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RELATIVE ABSENCE

Dutch memory culture and monuments of the Hunger Winter of 1944–45

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On 4 May 1981, the national day of Remembrance of the Dead of the Second World War in the Netherlands, a bronze statue of a female cyclist was revealed in the Prinsentuin, a public park in the Frisian capital city of Leeuwarden. The commemorative act was performed by three sisters—Ali, Gré, and Gelfke Haanstra—who had been actively involved in the resistance movement during the war. All three had transported food on their bicycles to people in hiding. Their resistance activities intensified during the harsh winter of 1944–45.¹ The bronze figure on the bicycle symbolises the many women who went searching for food during the final months of the German occupation. In a wider sense, it has also been interpreted as a tribute to all those couriers who carried out their work clandestinely during the war (Image 4.1).²

The female cyclist statue is part of a vast memorial culture of the Dutch famine, popularly known as the ‘Hunger Winter’ of 1944–45. The famine resulted from the culmination of several transportation and distribution difficulties after the Allied liberation of the south of the Netherlands in the autumn of 1944, causing severe problems with the food and fuel supply. At least 20,000 people died as a result of the famine, which mostly affected the population in the large cities in the western Netherlands.³ Today, every Dutch child is still taught about this important phase of the Second World War at school, as the Hunger Winter forms an integral part of the ‘historical canon’ of the Netherlands.⁴ In addition to receiving extensive coverage in educational materials, the Hunger Winter features prominently in museum exhibitions, documentaries, novels, and children’s books. Most Dutch people become familiar with the Hunger Winter via the children’s book *Oorlogswinter* (1972), by Jan Terlouw, which remains popular to this day and was made into a feature film in 2008.



IMAGE 4.1 ‘The Courier’ by Tineke Bot (1981), Leeuwarden. Photograph by Ingrid de Zwarte.

Yet, contrary to the ample attention devoted to the Dutch Hunger Winter in education and popular culture, nowadays only a few inconspicuous monuments—plaques, memorial stones, sculptures, and public artworks—scattered across the Netherlands commemorate the Hunger Winter. The statue of the young woman on the bicycle in Leeuwarden is, in fact, exceptional. Indeed, while almost every Dutch person is familiar with this episode of history, hardly anyone will be able to name or place a single monument—defined as ‘the material objects, sculptures and installations used to memorialize a person or thing’⁵—dedicated to the Hunger Winter. This ‘relative absence’ of Hunger Winter monuments stands in stark contrast with the visual memorialisation of many other European famines, in particular the many monuments in both Europe and North America dedicated to the Great Irish Famine of 1845–50 and the Ukrainian ‘Holodomor’ of 1932–33.⁶ It also diverges significantly from the material memorialisation of other Dutch disasters, such as the Dutch North Sea Flood of 1953, which is kept alive in public remembrance in the Netherlands through at least 150 monuments.⁷ Neither does it align with the Dutch memorialisation of the Second World War in general, which finds expression in c. 4,000 monuments across the country.⁸

This chapter raises the question of why the Dutch Hunger Winter has left relatively few material objects of commemoration in the Dutch landscape,

while it seems to be abundantly present in, for instance, formal educational practices and popular culture. In this chapter, we are the first to investigate the seventeen known Hunger Winter monuments that have been erected between the end of the war in 1945 and today. Our study is based on extensive fieldwork, supplemented by historical newspaper articles that reveal the social, cultural, and political contexts in which these sites of memory were developed.

We investigate our research question by situating the memorialisation of the Hunger Winter within the broader context of Dutch memory culture and comparing and contrasting the memorial culture of the Dutch famine with that of other European famines. We argue that the relative absence of famine monuments in the Netherlands stems from a combination of several factors, including the absence of a tradition of representing famines in the Dutch public sphere; Dutch post-war memory politics; and the absence of actively engaged diasporic communities. These factors may help explain material ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ in other famine heritage contexts as well.

