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Whitewashing and levelling

‘With all due respect I can say that I have democratized knowledge of the war’ claimed Ad van Liempt in an interview in *NRC-Handelsblad* in 2015.¹ Van Liempt started his ‘democratization’ with his television series *De Oorlog* (The War) broadcast in 2009 in nine instalments. The next year Van Liempt published his book *De oorlog*, based on this series, in which he recounted the same history in nine chapters.² In an interview he explained his mode of operation.³ With Hans Blom, professor at the University of Amsterdam and retired director of the NIOD, he supervised four researchers who for each of the nine instalments of the series collected a ‘bulky file’ with material. ‘While writing the book I leafed again through those files. I could write four times as much text compared with the television series, and this was a good opportunity to make better use of the material.’ Blom’s role as an advisor was great and it was even suggested that he should have presented the television series, instead of the hired professional newsreader.⁴ Hans Blom was seen as the most important Dutch historian of the Second World War and the successor of the famous Loe de Jong.

Between 1969 and 1994 Loe de Jong had published the standard history of the war years, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, in twelve volumes and 18.000 pages. His television series *De Bezetting* (The Occupation), broadcast between 1960 and 1965, had greatly influenced the general public’s view of these years. De Jong told a straightforward story about a neutral country attacked by surprise in May 1940 followed by five years of German Occupation under a Nazi-regime headed by a *Reichskommissar für die besetzten niederländischen Gebiete*, supported by the Dutch Nazi-party NSB. These five years were in De Jong’s view a rather isolated

period in Dutch history with fault-lines on the Tenth of May 1940 and the Fifth of May 1945. In his approach resistance, repression and the persecution of the Jews are central themes. Non-Jewish Dutchmen were divided in 'goed' and 'fout', meaning pro- and anti-Nazi. Van Liempt called De Jong's view not only simplistic but also wrong: 'It was not so black and white as many Dutchmen think; in this regard the picture De Jong sketched has held sway too long.'

Van Liempt's view is inspired by a book published in 2001 by historian and journalist Chris van der Heijden entitled *Grijs verleden*, meaning 'the grey past'.⁵ According to Van der Heijden most Dutchmen did not make moral choices and simply tried to continue living their lives. They were neither 'goed' nor 'fout', they were a grey mass. The war years were no longer a black page, but a grey page in Dutch history. Van der Heijden's book had a critical reception among fellow historians, but it was a great public success, and in 2019 the thirteenth edition was published. Chris van der Heijden was a member of the advisory board of Van Liempt's documentary, which propagated his ideas. However, Van der Heijden's book was an elaboration of ideas Hans Blom had earlier expressed.

Van Liempt wrote his book *De oorlog* with historian Hans Blom. In his preface Van Liempt explains this. 'He cooperated intensively in the planning of the book and in the writing process, and he has written important contributions'. Blom was thus a co-author, and his name is printed on the title page with the addition 'in cooperation with'. Hans Blom never published a general study of the Netherlands during the Second World War, and this book should be regarded as his magnum opus. The book presents Blom's view of the war years and is aimed at replacing the version of his predecessor Loe de Jong. The book's central theme was formulated by Hans Blom in his inaugural lecture of 1983, 'Under the spell of right and wrong?' The war years should, he said, no longer be written with resistance and collaboration

as central themes. Blom also stressed the continuity with the pre- and post-war years. Blom exhorted historians ‘to demolish the political-moral spell of right and wrong with regard to the war period.’⁶ Blom’s lecture was well received in a time when ideologies were becoming less important in Dutch history writing. Nobody would be against a more nuanced view and there was no criticism to speak of.⁷

