

Plagiarism,
fraud and
whitewashing

The Grey Turn in the History of
the German Occupation of the Netherlands

1940-1945



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A misleading family memoir: Van Boetzelaer's *Oorlogsouders*

The well-known Dutch journalist and historian Ad van Liempt has more than anyone else influenced the current view of the Netherlands during the German Occupation in the Second World War. This started with his documentary series *De Oorlog* (The War) on Dutch national television in 2009. The series was followed by his book with the same title. He also published several books about the years 1940-1945. With his books, his documentaries and public lectures he was each year attracting much attention around the Fourth of May, the national Commemoration Day of the victims of the Holocaust and the members of the Resistance who had lost their lives. The national ceremony takes place in the evening at the Dam square in Amsterdam, and is broadcast on television nationwide. After two minutes of silence, the King and Queen lay a wreath, followed by representatives of the government and surviving victims and resistance members. The following day, the Fifth of May, is Liberation Day, a national holiday. During the last decade the Commemoration of the Fourth of May has changed in character. In 2012, for instance, the national committee which organizes the ceremony on Dam square had scheduled the reading of a poem commemorating a Dutch member of the SS, killed at the Eastern Front. The idea was that the Dutch people should see collaborators and even Nazis also as victims of circumstances. Only after protests was this cancelled. Such initiatives are an expression of the new 'grey' image of the war years, which is propagated by some historians and made popular by Ad van Liempt. The attitude to the resistance has changed too, as some of its members are now seen as adventures whose acts often had a disastrous outcome. Perpetrators and victims have in this view much in common and become interchange-

able, a process which historian Evelien Gans called *nivellering*, levelling or equalizing. A striking example of this approach is a book published in 2017, *Oorlogsouders* (War Parents) by Isabel van Boetzelaer. This bestseller contributed much to the further propagation of the idea of levelling, and Ad van Liempt played an active role in writing and promoting this book.

In *Oorlogsouders* Isabel van Boetzelaer tells the history of her family in the twentieth century with the Second World War at its center. The main person is her father, a Dutch nobleman who entered the Waffen-SS, who fought as an officer on the Eastern front, and was later hired by the *Sicherheitsdienst* in The Hague.¹ An important role is played by her maternal grandfather, a German nobleman, who also was a member of the SS. The author, born in 1961, writes about the pain caused by this background to her and her family. She looks for the good sides of both men, and writes that her father had nothing against Jews, and that her German grandfather participated in 1944 in the Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler. Ad van Liempt wrote a line of praise for the cover of the book: 'I read a lot of family histories and war memoirs, but this high level is exceptional.' The book launch took place in the Goethe Institute in Amsterdam on 23 March 2017 where Isabel van Boetzelaer presented the first copy of her book to Ad van Liempt. Van Liempt answered with a speech, telling that he 'had followed the genesis of the book with great interest.' He continues: 'There are many reasons why this is an interesting book. How a convicted Dutch SS man and a child of a German anti-Nazi family meet and a harmonious relationship develops.' In his speech Van Liempt repeats the conclusion of the book: 'Love was the cause of it all'. Willem van Boetzelaer simply had fallen in love with the daughter of a Dutch Nazi, and entered the SS to make a good impression on her father. According to Van Liempt this family memoir is exemplary for the war years. He says: the author's 'travel to the past of her father shows the essence of the German occupation for many people. Rela-

tively small causes could lead to immeasurable weighty consequences.' He ends his speech with saying 'This is really a very special story. You should all read it.' After Van Liempt's speech, Isabel's mother, in her nineties, talked about her memories and her daughter's book: 'This book offers an idea how young people at a certain unhappy moment make a fatal decision and how their lives remain scarred after a conviction, also for their families. You should see this book as a document of those times.'

Isabel van Boetzelaer was interviewed by the *NRC-Handelsblad*. In this newspaper – with 200.000 readers - she spoke about the heroism of her German grandfather, who dared to resist Hitler. About her father she said 'He had the bad luck to be in the wrong circles at the wrong moment.'² In *Het Parool* – with 60.000 readers - the book made the front page. The author could tell her story once again: 'My grandfather was involved in the Stauffenberg plot to assassinate Hitler, he was arrested and held in the Gestapo jail in Berlin. I wanted to show that not all Germans followed Hitler.'³ *De Telegraaf*, with nearly 400.000 readers the largest Dutch newspaper, also published an interview, with the heading: 'Idealist trapped by the Nazis.' The author talked about her conversations with her ninety year old father: 'I learned to know the young man, who was driven by ideals to better the world and who fell into the hands of the wrong people.' Other newspapers also published interviews and enthusiastic reviews.

