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

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

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

Sixty years after the bombardment, the popular TV program Andere Tijden (Different Times) made a documentary about the disaster, which stated that for forty years there had been virtually no commemorations of the disaster: “Nothing was heard about it, unlike about the bombardment of Rotterdam. The big difference with Rotterdam, of course, is that this bombardment was a mistake, and one made by friends to boot. This makes the bereavement process much more complicated” (Andere Tijden). This set of assumptions will be the
central focus of the present essay. In particular I will examine two aspects: the presumed lack of commemoration, and the explanation for the bombardment. First, why was the bombardment not commemorated for so long? Or, more precisely, is it true that no commemorations were held? Secondly, is the explanation given in 1984—that the bombers had the intention of bombing a German city—correct? Or is this a consoling vision, accepted to make it easier to cope with the loss of lives and the material damage caused by our Allied friends? The case of Nijmegen may illuminate a more general issue: to what extent did self-censorship and political correctness inhibit the processing of a traumatic Allied bombardment? In order to find an answer to these questions it may be useful to offer a comparison to the bombardment of the Belgian town of Mortsel.

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

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

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

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1 The ensuing examination is based on Rosendaal 2009.