



Narratives of Remembrance of the Second World War

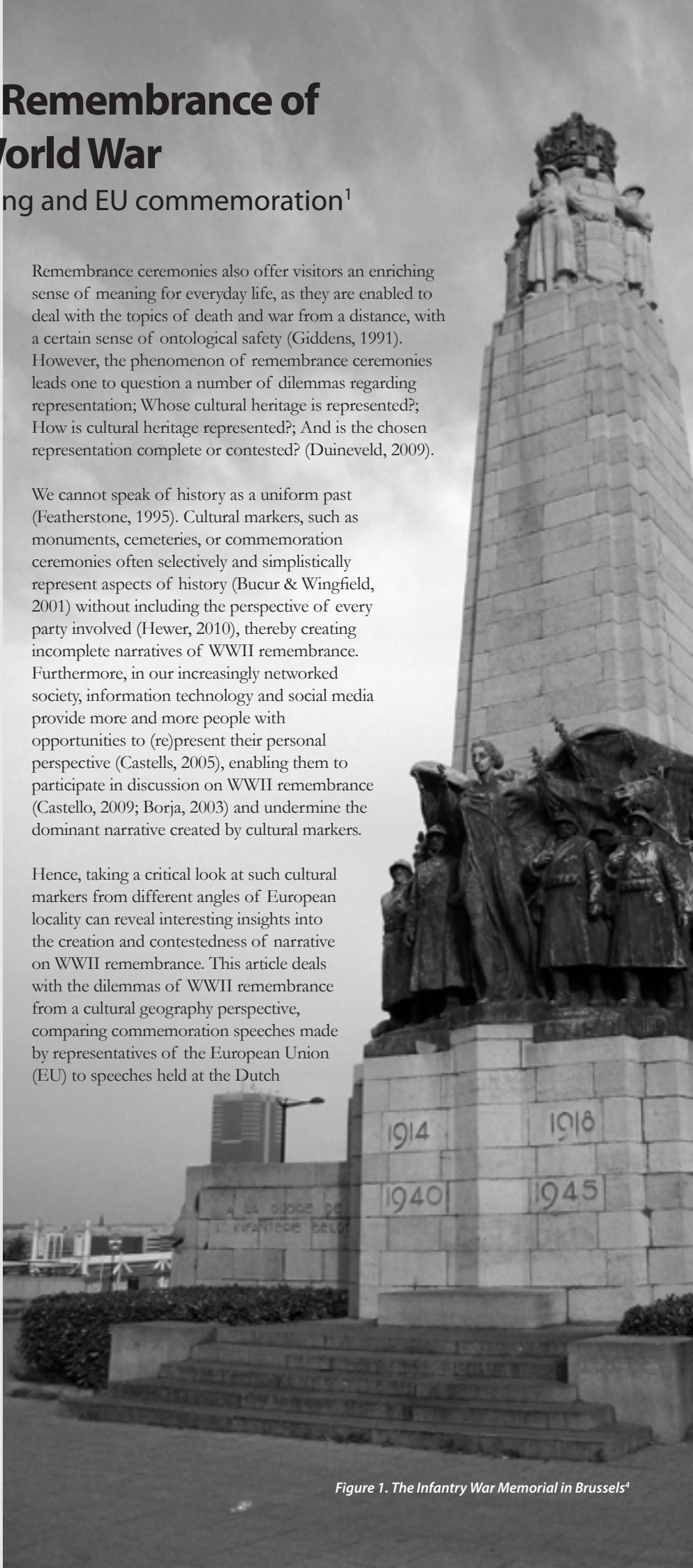
The Dodenherdenking and EU commemoration¹

In early May, remembrance ceremonies are held all over Europe to commemorate the victims of The Second World War (WWII), with many visitors either physically present or listening to speeches via the media. In the Netherlands, since 1945, Dutch remembrance of WWII revolves around the annual 4th of May Dodenherdenking ceremonies, the centre stage of which is the Dam square in Amsterdam. The events of WWII are considered very meaningful, if gruesome parts of European cultural heritage. According to Crang (1998), remembrance of the past has a strong influence on how we perceive the present, contributing to the construction of cultural memory and worldviews.

Remembrance ceremonies also offer visitors an enriching sense of meaning for everyday life, as they are enabled to deal with the topics of death and war from a distance, with a certain sense of ontological safety (Giddens, 1991). However, the phenomenon of remembrance ceremonies leads one to question a number of dilemmas regarding representation; Whose cultural heritage is represented?; How is cultural heritage represented?; And is the chosen representation complete or contested? (Duineveld, 2009).