Ad van Liempt's praise on the cover and further advertisement added much to the success of the book. He assisted Isabel van Boetzelaer to promote her book and opened doors for her to the press, radio and television. Together they appeared in a popular television show to talk about her book. The theme of the show was: 'What can wartime stories tell us today?' Van Liempt emphasized the innocent character of her father, and spoke of him as a 'so-called perpetrator'. Van Liempt's praise was a well-planned advertisement, because the show was broadcast a few days before the Commem-

oration Day of the Fourth of May.⁴ Isabel van Boetzelaer was also guest in a weekly history programme on Dutch national radio.⁵ In the May issue of *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, a popular monthly journal about history, her book headed a list of recommended books about the aftermath of the war.⁶

Despite his involvement with its genesis, Ad van Liempt reviewed the book in *De Volkskrant*.⁷ Of course he was very enthusiastic and wrote: 'Isabel van Boetzelaer asked her parents about their past and discovered many surprising facts. Her mother was German and her family had opposed the Nazis. Her father joined as a young man the Waffen-SS and thereafter in The Hague had a leading role in a police unit on the wrong side.' Again, Van Liempt stressed that love for the daughter of a member of the Dutch Nazi-party NSB was Van Boetzelaer's motive to join the SS. After the war he was sentenced to life imprisonment, but was pardoned after twelve years. Van Liempt calls this chapter 'the most moving part of the book. Only now it became clear to me how terribly long this is.'

Within the Dutch nobility the book was welcomed by *jonkheer* Dolph Boddaert, who in his enthusiastic review wrote that baron Willem van Boetzelaer was involved in 'arresting criminals, but also members of the Dutch organized resistance', but he does not mention his many arrests of Jews in hiding. And Boddaert sees an excuse: 'He was on a moving train, from which he could not jump', suggesting that Van Boetzelaer would have preferred to stop.⁸ Isabel van Boetzelaer's book was three times reprinted and meanwhile she continued to spread her message. Memorial Center Kamp Westerbork invited her to give a lecture. She looked forward to it: 'I want to go to Westerbork for a debate', she said.⁹ She also visited schools to tell children about her book, organized by an organization linked to Westerbork.¹⁰ Westerbork was a *Judendurchgangslager*, the detention camp from where between July 1942 and September 1944 more than 100.000 Jews were sent to the extermination camps, of which only 5000 returned.

Only one critical voice was heard after *Oorlogsouders* was published. Chaja Polak sent a letter to *NRC-Handelsblad* which was published on 22 March 2017. Chaja Polak wrote: 'Obviously now the time has come to introduce kind-hearted SS men and feel sympathy for them. This thought came to me after reading the interview with Isabel van Boetzelaer on 20 March 2017. To be clear: It is entirely understandable that Isabel van Boetzelaer loved her father and that it was hard to be the child of a SS man, but not that she softens her justified criticism of him.' Chaja Polak was born in 1941 and is a painter, poet and writer. She published several acclaimed novels, which were translated in several languages, including English.¹¹

Around the same time Maarten van Voorst read *Oorlogsouders* and he was left with doubts about Isabel van Boetzelaer's stories. These were confirmed by his research, and in September 2017 he published an article in which he showed that her book was 'a mix of falsehoods, fantasies and plagiarisms'.¹² Her grandfather was not a hero of the German resistance, he was not involved in the Stauffenberg plot and he never was a prisoner of the Gestapo. In reality he was since 1933 a member of the SS and during the war commander of a Prisoners of War camp, the infernal Stalag-XII-A camp, where Russian soldiers were starved to death. This is documented in a book about the history of the Von der Recke family published in 2015.¹³ The mother of Isabel van Boetzelaer and her family was not anti-Nazi, on the contrary, they were convinced Nazis. The worst falsehood is that her father Willem van Boetzelaer was not a sympathetic SS man, who had nothing against Jews, but instead he fanatically hunted down Jews in hiding. After Van Voorst's article was published, Isabel van Boetzelaer made changes in the fourth edition of her book. She left out the falsified stories about her grandfather. The stories about her father remained the same, although she now made her mother responsible for telling them.

The new, revised edition again attracted much attention in the press. In

Het Parool and the *NRC-Handelsblad* Isabel van Boetzelaer was interviewed again.¹⁴ In *Het Parool* she explained: 'I intended my book as the story of a family, to warn young people so that they can learn from it.'¹⁵ Adding: 'I did not whitewash anything intentionally.' Despite the fact that her book was unmasked as fraudulent, Isabelle van Boetzelaer was still welcome to give a lecture in Memorial Center Kamp Westerbork. After protests her lecture was postponed, and, after continuing protests, eventually cancelled. The management of the Memorial Center declared: 'The lecture would raise too much emotions and pain. Because this would benefit nobody, it is decided to cancel the lecture. It turned out that there are mistakes in the family chronicle. Van Boetzelaer has admitted this, and said that she will do further research. Therefore her book is at the moment not complete.' Director Dirk Mulder added to this: 'It is good to take time and at a later stage give attention to the discussion.'¹⁶ This reaction is rather strange. 'Not complete' is a euphemism for lies. Journalist Willem Bouwman wrote in the small – 20.000 readers –, but independent newspaper *Nederlands Dagblad* that not only Isabel van Boetzelaer was to be blamed: 'This has also tarnished those who applauded her book, like Ad van Liempt.'¹⁷ Bouwman was the only journalist who drew this conclusion. Meanwhile Isabel van Boetzelaer was fighting back. She complained: 'Everywhere things are taken out of context. I could nowhere speak out, except in a forthcoming magazine of the Comité 4 and 5 May.'¹⁸ This is the committee which organizes the national remembrance ceremony on the Fourth of May, which shows that the 'grey' version of the history of the years of Occupation and Holocaust is now mainstream.