Blom proposed that the word collaboration should no longer be used. Instead he preferred the word ‘accommodation’ for cooperation with the German Nazi-regime installed with Arthur Seyss-Inquart as *Reichskommissar für die besetzten niederländischen Gebiete*. This was not Blom’s own idea. He borrowed it from the well-known historian E.H. Kossmann, professor at University College London and the University of Groningen. Kossmann had proposed using ‘accommodation’ instead of *aanpassing*, attunement or adjustment, a word he regarded as pejorative and stigmatizing. Kossmann used accommodation for ‘forms of contact, consultation and cooperation’ with the German Nazi-administration, which he distinguished from ‘collaboration based on political principles, lust for power or pursuit of profit’. Kossmann’s personal history must have inspired this view, as he was one of the 500.000 Dutch men who were deported to Germany as forced laborers. Kossmann, then a student, was arrested during a *razzia*. Blom, however, went further and concluded that ‘the political and moral dimension should be as much as possible kept in the background.’⁸ This is of course impossible. Language is not a neutral tool and the meaning of words can change even within a few years. ‘Accommodation’ has quickly developed into a euphemism of collaboration. Kossmann’s proposal was also naive. How can a historian distinguish between acceptable accommodation and criminal collaboration without making a moral judgement? Objective history written in a neutral language is impossible. An historian using the word accommodation delivers a moral judgement, especially since the interpretation of

human motives is always subjective. A good example is provided by Ad van Liempt, who labelled Willem van Boetzelaer's motive for joining the SS as 'love for a woman'. Maarten Brands, professor at the University of Amsterdam, explained that the very term accommodation represents an explicit norm of behavior.⁹

Hans Blom presented his view on the years of German Occupation as more nuanced than that of Loe de Jong, meanwhile reducing his predecessor to a prisoner of a simplistic view with only good guys and bad guys.¹⁰ However, during the five years of German Occupation the Dutch words 'goed' (good) and 'fout' (wrong) had a special meaning. 'Goed' meant anti-German and anti-Nazi. 'Fout' meant pro-German or pro-Nazi. 'Fout' literally means wrong, and the word was never used for persons before 1940, the word had received a new meaning. During these five years the words 'goed' and 'fout' were useful labels, indicating whether someone could be trusted or not. After May 1945 these words lost their practical meaning and instead became moral labels. Loe de Jong stressed that he did not use these words as moral categories, but only to indicate a pro- or anti-German attitude during the Occupation. De Jong was certainly open to nuance, as evidenced by his moving inaugural lecture as professor at the Erasmus University.¹¹

Ad van Liempt further simplified Blom's view. The moralism of Loe de Jong should be replaced by his own new vision, Van Liempt declared on 21 April 2009 in a lecture on his forthcoming documentary series *De Oorlog*. He wanted to avoid the 'traditional goed-fout-judgements' and 'the customary framework of collaboration and resistance'. He wanted 'to omit as much as possible moral assessments in the presentation of facts and stories'.¹² Ten years later, in 2019, he repeated this statement: 'I am not a man of morals'.¹³ Van Liempt claimed to present a completely new and original view. He said that he was the first to give a voice to ordinary people. He also said that he

for the first time showed the 'normality' of the war. And last but not least, he claimed that he for the first time paid attention to members of the Dutch Nazi-party NSB, the Dutch SS-men and the Dutch soldiers fighting at the Eastern front.

Historian Barbara Henkes has pointed out that none of these claims are valid and that all these subjects had received attention before. Loe de Jong in his documentary series broadcast on television in the 1960's had discussed the motives for joining the NSB, and had already interviewed people talking about daily life, which was 'oral history' *avant-la-lettre*. More importantly, in 1974 a documentary of two-and-a-half hours was broadcast about the Netherlands between 1938 and 1948, in which ordinary men and women talked about their lives during these years. The focus was not on heroism, but on the irresolution, half-heartedness, and even cowardice that indeed governed many Dutchmen.¹⁴ This approach not only caused a lot of commotion, but also elicited much praise, and led to a more nuanced view of this painful period in Dutch history, while also stressing the continuity before and after the war.¹⁵ In several books former members of the NSB and Dutch SS were interviewed.¹⁶ From around 1980 a stream of autobiographical books written by children of parents who had been 'fout' during the war years were published, and in 1979 a children's book addressed this subject.¹⁷