We cannot speak of history as a uniform past (Featherstone, 1995). Cultural markers, such as monuments, cemeteries, or commemoration ceremonies often selectively and simplistically represent aspects of history (Bucur & Wingfield, 2001) without including the perspective of every party involved (Hewer, 2010), thereby creating incomplete narratives of WWII remembrance. Furthermore, in our increasingly networked society, information technology and social media provide more and more people with opportunities to (re)present their personal perspective (Castells, 2005), enabling them to participate in discussion on WWII remembrance (Castello, 2009; Borja, 2003) and undermine the dominant narrative created by cultural markers.

Hence, taking a critical look at such cultural markers from different angles of European locality can reveal interesting insights into the creation and contestedness of narrative on WWII remembrance. This article deals with the dilemmas of WWII remembrance from a cultural geography perspective, comparing commemoration speeches made by representatives of the European Union (EU) to speeches held at the Dutch



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'Doden-herdenking' ceremonies. The speeches, available at the websites *Europa: Gateway to the European Union*, *European Commission* and *Comité 4 en 5 mei*, were analysed with regard to central messages on the value and purpose of WWII remembrance, revealing empirical examples of official narratives of WWII remembrance at the supranational EU and national Dutch levels. In addition, an examination of several sources from social media and the news revealed aspects of contestedness of the Dutch narrative of WWII remembrance.

Supranational Remembrance - EU Commemoration Speeches

The European Union (EU), born out of the ashes of WWII, stands for values of peace, democracy, and unification and hosts a range of events that aim to uphold remembrance of our violent history and remind us of the importance of these values (Europese Commissie, 2009).

"The legacy of Nazism and Stalinism underscore just how important and valuable our current democratic values are. By commemorating the victims, as well as preserving the sites and archives associated with deportations, and myriad other actions, Europeans, particularly younger generations, can draw lessons for the present and the future from these dark chapters in history."

"The historical roots of the European Union lie in the Second World War. Europeans are determined to prevent such killing and destruction ever happening again."

What is particularly emphasised in EU level speeches on WWII remembrance is the need to learn from the past to create a more hopeful future.

"[We need] to keep upholding the memory of the Nazi regime, so that the pain and suffering that hate and discrimination create

will not be forgotten."

"This achievement of the European Union [for peace and prosperity] cannot be taken for granted; it has to be defended every day anew. [...] We should never assume that it is impossible to revert back. [...] The 8th and 9th May¹ have become important days of remembrance. They call for an insightful review of the past and hope for the future."

Interestingly, Alexander (1994) reveals that the European master narrative of peace, unification, and collaboration is historically situated, reflecting a neo-modern market ideology. This element of the 'usefulness' of peace is also reflected in the following quote:

"Europe has learned that war is not a politically viable approach to unification. Countries that in the past considered each other enemies have now entered partnerships with each other."

Hence, we can say that the EU narrative on WWII remembrance with its emphasis on learning from the past in order to uphold values of peace and collaboration reflects this neo-modern ideological umbrella and the imperative for Europe to remain united and keep its stronghold on the world stage.

National Remembrance: The Dodenherdenking

But what does WWII remembrance look like at the national Dutch level?

What is interesting about the Dodenherdenking, is that since 1961 the annual ceremony officially includes *all* victims of war who died since the outbreak of WWII (Het Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 Mei, 2009). Hence, we can speak of an 'open' narrative of WWII remembrance, with which everyone should be able to identify;

"Why are we gathered here, each fourth of May anew? To remember our beloved Dutch

deceased, but also to let our hearts go out to all those others who died, on the beaches of Normandy and Walcheren, [...] at the siege of Leningrad, in the sea of Java, [...] in the camps of Belzec and Sachsenhausen, [...] [and] in the prisons of Berlin, Rome and Scheveningen."

This openness and inclusiveness echoes the EU ideology of unity and democracy. Furthermore, the central remembrance ceremony is traditionally held at the National Monument at the Dam square in Amsterdam, a monument which in itself symbolises national unity (Comité 4 en 5 mei, 2010). In the Dodenherdenking speeches, we can also find agreement with the EU narrative of learning from the past and valuing our freedom. The mood created, however, is characterised by a distinct emphasis on reflection, which is epitomised by a national two minute silence.

"All over the world are museums, memorials, statues created to support us in the need we feel to remember. [...] We stand still and with the help of signs in the space [...] we try to return to the Second World War, to the fate of its victims. As if with the help of the space, we can make time alive."