Maarten van Voorst was not happy with the revised edition, it was still mainly whitewashing a black past.¹⁹ He showed that Isabel van Boetzelaer had consciously withheld information from her readers, especially facts mentioned in the standard book about The Hague during the German Oc-

cupation by historian Bart van der Boom. He wrote that the *Sicherheitsdienst*-unit of Van Boetzelaer made hundreds of arrests. Most of the men, women and children they arrested did not survive the war. Van der Boom gives a specific example. 'Some really enjoyed their work. Van Boetzelaer [...] discovered a few months before the end of the war a Jewish family in hiding, "very pleased" he looked at his catch and said "A Jew, a Jewess and another Jewess, you never would have thought that we would finally find you".'²⁰ This passage is consciously neglected by Isabel van Boetzelaer, since she does mention Van der Boom's book in her bibliography.

Willem van Boetzelaer is also mentioned in Van Liempt's book *Jodenjacht* published in 2011. This book presents the results of a research project of the National Archive in The Hague. Six historians, supervised by archivist Jan Kompagnie, studied files in the archive of the special courts set up after the war to try war criminals.²¹ Jan Kompagnie wrote the introduction with Ad van Liempt as co-author. Although Kompagnie was the main supervisor of the project, Van Liempt managed to have his name before that of Kompagnie on the cover, and in bigger letters. Although Van Liempt claims to be the main author of *Jodenjacht*, he obviously did not know that Willem van Boetzelaer is mentioned in his own book. In one of its chapters an arrest by Van Boetzelaer is described. His victims were a Jewish girl and her uncle, caught in hiding. The girl is put under pressure to act as an informer, which she bravely refuses. She then receives a menacing advice: 'Put on warm clothing, because it is cold in Poland.' These facts are found in an essay titled 'Treason', written by Margot van Kooten.²²

Johannes Krom, who was a member of Van Boetzelaer's SD-unit, is also mentioned in Van Liempt's *Jodenjacht*, in a chapter entitled 'Violence', written by Liesbeth Sparks. Krom was feared for his cruelty. Sparks describes how Krom arrested and tortured a Jewish man. Krom made him to do 200 deep knee bends, and the next day he could hardly move, according to his

fellow-prisoners.²³ His victim was thereafter sent to Westerbork, and finally to Dachau, where he was murdered. If Van Liempt had cared to read his own book he would have been aware of these facts, and he could have saved his protégé Isabel van Boetzelaer some of her mistakes.

Chaja Polak realized that the Jewish man arrested by Krom was her father, Hans Polak. The arrest took place in April 1944. While Krom took with him her father and mother, he thought that the two-and-a-half year old Chaja belonged to the family where they were lodged. When he came back to correct his mistake, the child had already been taken to another hiding place.²⁴ Aware of the link between her own family and that of Isabel van Boetzelaer, Chaja Polak decided to write a book about her experiences in the past while at same time analyzing Isabel van Boetzelaer's book. Access to the archive of the special courts for war crimes is limited to relatives, but in this exceptional case Chaja Polak received permission to study the file about Johannes Krom. Together with her half-brother Hans Fels, a historian, she found out many incriminating details which Isabel van Boetzelaer had left out, although she had studied the files about her father.

Chaja Polak's book was published in October 2018, titled 'The man who did not hate Jews. A collusion with the past'.²⁵ It is both a story about the experiences of her father, her mother and herself, and a statement, based on research, criticizing the way in which Isabel van Boetzelaer mixed truth and lies so as to whitewash the crimes of Dutch and German Nazis. Van Boetzelaer's book shows that this 'levelling' or 'grey' history of the war years has become mainstream, and has been embraced by the Dutch reading public. She also points out how dangerous it is to falsify history. A book which minimizes the crimes of Nazis while not mentioning the Holocaust at all contributes to making anti-Semitism again fashionable. And Chaja Polak's book is more than an analysis of a dangerous book. It is in the first place an accusation against the Dutch press and the many journalists who did not

recognize the false and misleading information in *Oorlogsouders* and who offered Isabel van Boetzelaer a platform to promote her book, including the popular historical monthly *Historisch Nieuwsblad*.²⁶ And nobody had put more time and energy in promoting *Oorlogsouders* than Ad van Liempt.