Grey was the colour in which Van Liempt and Blom painted the five years of German Occupation. Their grey history was soon made into a new dogma. Ad van Liempt even declared that he had set down the definitive history of those years. Asked if there would ever be a new series made about this period, he answered: 'This will never be done again like we did it. New details will be discovered, but we have sketched the definitive view.'¹⁸ When Hans Blom in 2007 looked back on his inaugural lecture of 1983 he concluded that he had been successful in destroying the black-and-white view of the war years. He regretted that his a-moral approach to those years was

accepted in scholarly discourse, but not by the public at large.¹⁹ Historian Bart van der Boom proposed a solution: 'In the public debate the war remains a moral issue, but we historians do not care about morals.'²⁰ He forgot that the next problem would be to define the boundary between scholarly and non-scholarly. Hans Blom claimed his victory, and indeed, in the past twenty years few dissenting voices were heard among historians. Only two critical reviews of Van Liempt's television series of 2010 were published. And since then the grey view of accommodation has become an accepted truth and was embraced by the Dutch people.

Hans Blom's message reached a large audience through Van Liempt's series and their co-written book. *De Oorlog* was broadcast on Dutch Public Television in prime time with more than a million viewers (of an adult population of 12 million), and afterwards published in a box set of DVDs. Blom's grey message is found most explicitly in an episode entitled 'choices'. This is the story of brother and sister Jan and Joke Folmer. Jan entered the Waffen-SS, while Joke helped 120 stranded allied airmen on their way back to England. Why did they make very different choices? Van Liempt's answer is simple. Jan entered the SS because he had been placed in a NSB foster family. Joke 'nearly unconsciously' became involved in the resistance as a courier. Van Liempt concluded: 'Joke and Jan Folmer, two people from one family – just one example of how fate capriciously could decide what could happen to people during the Second World War'.²¹ In other words fate, instead of choice, determined the behavior of men and women. If, however, fate, coincidence, bad or good luck decides the course of history, there is no place anymore for personal choices. This idea reduces history to a tombola. The study of history is thereby rendered meaningless. There is no longer a need for explanation because there is no human agency. As a consequence, men are no longer responsible for their choices. In retrospective Van Liempt gives an alibi to those who made wrong choices, while denying

those who made good choices any praise. In the end both Joke and Jan Folmer were victims of history, while most Dutchmen were in Van Liempt's view intelligent enough to avoid the risks brother and sister Folmer took.

In line with this view, Van Liempt diminished the importance of the Dutch resistance. In the documentary *De Oorlog* a clip from a movie about the resistance made in the 1950's is shown with Van Liempt's commentary: 'perilous work done by solemn, valiant men.' The irony is intended to ridicule the resistance. His conclusion is that the Dutch resistance did not shorten the war by one day. This tendentious conclusion is contradicted by the fact alone that Joke Folmer set 120 airmen on their way back to England, where they started flying again. Van Liempt's series is a plea for accommodation, and for *not* making choices. The benefits of accommodation are praised, for instance by stressing that the German Occupation stimulated the Dutch economy. An example is the flourishing of the shoe industry due to the booming export of leather boots to Germany. Van Liempt forgets to mention that good boots for German soldiers prolonged the war by many days. According to Van Liempt, the Germans also solved the problem of Dutch unemployment. But he forgets to make clear that unemployment was reduced by sending Dutch men to Germany as forced laborers in (war) industry, which also prolonged the war. There was also the dismissal of Jews from civil service, already in November 1940, including school teachers and professors, which created many new jobs for non-Jewish Dutchmen.