Dutch memorial culture

To understand why famine monuments are relatively absent in the Dutch public sphere nowadays, it is necessary to adopt a wider historical perspective and establish how Dutch memorial culture took shape in the nineteenth century. In many respects, the Dutch developments align with international patterns, yet certain aspects can be considered characteristic for the Netherlands. What, how, and why individuals and communities remember reveals how the past lives on in present-day society, thus forging personal and communal identities.⁹ Memory scholars have convincingly shown that this process of remembering is never neutral but can be seen as a performative act. As Jay Winter puts it, ‘When individuals and groups express or embody or interpret or repeat a script about the past, they galvanize the ties that bind groups together and deposit additional memory traces about the past in their own minds’.¹⁰

Celebrating the national past and emphasising shared victimisation have played a crucial role in processes of national identity formation since the early nineteenth century. The arts—paintings, music, literature, architecture, and sculptures—were important instruments in nation-building, as were historiographical, educational, and philological writings. By representing the past as a continuous story of oppression and liberation, and by creating national myths that celebrated glorious victories, visual and textual media contributed to the constitution of certain interpretations and coherent national historical narratives.¹¹ Leaving out certain less favourable and painful episodes, however, was (and still is) just as constitutive. In his famous lecture ‘*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation*’ (1882), the French philosopher Ernest Renan already stressed the importance of collective amnesia with regard to nation-building:

‘the essence of a nation is that all of its individual members have a great deal in common and also that they have all forgotten many things’.¹²

As in other European countries, in the Netherlands, the celebration of the national past peaked in the nineteenth century. Artists singled out stories of revolt and liberation, such as the Batavian revolt against the Romans (69–70) and the Eighty Years War against Spain (1568–1648), while celebrating the so-called Golden Age, in which Dutch economy and culture flourished at the cost of colonised peoples.¹³ Shared victimisation contributed to the shaping of patriotic feelings: the war against Spain was also represented as a period during which the Dutch suffered severely. They showed their resilience by overcoming the brutalities and violence inflicted by the Spanish enemy. Most Dutch national heroes—and only a very few heroines—who were canonised in history, came from that period, such as the ‘founding father’ of the Netherlands, William of Orange, naval hero Michiel de Ruyter, painter Rembrandt van Rijn, and poet Joost van den Vondel. The creation of a coherent, nationally unifying story excluded many other important events that were more inconvenient to remember, such as the ‘Martyrs of Gorkum’ (the hanging of a group of Catholics by militant Calvinists, 1572), the brutal murder of the Dutch statesmen Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1619) and the brothers Cornelis and Johan de Witt (1672), or the massacres in the Netherlands East Indies (1621, 1740).

The erection of monuments added to this (selective) image of the Dutch national past. However, as Marita Mathijsen has also noted, unlike in France and England, a thriving memorial culture in the form of monuments remained largely absent in the Netherlands.¹⁴ From the 1840s onwards, several naval heroes, poets, painters, and statesmen who fitted the dominant national self-image were honoured with a statue, but compared to other European countries, the number of memorial objects was rather modest. The relatively few monuments in Dutch memorial culture could possibly be explained as a consequence of the dominance of Protestant culture, which renounced the worshipping of saints’ statues in churches. Furthermore, contrary to many other European countries, the Dutch state was hardly ever involved in commissioning or funding these monuments. Most monuments from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were realised through fundraising by private initiatives or civilian committees in collaboration with local governments.¹⁵ The success of these monuments thus depended largely on local efforts, as was, for example, the case with monuments erected for the nineteenth-century female author A.L.G. Bosboom-Toussaint (1912, Alkmaar), Suriname resistance fighter Anton de Kom (2006, Amsterdam), and the first Dutch female physician, Aletta Jacobs (2019, The Hague). Such local initiatives were usually motivated by emancipatory ambitions to make forgotten people and events in Dutch history visible again.