The publisher of Chaja Polak's book approached Memorial Center Kamp Westerbork with a proposal for a lecture about her book. The request was refused, which is all the more remarkable, because its director Dirk Mulder had personally invited Isabel van Boetzelaer to present her book *Oorlogsouders*.²⁷ The museum shop of Westerbork refused to sell Chaja Polak's book.²⁸ After protests Westerbork's management allowed Chaja Polak to apply as a speaker on a list of Holocaust survivors. Protests continued after this humiliating answer. After much pressure Westerbork proposed a compromise: Chaja Polak was allowed to speak at the site from where her parents were sent to extermination camp Auschwitz, but only after the First of July. The reason was that by then director Dirk Mulder had reached retirement, and obviously he continued his support for Isabel van Boetzelaer, backed by Ad van Liempt, who is member of the Board of Advice of Westerbork. The protests continued and finally Chaja Polak was allowed to give a lecture in March 2019.

Chaja Polak and her book received attention in the press, but every time Isabel van Boetzelaer was asked for a response and was given the last word. *Trouw*, a quality newspaper, published interviews with both, without telling Chaja Polak that Van Boetzelaer would also be allowed a full page. Isabel van Boetzelaer finished her comment with a harsh attack: 'In her book Madam Polak leaves no room for any other insight, for nuance. She has slammed the door. I am sorry, because in this way a conversation with her is useless. And it is so important to build up mutual understanding. That is much better than running someone down.'²⁹ Next to each other the newspaper printed a photo of Chaja Polak's parents, taken before the war

(only her mother returned from Auschwitz), and a photo of Van Boetzelaer's parents, who lived into their nineties after the war. For this painful misjudgment *Trouw*, founded in 1943 as an underground newspaper of the resistance, offered an apology to its readers.³⁰

Chaja Polak had another unpleasant surprise when she was invited to talk about her book in November 2018 in a popular weekly radio programme on history. Without being announced, historian Bas Kromhout entered the studio, to join her. He took half of the scheduled time saying that it was unlikely that Willem van Boetzelaer while fighting in the Waffen-SS at the Eastern front during two years, was aware of the large scale murder of Jews there. An implausible attempt at whitewashing, because the large scale participation of the SS and Wehrmacht is confirmed by recent research. It was only a prelude to what was the real reason for his participation. Kromhout started to reproach Chaja Polak for criticizing Ad van Liempt's support for *Oorlogsouders*. He said to her: 'My objection to your book is..., that you pages long asked how can Ad van Liempt do this. Ad van Liempt is made into nearly the symbol of this 'leveling', and, when I look at Ad van Liempt's own work, *Jodenjacht* and *Kopgeld*, then is he quite the reverse; I do not think it is fair that Ad van Liempt is now presented, say, as some kind of pars pro toto of leveling'.³¹ Rather incoherent and stammering Bas Kromhout delivered this accusation to the 77-year old Chaja Polak. Because Kromhout took so much time, she had hardly a chance to explain what her book really is about, but she was not deterred. She answered that Van Liempt had praised a book that stimulated the current trend of whitewashing the black past of the war years, and that he, being a member of the Board of Advice of Westerbork, should have known the difference between truth and lies. Van Liempt's praise on the cover was to her 'a stab in the back'. Bas Kromhout's attack in this live radio program was of the same nature.

Only one newspaper took a straightforward stand in its review of Polak's book, the independent *Reformatisch Dagblad*, with some 50.000 readers: 'It was definitely a choice to join the SS and to participate in arresting Jews and members of the resistance, and to work with violent colleagues. The victimhood of Willem van Boetzelaer is of a totally different character than that of Jews: he received a just punishment for his consciously performed deeds. Isabel van Boetzelaer is totally unaware of this difference.'³²

It took a long time before Ad van Liempt spoke about his involvement with *Oorlogsouders*. And he did so only once and in the passing in a provincial newspaper during an interview on 12 January 2019, about his forthcoming book about camp commander Gemmeker. He declared: 'I have hardly read the book, I just did a little scanning. And I wrote a little advertising sentence, which I regret very much. My view has always been that as many people as possible should read any book about the war. This is why I comply with such requests. But I should not have written this without knowing its content.' This is a strange remark, because Van Liempt also reviewed the book in *De Volkskrant*. Did he write this review also without reading the book? His words are not compatible with his speech at the book's presentation, when he said that he was involved in the writing of the book³³ It is more likely that Van Liempt was very well aware of the content of *Oorlogsouders*. His regret mainly concerns his own reputation: 'It was a low point in my career.' He is silent about the damage he has caused to others: he did not warn Isabel van Boetzelaer about her embarrassing factual mistakes, and he did not realize how much her book damaged Holocaust survivors like Chaja Polak. Those who bought the first three editions of *Oorlogsouders* now have a fake family history, and, even worse, so do public libraries. So far, Van Liempt has done nothing to repair the damage he has caused.

