# *De burger gaat naar het gerecht kijken.*[1]

The Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery and Dutch memory of the Second World War.

## Introduction.

The Second World War is frequently perceived as a decisive turning-point for the 'Western' society: the economic and political consequences of the conflict, as well as the memories of the sorrows it brought, have, for many decades now, been actively influencing many generations. This includes not only the generation of those who lived through the conflict, but also those who never got to know a reality different than the one marked by the legacy of that war. The memory of the mass destruction of the years 1939-1945 is constantly being re-evaluated, be it in monuments, school textbooks, museums, or films, to name but a few. This essay investigates the Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery. Looking at the context of its creation, and the various war commemoration practices it showcases, this essay aims at assessing its function as a very powerful site of memory for contemporary Netherlands.

## Operation Market Garden and the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

Before looking into how the cemetery investigated has been shaping the memory of the conflict, it is worthwhile to summarise the particular moment in history which it commemorates. The Arnhem Oosterbeek War Cemetery (the Airborne Cemetery) is the final resting place of 1770 soldiers who lost their lives in the Battle of Arnhem (17-25 September 1944). As far as the west European front is concerned, it was undoubtedly one of the turning points of the war. In a very brief summary,[2] the military actions undertaken by the Allies in

1 *The citizen goes to watch the battle.* (Korthals Altes, A. 1981, p.6.). Unless otherwise stated, the translations come from the author of this essay.

2 For a thorough analysis of the events in Arnhem in 1944, see e.g. Beevor (2018), Brown (2014), Nichol & Rennell (2011).

the area of present-day southern and central Netherlands were inspired by their successes in Normandy in the summer of 1944 (Schoenmaker, 2005, p.162). American, British and Canadian troops had regained Northern France and Belgium at lightning speed, liberating Brussels on 3rd, and Antwerp on 4th September (ibid.). What followed was an operation codenamed Market Garden, designed by British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. Essentially, the operation meant that a large portion of strategically key bridges along the many rivers and canals cutting through the Netherlands would be taken over at one fell stroke. The sheer abundance of these very rivers and canals posed considerable tactical difficulties for ground troops; consequently, the plan involved the engagement of airborne divisions (Schoenmaker, 2005, p.164). The plan proved unsuccessful. Southern Netherlands were liberated, but "the jump over the Rhine in Arnhem failed" (Woltjer, 1993, p.132). Operation Market Garden has gone down in Dutch collective memory as *the* military failure of the war, which subsequently caused the sorrows of the 'hunger winter' of 1944-1945, which cost about 20,000 lives.

The loss of life of the many Allied soldiers on this piece of Dutch soil is commemorated at the Airborne Cemetery, situated on the edge of the now peaceful village of Oosterbeek, just outside of Arnhem. It was established in 1945 by the Imperial War Graves Commission. Founded in May 1917, the actions of the Commission themselves illustrate the extent to which commemoration practices can become a powerful political instrument. Scholars have investigated how the establishment of cemeteries for Allied troops both in Europe and across the Empire during the interbellum shaped memory and identity of the Empire's subjects (Edwards, 2018). In locations such as e.g. India or South Africa, they were essentially a means of exercising "soft power" on these areas at a time when self-determination of the Empire's subjects was strengthening. The Commission changed its name to Commonwealth War Graves Commission in 1960—a clear indication of the loss of United Kingdom's "hard power" over these locations (Edwards, 2018, p.272). The Airborne Cemetery in Oosterbeek showcases the neo-classical design of the Commission cemeteries: long rows of white marble headstones stretch vertically to the left and right of the entrance gate, changing into horizontal rows towards the Cross of Sacrifice at the opposite end. Additionally, there is a row of headstones immediately to the left and right of the entrance gate where 73 Polish soldiers who also fought in the battle are buried. Overall, this particular cemetery is not only a memorial to the loss and suffering brought about by the failure of Operation Market Garden, but also a site of a politically laden, dynamic interaction of the British and Dutch collective memories of the Second World War.

## 76 years of *le lieu de mémoire*.

Having provided a short and succinct overview of the particular historical event that the cemetery commemorates, as well as considering the context of its creation (especially the institution that commissioned it), it is time to investigate how this *lieu de mémoire* has been shaping Dutch memory over the past 75 years. It should not be overlooked that the members of both Dutch and British royal families hold the memory of Arnhem in high regard. HRH The Prince of Wales regularly participates in the commemorations, especially during the 50th anniversary of Operation Market Garden in 1994, and the 75th anniversary in 2019 (Goudriaan, 1994; Battle of Arnhem, 2019). The annual encounter between the people of Arnhem and the neighbouring towns on the one hand, and the members of royal households on the other hand changes the Oosterbeek cemetery into a site of memory that is truly alive. Newspaper coverage of the 1984 commemoration ceremonies offer interesting insights into the dynamics of these encounters. A two-week-long commemoration took place in September 1984, crowned with a royal visit: as reported in *Trouw* (24 September 1984, p.3), "koningin Beatrix, prins Claus en prins Charles van Engeland als erekolonel van het Britse Parachute Regiment namen met zo'n duizend veteranen en hun familieleden deel aan een oecumenische dienst op de begraafplaats."[3] The ceremonies on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Arnhem were also an opportunity to reflect on the role of the local population in the battle. As mentioned by Joop Meijnen in *Het Parool* (24 September 1984, p.3) many of the Allied battle veterans appreciated the presence of the members of royal families, but at the same time they felt that the attention these personas claim meant "dat er voor veel mensen die ons in September 1944 hebben geholpen en aan wie velen van ons hun leven hebben te danken, geen plaats is tijdens de herdenkingsdienst."[4] Crucially, the commemoration ceremonies of 1984 provided a dynamic encounter between very personal memories of those who had participated in the battle, both soldiers and civilians, and the symbolic visit the royal figures, whose presence in Oosterbeek was of an immense significance—national, international, and political. The newspaper coverage of the events gave the whole of the Netherlands an opportunity to witness how (surely still quite vivid) memories were gradually being moulded into a grander historical narrative.