Besides paying tribute to the memory of important persons, the majority of Dutch monuments have been commissioned in response to traumatic events and disasters, such as floods and wars. Famines, however, have traditionally not left any traces in Dutch memorial culture. Indeed, while the European-wide potato failure in the mid-nineteenth century—which caused the Great Irish Famine (1845–50)—also significantly affected the Netherlands and Flanders in terms of famine-related excess mortality,¹⁶ there are no monuments that commemorate this event.

By contrast, the physical commemoration of floods in the Netherlands is vastly different, including many statues, plaques, and sculptures. Floods are commemorated in countless places, including the St. Elisabeth's Flood of 1421, the Christmas Flood of 1717, the Storm Surge of 1825, and the Flood of 1916. The North Sea Flood of 1953, however, surpasses all other floods in Dutch memorial culture.¹⁷ Generally speaking, monuments to the North Sea Flood of 1953 can be divided into two categories. The first group visualises traumatic losses by portraying vulnerable people, often employing the victim mother and child trope. The second group represents heroic rescue activities and the rebuilding and reconstruction of the landscape after the calamity, portraying fishermen skippering boats with refugees and dike workers. The visual representation of this catastrophe thus runs emphatically along gender lines.¹⁸

Of all traumatic events, the Second World War has left by far the most visible traces in the Dutch landscape. In the first years after the war, commemoration of the German occupation period and its victims aligned with traditional political and religious beliefs of continuity and progress. Based on 'grand narratives' and national sentiments, memorials of the war were focused on national restoration and moving into the future.¹⁹ The National Monument on Dam Square in Amsterdam (1956), which had already become the place of the annual commemoration, represents this post-war dominant narrative, which revolved around stories of national suffering, endurance, courage, and sacrifice.²⁰

In the mid-1960s, these traditional views became challenged through social and political change, including countercultural movements, which undermined these dominant representations of national unity and continuity. Renewed attention for the atrocities committed against the Jewish population, through publications and television series, brought about a new, pluralistic view on the war, which created space for differentiating between victim groups. Consequently, 'counter monuments' dedicated to commemorating the war's violation of morality and humanity were erected throughout the Netherlands. These include the Jewish monument (Groningen, 1969), the National Monument at former concentration camp Westerbork (Westerbork, 1970), the Gypsy Monument (Amsterdam, 1978), and the Never Again Auschwitz Monument (Amsterdam, 1977).²¹

A second shift in the Dutch memorial culture of the war took place in the mid-1990s, around the 50th commemoration of the end of the war. This period has been referred to as the 1990s 'memory boom' also in other European countries. Under the influence of European integration and globalisation processes, the dominant black-and-white narrative of the war in terms of 'good' and 'evil' and of 'victims' and 'perpetrators' was abandoned in favour of monuments that carried universal messages related to human rights, freedom, and peace.²² In addition to national memorials, throughout the post-war decades, nearly every city and village in the Netherlands created WWII monuments and commemorative sites, which are visual reminders of the many various groups and individuals who lost their lives during the German occupation.²³

The abundance of monuments of, among other traumatic events, the North Sea Flood of 1953 and the Second World War, raises the question why the Hunger Winter has left so few visual objects of commemoration. Before suggesting possible explanations for this paradoxical absence, it is necessary to take a closer look at the few monuments of the Hunger Winter that are present in the Dutch landscape: what or who is represented, how did these monuments come into being, and what commemorative functions do they have today?

Monuments of the Dutch Hunger Winter

While they have remained largely unknown to the wider public, in the direct post-war years, five small monuments were erected which were dedicated to commemorating the Hunger Winter. Without exception, these monuments came about through local initiatives, financed privately through fundraising. Although vastly different in material form, these early post-war monuments share two common themes: relief and national solidarity, both strongly tied to Christian symbolism. As mentioned in the previous section, there was hardly any attention for individual victim groups in the immediate post-war year. The dominant political discourse emphasised shared victimhood, as this would benefit a swift reconstruction of the Dutch state and identity. As a result, these early monuments were mostly about overcoming victimhood rather than about the suffering during the famine.