Van Liempt had been silent for a very long time. Chaja Polak's first criticism was published on 22 March 2017 and Maarten van Voorst had on

24 August 2017 pointed out the many falsehoods in *Oorlogsouders*, while on 29 October 2018 Chaja Polak's book was published. All the time Van Liempt refused to give a serious reaction. It took Van Liempt one year and a half to show for the first time a bit of remorse, albeit in passing and in a provincial newspaper. Chaja Polak wrote him a letter asking him to give a public statement distancing himself from his praise for the book. He refused, telling her: 'my contribution was small'.³⁴ The Van Boetzelaer case was mentioned by Frits Barend in April 2019 in *Het Parool*. Van Liempt wrote in his reaction: 'A few years ago I lightheartedly praised a book which I had not studied enough. This was a mistake and I have apologized many times in the past.' This was not true, as Ad van Liempt had still not openly condemned the false information and the dangerous message of *Oorlogsouders*. Chaja Polak therefore decided to write a letter to *Het Parool*, published on 12 April 2019: 'Because Van Liempt promotes *Oorlogsouders*, a book disseminating a dangerous and false view of the war years, I asked him first in a letter and then in my book, to write an open letter to correct what went so terribly wrong. In this letter I ask him again to do this.'³⁵ Van Liempt again preferred to remain silent.

In the interview with Ad van Liempt on 4 May 2019 Jort Kelder also asked him about his support for Isabel van Boetzelaer: 'Look, the criticism is of course based on the Van Boetzelaer affair. The book *Oorlogsouders* by the daughter of Van Boetzelaer. You received the first copy of that book. You gave the book your blessing. You retracted this afterwards because the book contained false information. This is in my view the root of what maybe could be called a hate campaign.' Ad van Liempt answered: 'Yes, that is understandable. I have...., eh, I made a mistake and I have admitted this elaborately. I made a wrong assessment. This happens now and then, people ask you to write a puff for a book, and you do it out of sheer benevolence, and I did this carelessly, I should not have done it. I have declared this now

about eighteen times.' Again not a word about the dangerous content of *Oorlogsouders*. And what did Van Liempt mean with his 'wrong assessment'? It seems at the very least to be a euphemism. The vagueness of his answer asks for a closer look at his involvement with Isabel van Boetzelaer to find out what attracted him in her book, which he, using the deceiving first edition, still cites in his publications.³⁶

Despite his denials, we can assume that Ad van Liempt did read *Oorlogsouders*. He wrote a review in *De Volkskrant*, and even Van Liempt can not write a review of a book he has not read. What attracted Ad van Liempt in *Oorlogsouders* so much that he went on to promote the book with all his power? This was a combination of content, style and presentation, the levelling view of the author for whom good and bad were nearly exchangeable, and Van Liempt's self-proclaimed preference to study Nazi perpetrators. This made him embrace an 'idealistic' Nazi like Willem van Boetzelaer, while the noble descent of his daughter may also have been attractive to him.

The preliminary pages of her book promise a work of high moral and intellectual standing. Its motto consists of a few lines from Livy, who declared that the 'decisive last judgement' on men given by history is more truthful than that given by contemporaries. This is exactly the intention of Isabel van Boetzelaer, who wrote her book to restore the honor of her father. Then follow lines from Goethe's poem *An den Mond* about 'Froh- und trüber Zeit'. Again this is a preview of the book, which is presented as a history of good times and bad times. The book starts with a moving death scene, the last hours of her ninety-plus father. This is immediately followed by citations from the baby book kept by his mother nearly a century ago, like 'If he wants to be sweet he lays his little head against people' (p. 10). Isabel van Boetzelaer tries from the start to arouse sympathy for the main character of her book, her father.

In the next scene the author switches to Germany, to her grandparents from her mother's side. In 1920 her grandfather Hilmar Freiherr von der Recke married a noblewoman, hereafter in the book only referred to by her pet name 'Muschatz'. Not only she, but all family members are from then on mentioned only by their first names or pet names. The mother of Muschatz is called Omala. In the same vein, the many animals kept by the family are mentioned by name, like the fox terriers Tammi and Putzi, sausage dog Strolch, pony Ella and donkey Lottschen. This stimulates the readers to identify with these two noble families, the Dutch barons Van Boetzelaer and the German *Freiherrn* Von der Recke. *Oorlogsouders* is written in the style of a romantic novelette, including fantasy dialogues. No wonder that the women's magazine *Margriet* – with 150.000 readers - published an enthusiastic review, which was cited on the jacket of *Oorlogsouders*: 'A superbly written and very impressive book'. As a special sign of appreciation, *Margriet* gave away ten copies of *Oorlogsouders* to its readers.³⁷

In the 1920's and 1930's the four grandparents of Isabel Van Boetzelaer lived comfortable lives in castles and country houses. The atmosphere is sketched in scenes with kitchen maids who are 'baking big Christmas cakes' and picnics in gardens under old trees (p. 68). Isabel van Boetzelaer looks back on those happy pre-war days in a nostalgic mood. She remembers Omala with her 'warm geniality and hospitality' (p. 65). This nice old world, however, is under threat. On the evening of *Reichkristallnacht*, grandmother Muschatz says: 'You see, today it is the Jews, tomorrow the nobility' (p. 75). It is no coincidence that when on the First of September 1939 Hitler announced on the radio that the German army had invaded Poland, Muschatz 'dropped a vase in which she had just carefully arranged a bouquet' (p.76).

