

H-Net Reviews

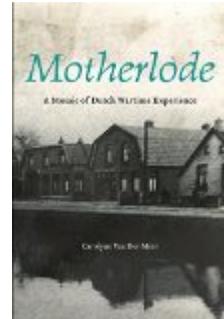
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Carolyne A. Van Der Meer. *Motherlode: A Mosaic of Dutch Wartime Experience*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014. 146 pp. \$19.99 (paper), ISBN 978-1-77112-005-0.

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Of all the theaters of war in Western Europe under Nazi occupation, the Netherlands stands out as one of the most tragic and difficult places to find oneself west of the Rhine. Successive studies have shown that the Netherlands proportionally suffered the highest number of Jews lost in Western Europe, while attempts to liberate the country were dashed by the German counterattack of 1944-45. These conditions exacerbated the already failing harvest, the extreme cold, and an increasing number of requisitions to feed German forces, which led to the so-called *Hongerwinter* (Hunger Winter), causing the deaths of tens of thousands and forcing many more into desperate situations. It is no surprise, then, that literature on the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands has been rich, nor is it surprising that so many Dutch decided to emigrate after the war to seek a better life from a country torn asunder by internal political rivalries and physical and psychological damage. Carolyne A. Van Der Meer is the daughter of one such migrant, now residing in Canada. Her motivation in writing this book is largely personal, tracing her mother and grandparents and their actions during the war. The author's grandfather was, we are told, active in the Dutch resistance, hiding Jews and assisting them, prompted by a deep religious conviction of living by thy neighbor.

The book describes the author's trip to the Netherlands to examine what her family did, and, in so doing, to create a picture of the country under occupation. The study is peppered with poems and short stories, crafted from the experiences recounted to her by Dutch Jews living both in Canada and the Netherlands, and by conversations with her mother. In this sense, the book is not a historical monograph and, as such, will not appeal to those seeking a comprehensive history of political machi-

nations or even the actions of the resistance. At times, the poems and stories sit ill at ease with the mission of the author to discover her family's place in the occupied Netherlands. In reality, the book may have worked better either as a book of poetry and short stories based on the occupation, or as a personal exploration of her family's actions and legacy. By merging the two, the author may have hoped to encourage the reader to build a picture from these embellished memories. In reality, these appear as tangential, distracting the reader from the aim stated at the outset. Moreover, presenting these stories as works of fiction seems an unnecessary approach with the materials that the author has. The Second World War is not short of tragic stories, and under military occupations there are as many interesting points of view as there are those who have experienced them. Simply recounting these memories may have been a better method of communicating the author's experiences in learning about the wartime past of the Netherlands.

Van Der Meer's study of the country is more journalistic than academic history. This is not a criticism, but limits the author's methods in researching the occupation. It seems that there has been little or no preparation for the journey. Van Der Meer has no awareness of the Dutch Resistance Museum, nor the crucial Netherlands Institute for War and Holocaust Documentation (NIOD) before arriving. Moreover, she seems to have read very little of the secondary literature in Canada before going to Amsterdam. This is exemplified by the fact that she does not know who Louis De Jong was before arriving at the NIOD. This is exacerbated by the fact that the author does not read Dutch, and the continual references to "Holland" in place of "the Netherlands."

The book does have numerous strengths, however. One of the main themes of the book is the attempts made by the author to better understand her mother through her wartime past. Conversely, her mother feels that she cannot make Van Der Meer understand her past as only those who have lived through these times can ever experience this concept of *Verstehen*. This is typical of a generation struggling to understand the actions of parents and family during the war and can be read as merely one example of a European, and indeed, worldwide phenomenon. The poetry and short stories contained within the book also bring up many of the key concepts of the Second World War—the Holocaust, collaboration, resis-

tance, and life under Nazi rule—although they perhaps could have been expressed more robustly in simply relating the experiences of those interviewed.

Despite these shortcomings, *Motherlode* will appeal to those interested in the occupied Netherlands. It is not an academic study, but rather a deeply personal book, dealing with key themes and concepts, albeit in a nonacademic environment. Van Der Meer has produced a book that should be of interest to those in similar situations and that should provide a springboard for those who wish to pursue research into the Netherlands in a more academic sense.

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