The persecution of the Jews was the theme of one of the nine instalments of the series, and also a chapter in the book with the title 'How the Jews disappeared from the Netherlands', a pun on the title of a book by his colleague journalist-historian Geert Mak.²² By treating this theme separately, the Dutch involvement in the Holocaust is isolated and marginalized, as if this were unconnected to the society and history of 'normal' Dutchmen. Historian Jolande Withuis, an advisor to Van Liempt, made objections. Af-

terwards she wrote that her remarks were brushed aside. ‘The suggestion that men do not make choices, but simply coincidentally ended up somewhere, is contradictory to everything I learned during my research on survivors of concentration camps’. She concluded: ‘The idea “not choices, but fate” is in my view a new and very dismal ideology.’²³

In his other books Van Liempt ventilated the same ideas. While promoting a grey view of history, his books are about the extremes. In *Kopgeld* he wrote about Dutchmen who informed the authorities about Jews in hiding to obtain a reward of a few guilders. This was, however, a very small group and not at all representative of the majority of Dutch people. But concentrating on such a small group does enhance the greyness of the majority. Van Liempt also wrote about special units of the Dutch police searching for Jews in hiding. Van Liempt writes: ‘It is strange that the true character of the hunt on Jews is only now revealed.’²⁴ Here again, only a small minority of Dutch policemen served in such units, which are not representative of the Dutch police in general. The reality was more complex, as these specialized policemen offered their colleagues a pretext for keeping their hands clean. By stressing the importance of the extremes, Van Liempt stimulates his readers to sympathize with a ‘normal’ SS-man, like Jan Folmer.²⁵ Van Liempt also wrote a one-sided book about a member of the resistance responsible for the killing of a farmer, who was convicted of murder after the war.²⁶ The same tendency to look for extremes is found in historians within Van Liempt’s circle. Chris van der Heijden wrote a book about Jewish members of the NSB, who of course were a very tiny minority.²⁷ Good SS-men, bad Jews and criminal resistance fighters are grist to the mill of those historians who promote the grey image of the war years. Another tendency is to concentrate on a few exceptionally brave resistance men, like ‘soldier of Orange’ Erik Hazelhoff Roelfzema and ‘banker of the resistance’ Walraven van Hall, whose lives were dramatized in films and a musical.²⁸

Chris van der Heijden played an important role in popularizing the ideas of Hans Blom. His book *Grijs verleden* (The grey past) was an elaboration of Blom's inaugural lecture. No wonder that Hans Blom wrote an enthusiastic review-article about this book in the leading journal of Dutch history.²⁹ Van der Heijden made no distinction between 'goed' and 'fout', and presented Dutch Nazis as victims, especially when they were convicted after the war. The book was a success and in 2019 a new, illustrated luxury edition was published. There was some criticism but the debate soon petered out.

The first fundamental criticism of this approach came from Blom's senior colleague at the University of Amsterdam, emeritus professor Maarten Brands. In 2003 he published his rather devastating critique in, of all places, a *Festschrift* for Hans Blom. Brands warned that writing history without ethical norms is impossible and that no historian can avoid moral questions: 'I emphasize that moral questions have the place they deserve because they are the core of history writing. The essence of this period [the German Occupation] was for many people making difficult choices between evil and a much greater evil, and this in situations in which they seemed to have little to choose anyway. This often involved heartbreaking questions of loyalty.' Brands concluded that while there should be no moralizing of history, the grey history proposed by Blom was also discreditable. And even more explicitly he wrote: 'My essay is especially directed against excessive relativity by using sliding scales making contrasts, borders and fault lines invisible.' Brands was afraid that the approach of Blom legitimized those who wanted to excuse or play down evil behavior.³⁰