Then the scene moves back to the Netherlands. Willem van Boetzelaer came under the influence of his uncle Duco Rengers Hora Siccama, a pro-

fessor at the University of Utrecht, and his colleague Harmen Westra. Both were sympathetic towards the Nazi-ideology, and Westra was a member of the Dutch Nazi-party NSB. During the German Occupation Hora Siccama held high public positions, while Westra was in 1942 appointed burgomaster of The Hague. According to Isabel van Boetzelaer, Westra's son Olaf had infected Willem with the 'Nazi-virus' (p. 80). The language betrays the author's intentions: Nazism was not a choice, it was a virus, and who was infected was an innocent victim of an illness. In her version of the family story it was also Olaf who persuaded Willem to join the Waffen-SS (p. 81). Isabel has a wide range of excuses for her father's decision: he was in love with Olaf's sister Stéphanie and he wanted to impress the Westra family; he wanted to escape from the 'stifling love' of his mother; he wanted to be judged not by his title but 'by his own achievements'; he hated communism; he had 'an adventurous character'. And above all: 'He was very suggestible'. The final attempt at whitewashing is: The Dutch SS-Standarte Westland was a civilized division of the SS and consisted of 'brainwashed soldiers', at least according to Isabel van Boetzelaer.

Then comes the moment Willem is sent to the Eastern front. He told his daughter Isabel that he had no choice: 'the alternative was to go into hiding, which I absolutely did not want to do' (p. 89). A strange excuse, as an SS man in hiding is unheard of. The use of the word 'onderduiken', to go into hiding, is in the context of the German Occupation only used with regard to Jews and the resistance, and the use of this word by Isabel van Boetzelaer is an example of how she manipulates the Dutch language to present her message of equality between perpetrators and victims. Willem van Boetzelaer remained on the Eastern front for two years, and when he arrived the SS had already started the large scale killing of Jews. Isabel writes that her father told her that he never noticed anything of this kind and that he knew nothing about it, a statement that is implausible in the light of recent

historical research (p. 92)

When the warfare in the East became less pleasant, Willem van Boetzelaer's uncle Hora Siccama arranged for Willem to be stationed in The Hague as a SS-Unterscharführer serving in the Sicherheitsdienst (SD). His daughter writes that this was the right place for him, because 'he was fond of detective work' (p. 139). He saw arresting criminals, 'as a decent and just task', including resistance members and Jews in hiding, which became his specialty (p. 168) Again Willem was in the first place a victim of circumstances: 'Willem was on a moving train and could not jump off. He had to continue until the bitter end' (p. 140) The metaphor his daughter is using gains in force when one thinks of the trains which brought the men, women and children he arrested to Westerbork and from there to the extermination camps. Later on Isabel van Boetzelaer repeats this excuse: 'It was a trap, and there was no way out without bringing his family in danger' (p. 168). Meanwhile Willem van Boetzelaer had married the daughter of professor Westra, who had been promoted to the prestigious position of burgomaster of The Hague. Before starting the deportation of the Dutch Jews, the Nazis had in 1942 ensured that all large cities had Nazi-burgomasters to carry through their murderous plan efficiently.

Willem van Boetzelaer was commander of a special unit of the *Sicherheitsdienst* with Johannes Krom as his main subordinate. According to Isabel van Boetzelaer her father came more and more under the influence of Krom. She transforms her father again into a victim, which is the pattern of her book. The reader should also know that the *Sicherheitsdienst* was 'overburdened and suffered from a serious shortage of personnel'. Of course, she does not mention the cause of this workload: chasing illegal workers and Jews in hiding. She also does not mention the reason for the personnel shortage: not many Dutchmen made the choice to work for the *Sicherheitsdienst*. Her next step is to write that resistance and criminality

were interwoven (p. 145). She writes that her father was working in a 'dark world in which good and bad could hardly be discriminated' and of 'a complex no man's land between the resistance and the SD' (p. 145). Her father even had sympathy for 'real resistance fighters', because they were 'idealists'. Isabel van Boetzelaer calls her father also an idealist, and thereby again makes him and his victims equal to each other (p. 142). She concedes that her father's *Sicherheitsdienst*-unit 'went too far', but even that she presents as understandable, because he was afraid to be killed by the resistance (p. 146).

