The crews chose targets and intentionally bombed them. Only afterwards did they establish which towns they had hit and realized their action had not been allowed.

The death toll in Nijmegen far exceeded that of the other cities bombed that day, and was in fact one of the highest during the entire Second World War if

we take into account the fact that it was caused by only fourteen planes. There are several reasons for this. First, the bombardier in the first plane, wanting to bomb the marshalling yards, aimed at buildings in the city center, while supposing that the following planes would not take into consideration their groundspeed. Most of the bombs thus missed the railroad yard and hit the center of the town instead. Cluster bombs killed hundreds of people in front of the station. Moreover, the air-raid siren had just sounded the “all clear,” with no one realizing that the bombers had returned. As a result, many people were out on the streets when the bombs struck. Finally, fire broke out after the bombing which could not be extinguished because there was no water pressure. Numerous people burned to death (Rosendaal 2009: 23–44).

The term “vergissingsbombardement” or “the mistaken bombardment” was introduced as a way to trivialize the magnitude of the catastrophe. Describing the bombardment as an error, in which Nijmegen and Arnhem were mistaken for Goch and Kleve, lessened the ‘guilt’ of the American allies; the victims, as the term “mistake” implies, should have been Germans. The officers of the American Air Force, for their part, considered their mission as justified; they had tried to hit a target of opportunity, even though it was in occupied territory.

At the start of his study for his 1984 publication, before he had even embarked on his research, Brinkhuis publicly emphasized that he was convinced that it had been a mistake, and that he was going to prove it. His use of the term “vergissingsbombardement” seems to reflect a degree of political correctness. Writing in the middle of the Cold War, at the beginning of the 1980s, it was simply not deemed politically correct to accuse a protective friend of having perpetrated a massacre. But is this really an adequate explanation? Did Brinkhuis have the intention to be politically correct? When we compare his research to the case of Mortsel, a similar restraint in condemning friendly fire can be established.

It may, then, be necessary to bring in another dimension in the Nijmegen case. So far we have discussed the memory of only one event, one particular moment in time. If we consider the year 1944 in Nijmegen as a whole, are there any other episodes which failed to become, or should have become, part of the collective memory?

One of these, certainly, was the well-known Operation Market Garden, launched on September 17th, 1944. It failed to reach its objective—Arnhem was the proverbial bridge too far—yet after four days of heavy fighting, Nijmegen was liberated (Rosendaal 2009: 110–143). Ironically, the same planes which had bombed the city in February now dropped supply goods for the American liberators of the city. The liberation took its toll as well. In defending their bridgehead, the Germans set fire to the eastern part of the city

center. Many civilians were killed in the street fighting, and even after their retreat, the Germans continued to attack the Allied troops in the city for about five months. On October 2nd, the city was heavily bombed and shelled. About a hundred people were killed in the cellar of a factory that was used as a bomb shelter. Towards the end of the day, one inhabitant wrote in his diary that "Het schijnt dat onze stad ten onder moet" ("It appears our city must perish") (Uijen). All told, the number of deaths in this period exceeded the numbers of casualties of the February bombardment and the material damage was far greater than that caused by the American bombers.

The memory of this episode in the war seems to have disappeared totally, even more thoroughly than the memory of the February bombing. Although it entailed a greater loss of lives and more damage to the city, and was inflicted by the enemy, the Germans, it was never commemorated explicitly. Indeed, the destruction of the city center was, and still is, connected to the Americans. Thus, it could be stated that the politics of commemoration were not the result of political correctness. But is this true?

As we have seen, comparison to other allied bombings of targets outside Germany, like the bombing of Mortsels on April 5, 1943, can shed some light on the matter. In the Netherlands the southern quarters of the Rotterdam harbor were attacked, killing about 400 people. Two years later, some 550 civilians were killed in The Hague when the Royal Air Force dropped their bombs on the Bezuidenhout, instead of on a nearby V-2 installation. Indeed, around two percent of all the bomb tonnage dropped by the allies in 1944 came down on the Netherlands (Zwanenburg; Van der Pauw 2009). France received almost 30 percent of it. And although the main targets were airfields, railroads, military troops and industry, with this much bombing, residential areas and civilians were bound to be hit as well. Exact figures are not available, but it is estimated that more than 67,000 Frenchmen were killed (Florentin; Beaudufe). In Italy some 64,354 civilians lost their lives due to Anglo-American bombings (Patricelli: x). For a long time civilian casualties were considered mere collateral damage, even if these civilians had been killed by Germans. Of course there are exceptions: the bombing of Rotterdam by the Germans in May 1940 was considered a war crime and responsible individuals were blamed for this criminal act. But not much attention was ever paid to the victims. We do not know the exact number of victims, and nor is there even a reliable list of their names (Van der Pauw 2006: 848–852).

Only recently, philosophical debate, historical research and commemorative activities have led to a re-evaluation of the importance of civilians that were killed by the violence of war. Although in Germany the allied bombings were always publicly discussed, and more often condemned, the works of

W.G. Sebald and Jörg Friedrich intensified the debate (Von Benda-Beckmann; Sebald; Friedrich). The morality of bombing cities was also discussed in British historiography and analyzed in comparative, European perspective (Grayling; Overy).

If we look at the case of the Nijmegen bombardment, and the alleged lack of commemoration due to self-silencing of the authorities and the victims, we can conclude this was not the result of a politically correct desire to not offend our American friends. The German enemy was never blamed for the even greater destruction that it caused only a few months later. The public attention for the bombardment and the way it was remembered changed during the more than seventy years after the tragedy. A similar conjecture in commemorative practice can be found in Mortsel. In both cases, accepting civilian casualties has been difficult. They are considered to have been a kind of collateral damage, regarded as having served no useful purpose. This has made it especially hard to find a commemorative place for them. Soldiers killed in action died to defend liberty and the fatherland. The victims of the Holocaust proved the inhumanity and the cruelty of a racist and perfidious regime. So what can the deaths of civilians tell us? What they demonstrate, perhaps, is the insanity of war. During the Cold War the emphasis on collateral damage was not useful and was felt to risk endangering the public morale.

After 1990 and the European détente, discussing civilian casualties was no longer a taboo. The commemoration of the terrible destruction of war stresses the importance of peace. In 2016, the city authorities of Nijmegen and Mortsel tried to find ways to work together in their commemorative activities. They saw in the postwar rebirth of Nijmegen and Mortsel an opportunity for a new meaning and a sense of hope that might also be a paradigmatic example for other cities struck by war.

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