"First and foremost, we must resist against apathy and numbness. Keep listening. To all stories of war. Stories of children who have guns placed in their hands. Stories of refugees. [...] Listen to the stories of then and to the stories of now. Listen to the voice of your own freedom."

Alternative Voices

But does this open remembrance narrative actually translate to the level of experience? The following quotes, taken from responses to a YouTube video of the Dodenherdenking, seem to indicate that some viewers question whether the

¹ This article is originally commissioned to be forthcoming in the journal of *Vrijtijds Netwerk* in 2010.

² Lisa's grandfathers were stationed in Eastern Europe, one as a military officer in Siberia, and one as the director of a German factory in Poland. Both grandfathers suffered from personality and mental health problems upon their return. One grandmother fled from former East Prussia to Germany, while the other brought up two sons in Germany until they were drawn into the army at age 16 and 17 in 1942.

³ Arjaan's grandparents experienced the German occupation between 1940 and 1945 in different ways. The grandparents of Arjaan's mother were hiding a Jewish family in their home, for which they were awarded a Yad Vashem distinction in 2006. The grandparents of Arjaan's father were forced to house 2 to 3 German soldiers of Hermann Göring's troops.

⁴ © Demuxx <http://www.flickr.com/photos/demuxx/3689530835/>

ceremony truly reflects diversity.

"I always find it very impressive. [...] But all Dutch... What you see standing there on the Dam; that is the Dutchman."

"The people with an 'un-Dutch' tan who I could see in this clip, that is almost 5 minutes long, I can count on one hand. Doesn't really compare to composition of the population."

Former minister Jan Pronk also highlighted this controversy on the news show Eén Vandaag:

"The people who experienced the genocide and have survived in Srebrenica, feel much less involved in the 4th of May commemoration, which they see as a Dutch event. They would like the recognition of their genocide."

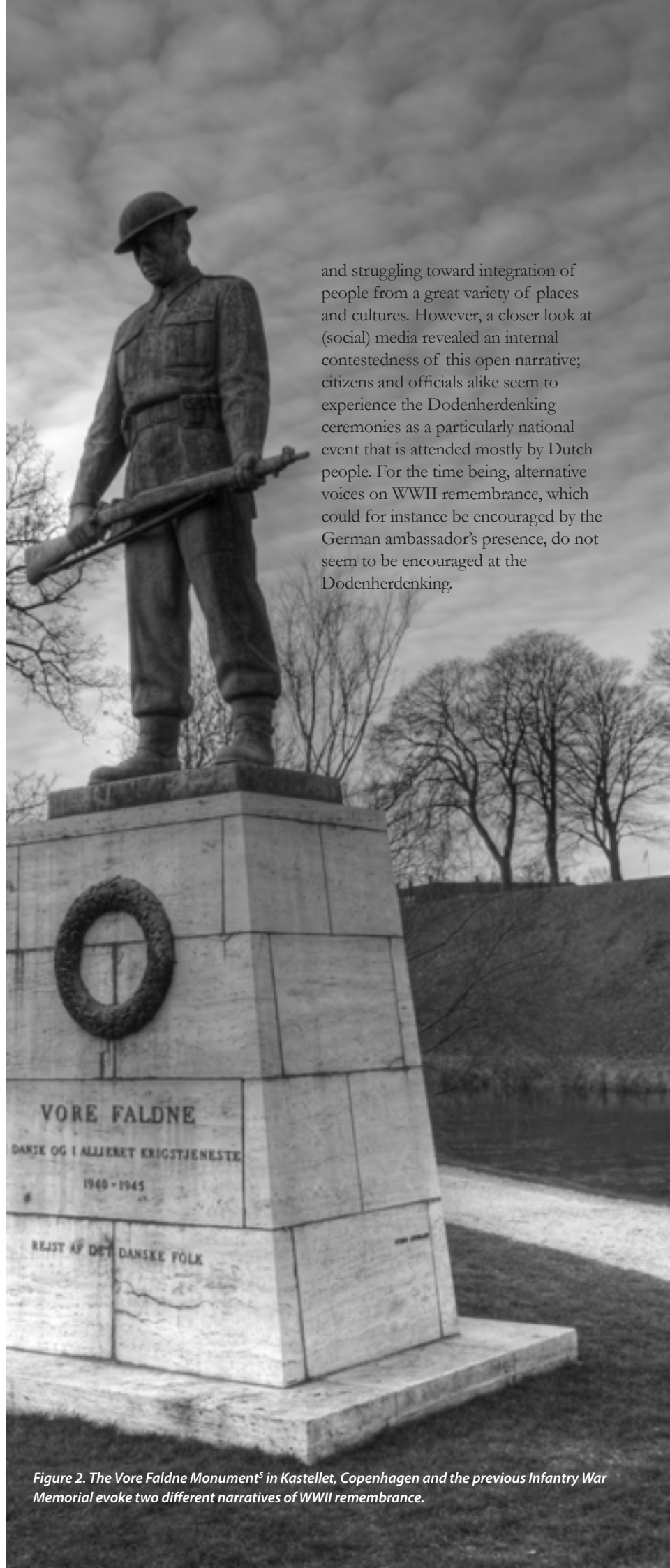
Even at the 'official' level, the Comité 4 en 5 mei seems to contradict its own notion of open remembrance. An article in de Volkskrant quotes a representative who, when asked to respond to the German ambassador's wish to attend the Dodenherdenking, responded that;