In three editions of *Oorlogsouders* several fake stories about the author's German grandfather are told, how he refused to make the Hitler salute, how he participated in the Stauffenberg-plot to assassinate Hitler and was a prisoner of the Gestapo. This falsification of history is left out in the fourth edition. However, the stories about the author's German mother, Muschatz, are still there. She went westward for fear of the advancing Russian army. On her way she was impolitely treated by uninterested or growling American soldiers (p. 187, 189). An American GI looked at her 'scornfully' (p. 192). The Americans 'caused havoc' in the family castle 'and took freely souvenirs; especially valuable noble insignia were popular booty. The expensive Meissner porcelain and antique crockery travelled to the United States by airmail' (p. 191). In short, she and her family were victims of the Americans. Fortunately, Muschatz could hide the family jewels in her clothing, and poor Omala could live many years from selling them (p. 191). On her way West she was also confronted by liberated forced laborers for the Nazis. They too were unfriendly to Muschatz: 'Yelling, growling and threatening, they took from her and other fugitives their last bread, watches, rings and papers, (p. 189). These Nazi-victims are transformed into criminals by Isabel van Boetzelaer. In another telling detail she describes that after his arrest her father saw a Canadian officer rudely commanding arrested Nazis. This Canadian officer was 'a German Jew', she writes, and he had 'visible

pleasure' in doing this. These are exactly the same words Bart van der Boom used to describe Willem van Boetzelaer, who had 'visible pleasure' in arresting Jews. And how did her father know that that this Canadian officer was a Jew? It could again be pure fiction to create a parallel. Fiction or not, the essence of Isabel van Boetzelaer's book is revealed here: a Jew is showing the same behaviour as the Nazis (p. 210)

Willem van Boetzelaer went on with arresting Jews, because, as he said, 'if I do not do it someone else will do it' (p. 198). The German surrender on the 5th of May made an end to Van Boetzelaer's prospects: 'The dreams of Willem and Stéphanie of a happy future collapsed' (p. 198). Willem van Boetzelaer and Johannes Krom were tried before a special court, and in both cases the death sentence was demanded by the Prosecution. Both were condemned to a life sentence. Only in the worst cases the death sentence was demanded, and only very few were executed in the Netherlands. Against Van Boetzelaer's father-in-law, burgomaster Westra, also a death sentence was demanded, which was even more exceptional. His case was worse than those of the Nazi-burgomasters in cities like Amsterdam and Utrecht, and he was the most hated of them. Rather few death sentences were given by the special courts, which indicates the gravity of their crimes. While her husband is in jail, his wife Stéphanie leads a 'colorful life in glaring contrast to the life of a man in jail', as Isabel van Boetzelaer writes (p. 257). A separation followed, and Willem had to pay alimony 'from his meagre miner's earnings' (p. 274). After twelve years Willem van Boetzelaer receives a pardon. Soon after his release he meets his second wife, Ingrid von der Recke, of whom the readers know her previous history, in her daughter's version. Before the marriage, his future wife wants to be certain that he had nothing to do with the 'gruesome crimes of the SS'. She is quickly reassured. Her father, Hilmar von der Recke, also wants to be sure on this point, and he says, surprisingly for a former SS man: 'I tried to keep my children far away from

the Nazi-ideology' (p. 299). In the final chapter Isabel van Boetzelaer confirms the truth of what she wrote about her family and writes: 'history must not be falsified' (p. 313). She thanks her parents 'who were brave enough to tell me their truth'. This is a wonderful ending of a book which has started with a citation of Livy about history revealing truth. There is a difference. Livy wrote about the truth, and Isabel van Boetzelaer writes about their truth. The difference could not be greater.

Information left out by Isabel van Boetzelaer is also crucial for understanding her intentions. She does not mention the Holocaust. This is only one step away from Holocaust denial. There is no information about what happened to the victims of Willem van Boetzelaer and his father-in-law Harmen Westra, or with the Russian prisoners of war detained by her father-in-law. This is in contrast with passages – with explicit parallels – in which her grandmother Muschatz tells about an allied bombardment in Trier: 'Look at this! These are bodies, many bodies, whole piles' (p. 164). And after a bombardment of Darmstadt: 'The bodies, some burned, were lying left and right in piles like firewood' (p. 165). The bombardment of Dresden is also mentioned (p. 187). The book does not have footnotes. The bibliography consists of only eight titles. Her main source for the stories and 'facts' about her father is the apologia he wrote while jailed in 1947, entitled 'Fight against appearances' (*Strijd tegen de schijn*). This text is not published, and obviously the daughter takes its truth for granted. Left out from the book are the declarations by victims found in the archive of the special war courts. Chaja Polak gives examples, here one suffices: 'I was arrested by a team of policemen, among them Krom and Van Boetzelaer. Van Boetzelaer kicked my brother, when he was not walking fast enough' (p. 125).

What made Ad van Liempt endorse *Oorlogsouders*, and promote the book with such great enthusiasm? In the first place an obvious lack of histor-

ical knowledge combined with an uncritical attitude. More important must have been his views on the years of German Occupation and the Holocaust. A history of a noble SS man who was a victim of circumstances, and after the war a victim of 'harsh' justice was a good illustration of Van Liempt's views. On television Ad van Liempt called Willem van Boetzelaer a 'so-called perpetrator', which means not a real perpetrator.³⁸ *Oorlogsouders* was the perfect proof of Van Liempt's levelling view of the war years: everybody was a bit guilty, everybody was a bit a victim. Many little details must have appealed to him, like the way Van Boetzelaer writes about the German bombardment on Rotterdam in May 1940, only mentioning 'destroyed buildings' but not the 650 to 900 civilian deaths (p. 80). This also fits in with Van Liempt's view, who wrote that the city center Rotterdam was a legitimate military target.³⁹ He must also have enjoyed the style of the book. While Van Boetzelaer wrote a romantic novelette for girls, Van Liempt's books read like adventure books for boys. Ad van Liempt and Isabel van Boetzelaer are in many ways kindred souls.