Hans Blom turned a deaf ear to the warnings of his senior colleague. In 2011 Blom functioned as 'promotor', the Dutch term for professor-supervisor, of Chris van der Heijden, who had written a book about the ways in which the Dutch dealt with the aftermath of the war.³¹ It is a follow-up to his book *Grijs verleden*, covering the years between 1945 and 2010. One of

his themes is how the Holocaust more and more dominated the memory of those years. Another theme is the continuing neglect of the suffering of former NSB-members, SS-men and their children. His dissertation was controversial. Two members of the Ph.D.-committee judged the dissertation substandard and unacceptable, but they were a minority.³² In academic journals and the press critical reviews appeared.³³ Dienke Hondius qualified the book as ‘an arbitrary list compiled for settling old scores.’³⁴ Evelien Gans, who was a prominent voice in the debate, saw levelling between victims and perpetrators as what she called ‘secondary antisemitism.’³⁵ For her criticism Evelien Gans was attacked with a vehemence unheard of among Dutch historians. Bart van der Boom, one of her opponents, wrote, for instance, ‘her curses poison the discussion.’³⁶

In 2018 Maarten van Voorst wrote in *Het Parool*: ‘With the Fourth of May coming soon, the inevitable discussions flare up again: whom, how and why do we commemorate? This year again voices will be heard asking to remember the fate of ‘fout’ Dutchmen and their offspring. This is said to be “the final taboo”, and the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust and the fallen members of the resistance is said to be “a difficult moment” for them. This criticism is paired with the cry to replace the “dogma of goed-fout” with the “grey” view, promoted by journalist Chris van der Heijden. Will this result in a more nuanced history? Or must we rather fear swinging to the other extreme, levelling, with a disappearing border between perpetrator and victim?’³⁷

In May 2019 a new edition was published of Koert Broersma’s biography of Philip Mechanicus, the diarist of daily life in concentration camp Westerbork. Michiel Krielaars wrote in a review in *NRC-Handelsblad*: ‘This biography can be read as a warning against the “levelling” of the Second World War. This process started in 1983, when professor Hans Blom pointed out the large grey middle between right and wrong. More nuances in the

approach to the history of the war were a welcome addition, but this nuancing has been excessive in the past few years. It leads more and more to the mitigation of the criminal acts of perpetrators who afterwards became loving, respected family men. Without intervention the Holocaust will soon be seen as a necessary evil, Hitler will be portrayed as a charming adventurer like Napoleon.³⁸

Hans Blom, Chris van der Heijden and Ad van Liempt have paved the way for the success of books like Isabel van Boetzelaer's fraudulent and dangerous family memoir, but it is to be hoped that a new awareness will arise of the importance of studying history without manipulating facts and telling lies. On 26 January 2020 the Dutch prime-minister Mark Rutte gave a speech at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day and he apologized on behalf of the government for the way the Dutch civil authorities had acted during the German Occupation. With the willing cooperation of Dutch public servants the first stage of the Holocaust was smoothly organized. The well-organized Records Offices, for instance, were made available to the German occupiers by identifying Jewish citizens, while the Dutch National Railways, a state-owned enterprise, transported Dutch Jews to the Westerbork concentration camp, cashing travel fares. Successive Dutch governments have for 75 years refused to apologize for the role of the Dutch state in the Holocaust. Even now, in 2020, making apologies was controversial, and Mark Rutte's speech therefore came as a great surprise. It made the front page of all Dutch newspapers. The *NRC-Handelsblad* headline was clear: 'Rutte's apologies mark a turning point.'³⁹ And: 'Premier Rutte's gesture underlines the image of the Netherlands as a country of guilty bystanders instead of resistance heroes.' This perspective will no doubt have a great influence on the way historians from now on will write about the five years of German occupation. Past and present are always connected, and current politics always influences the way the past is seen. Rewriting history has

already started on the front page of *NRC-Handelsblad* in the same article, with its criticism of Bart van der Boom's book *Wij wisten niets van hun lot* ('We knew nothing of their fate'), which, the article says, tried to establish innocence, but on reflection confirms guilt with regard to the Holocaust. It is to be hoped that this marks the beginning of the end of the grey turn in the historiography of the Netherlands during the Second World War.