3 Queen Beatrix, Prince Claus and Prince Charles (as Colonel-in-chief of the British Parachute Regiment), together with around a thousand veterans and their family members, participated in an oecumenical service at the cemetery.

4 that there is no place in the memorial service for the many who had helped us in September 1944, for those whom many of us owe their lives to.

Interestingly, three years prior to this, on 5th September 1981, a comprehensive contribution entitled *Slagveldtoerisme*[5] appeared on page 6 of the Saturday Supplement of *NRC Handelsblad*, a newspaper of record in the Netherlands. The author, A. Korthals Altes, investigates the phenomenon of tourist interest in locations marked by death and other calamities, noting: "Uiteindelijk biedt 't slagveld de toerist vooral de kleine sensatie, de lichte huiver. Dat gevoel moet worden opgewekt door een speciaal facet: door doelbewuste *conservering* van het slagveld."[6] In this way, the author draws attention to the fact that this form of tourism connected with the 'chase' after sites of memory, and sites of gruesome memory in particular, emerged somehow by virtue of specific locations being presented as such: fenced off, described, imbued with history. In point of fact, one of such sites mentioned by the author is Oosterbeek. Korthals Altes contrasts: on the one hand, he describes the nature of this later, more controlled encounter with history provided by an institutionalised site of memory that the Airborne Cemetery is; on the other hand, he recalls his individual memories of Oosterbeek from the summer of 1945, which was a much more organic confrontation with the aftermath of the calamity at this interesting moment when the dust had not yet settled, when history still manifested itself in present perfect tense.

And finally, it is worthwhile to also zoom in at a more contemporary contribution on the topic from outside the Netherlands. The 2009 commemoration ceremonies were attended by a correspondent of *The Times*, Michael Binyon. In his contribution the author illustrates how the new generations of people of Arnhem and Oosterbeek take over the task of maintaining the memory of September 1944:

> All weekend there were wreathlaying ceremonies, church services, receptions and fervent displays of gratitude to the veterans, their wives, widows, sons and daughters who come on the annual pilgrimage. All along the main road of Oosterbeek flags fluttered from houses, shops and lampposts. Hundreds of young British and Dutch men re-enacted the wartime events dressed in period uniforms and the maroon berets of the troops. Hundreds of historic military vehicles cruised the streets as crowds lined up to cheer.

Even though the vast majority of people Arnhem described by Binyon in 2009 most likely did not have any *direct* memories of 1944-1945, those events had shaped their identity in many ways: from the stories told by their parents and grandparents which they grew up listening to, to the many commemoration ceremonies that were taking place over decades, ceremonies that surely often changed their tone in context of the ever-evolving historical and political

5 Which translates into English as 'battlefield tourism'.

6 The battlefield ultimately offers a tourist the small sensation, the light chill. This feeling has to be awakened by a special aspect: by the purposeful *conservation* of the battlefield.

narrative. The Airborne Cemetery in Oosterbeek is a paradoxical site of memory: marked by death in the most literal way possible, it is also very much alive. Because every dialogue exchanged between veterans, every wreath being laid down by a child, every grave candle lit by a family member—although often immaterial, these are all unique *lieux de mémoire*.

## Conclusion.

Over the past 75 years, the Airborne Cemetery has become a knot where countless threads of memory and history are tied together: the historical narrative of the 1939-1945 conflict of the Allies of World War II; personal memories of veterans, children and grandchildren; collective memory of the city of Arnhem. One should also acknowledge the hard work that the Dutch authorities in Arnhem and the neighbouring towns put every year into the organisation of commemoration ceremonies—by doing so they make sure that that future generations remember about and reflect upon the ghastly events of Market Garden, which further serves as a powerful and very much needed stimulus to reflect on the nature of issues such as sacrifice, war, conflict. Reflections that have been, and will always be, of crucial importance. Historical narratives, personal memories, collective memories—all of those are in state of constant, dynamic interaction, and will certainly change further in the coming years. And the marble graves at Oosterbeek will most certainly be there to witness it.

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Word count: 1782 (footnotes included; headers and the larger quote on p.4 “All weekend…” excluded)

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