VIII

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

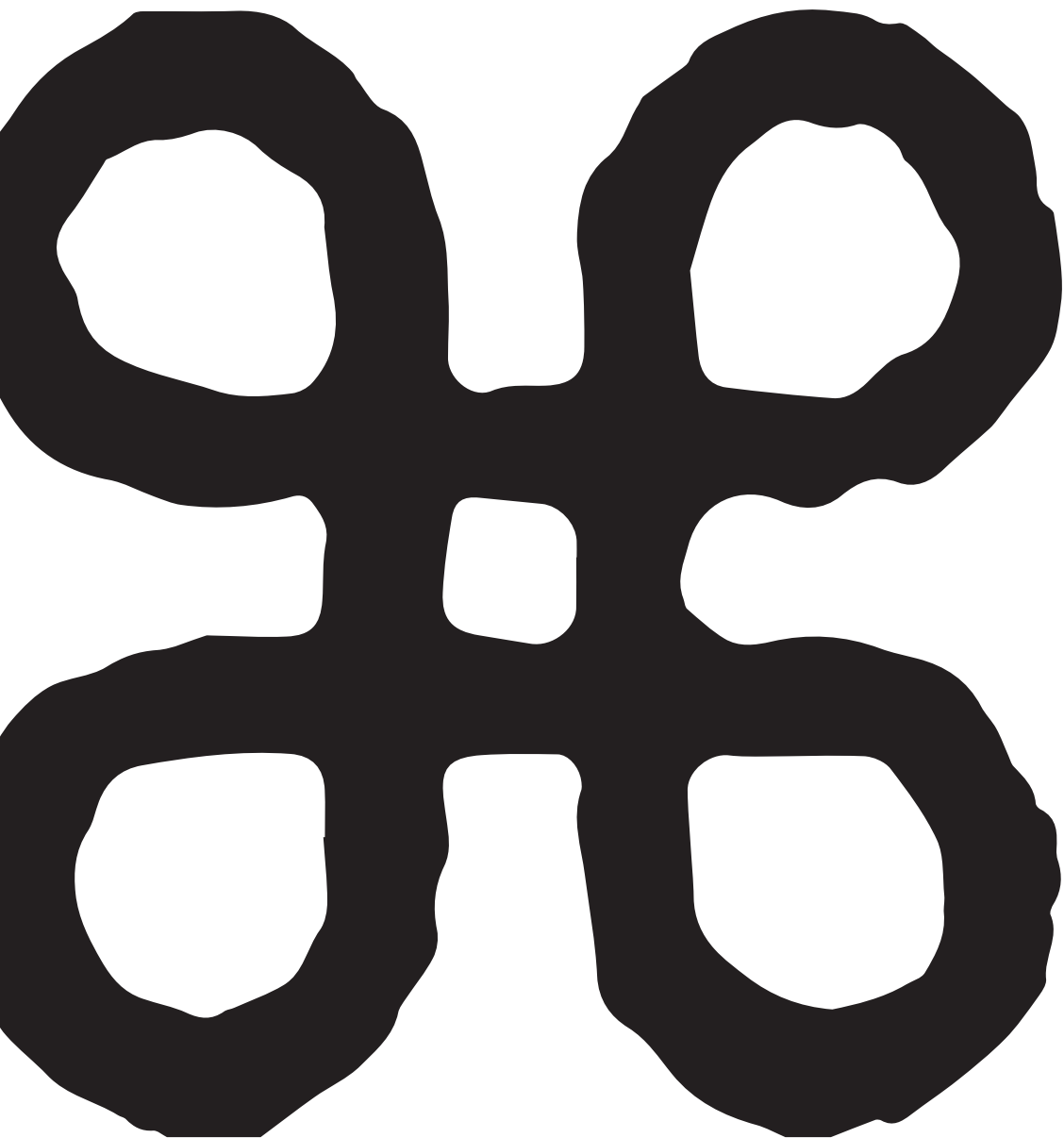
In 2018 Maarten van Voorst wrote in *Het Parool*: ‘With the Fourth of May coming soon, the inevitable discussions flare up again: whom, how and why do we commemorate? This year again voices will be heard asking to remember the fate of ‘fout’ Dutchmen and their offspring. This is said to be “the final 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.



This book discusses two problems in Dutch history writing. The first is plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. The second is the current 'grey' view of the Netherlands during the Second World War in which

the difference between victims and perpetrators is minimized. The influential books and documentaries of journalist and historian Ad van Liempt and a fraudulent family memoir serve as case studies.

ISBN 978-90-826730-6-7



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