"[...] the Dodenherdenking on the 4th of May is a concern of the Dutch people. Therefore, no single country's official representatives are invited."

Put briefly, the official Dutch narrative of open and inclusive WWII remembrance is contested by alternative voices of several people and groups who experience the Dodenherdenking as a 'purely' national event.

Conclusion

This article showed that narratives of WWII remembrance at the supranational EU and national Dutch levels share both similarities and differences. While this is in itself not very surprising, a closer look can reveal ideological undercurrents. The European story is about learning from the atrocities of WWII to uphold the values of unity, peace, and collaboration, reflecting neo-modern ideology. At first sight, the Dutch narrative of WWII remembrance with its inclusive embrace of open commemoration and its focus on reflection echoes this supranational myth of inclusion, democracy and freedom. Again, this is not surprising, given that Dutch society is highly diverse



and struggling toward integration of people from a great variety of places and cultures. However, a closer look at (social) media revealed an internal contestedness of this open narrative; citizens and officials alike seem to experience the Dodenherdenking ceremonies as a particularly national event that is attended mostly by Dutch people. For the time being, alternative voices on WWII remembrance, which could for instance be encouraged by the German ambassador's presence, do not seem to be encouraged at the Dodenherdenking.



Figure 3. The Dodenherdenking ceremony on the Dam square in Amsterdam⁶ is visited by many people every year.



Figure 4. Representatives of several organisations for war victims lay girdles of flowers around the National Monument⁷.

Due to its small scale, the empirical study presented here comes with a range of limitations, and our conclusions should be regarded as a departure point for discussion rather than solid evidence. A number of questions are interesting to consider in this context. For instance, one might tighten the focus from a supranational and national perspective to a more local and personal perspective to investigate how different narratives of WWII remembrance are experienced and adapted amongst different groups of people and at different locations for commemoration. Furthermore, it would be interesting to investigate the phenomenon of spatial exclusion at remembrance sites, as exemplified by the transfer of 32,000 bodies of German soldiers from WWII graveyards around the Netherlands to a special military graveyard in Ysselsteyn, near the German border. These are just two examples of the interest scholarly research might take in the complexity of WWII spatiality and narrativity.

⁵ © Klearbos <http://www.flickr.com/photos/klearbos/4280969029/>

⁶ © DePers.nl <http://www.depers.nl/UserFiles/Image/2009/200905/20090504/ANP/THEMA/img-040509-119.onlineBild.jpg>

⁷ © Travelpod.com <http://images.travelpod.com/users/chronometers/amsterdam.1146382320.dscn3723.jpg>

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Samenvatting

Dit artikel behandelt de nagedachtenis van de Tweede Wereldoorlog zoals deze in de EU en in Nederland gehouden wordt. Vanuit een cultureel geografisch perspectief wordt er beargumenteerd dat verschillende geografische representaties van deze nagedachtenis een duidelijke ideologische ondertoon bevatten. Zo vertelt het supranationale verhaal van de EU een neo-modern verhaal van eenheid, vrijheid en integratie. Het Nederlandse verhaal typeert een open en reflectief verhaal waarbij alle oorlogsdoden sinds de WWII herdacht worden. Er zijn echter verschillende groepen in de samenleving die zich niet kunnen vinden in de open herdenking, welke geïnterpreteerd kan worden als een uitsluitend 'Nederlandse' aangelegenheid dat nationale eenheid symboliseert.