The first of these Hunger Winter monuments, revealed in July 1947, was cemented into the wall of the Oosterkerk, a large Reformed church in Amsterdam. The stone relief was made by the famous Dutch sculptor Hildo Krop and financed by the 'nickels and dimes' of local inhabitants.²⁴ The small relief shows a male figure carrying a sack of wheat next to a boat, with a female figure and two children on the other side of the river, and was meant as a display of gratitude towards the Interdenominational Committee, which provided food aid and evacuated malnourished children during the Hunger

Winter. The rhyming accompanying text states: ‘What love brought together in the year of dire distress, saved many parents and children from starvation. This monument represents the gratitude of the entire neighbourhood. Gratefulness which lasts forever in the heart of God’.²⁵ Around the same time, another memorial stone (undated) dedicated to famine relief efforts was cemented into a brick wall in Holwerd (Frisia), donated by inhabitants from the town of Diemen (North Holland): ‘During the last winter of the Second World War, famine in Holland threatened many lives. Holwerd then opened its home and heart lovingly for our children and sent us food. This way, Frisian selflessness generosity offered invaluable help and obliged us to gratitude’. The monument was signed in stone by Diemen’s mayor, two local physicians, the local head of school, reformed ministers of two Protestant denominations, and a Catholic priest, thus reinforcing the dominant post-war narrative of national unity.

Other Hunger Winter monuments from the same period similarly represent these dynamics between relief, resistance, and national unity. For example, in the small village of Lollum, in 1947, a sundial pillar made by sculptor Frits Sieger was unveiled by Nel ‘the courier’ in the presence of ‘several authorities’ and former resistance fighters.²⁶ The monument was commissioned by inhabitants of the Amsterdam Watergraafsmeer neighbourhood to express their gratitude for the relief offered by the Frisian resistance and population. The pillar shows the Frisian coat of arms, a pelican—the Christian symbol of self-sacrifice—and a young man with a grain shuffle surrounded by loaves of bread, symbolising food aid. Christian symbolism to commemorate the famine is also part of the Gouda (South Holland) monument ‘Saint George and the Dragon’ (Ludwig Oswald Wenkebach, 1948), which refers to the battle between Good and Evil: ‘When the water was up to our necks, God gave us liberation’.²⁷ The stone relief installed on the exterior wall of a large church mentions Hunger Winter victims—‘when mortality rose threefold’—together with victims from the resistance, prisons and concentration camps, bombardments of cities, and deported Jewish citizens.²⁸

The memorial windows in Kamerik (Utrecht, 1955),²⁹ one of which is dedicated to the Hunger Winter, also demonstrate how nationalist stories of sacrifice and redemption were interwoven with Christian symbolism after the war. The stained glass window shows a boat sailing under the Frisian flag and lighthouse, signifying the light that guides the way to Christian redemption. Below is a figure of the Grim Reaper, dressed in Nazi uniform, whipping a defenseless young woman at his feet. The bottom of the window shows a man bent over his handcart in the snow with two other figures in the distance, referring to the so-called hunger journeys (*hongertochten*) as the embodiment of suffering and endurance during the famine. Indeed, the Kamerik memorial window is the only Dutch monument that conveys suffering during the Hunger Winter rather than emphasising a narrative of overcoming victimhood.

As the descriptions above demonstrate, all of these early monuments were predominantly inspired by a traditional and Christian repertoire of representations, which includes familiar tropes such as doves, lions, broken chains, flags, and olive branches, as well as Christian figures such as the Good Samaritan and the merciful mother figure. Defenseless victims cast to the ground by Nazi oppression and victorious, strong male and female figures represent the battle between good and evil and the story of national trial and resurrection.³⁰ These tropes show that Hunger Winter monuments were, to a large extent, ‘premediated’ by a familiar representative repertoire,³¹ which had already been part of Dutch memorial cultural prior to the war.

As mentioned in the previous section, the interconnectedness of the troubled past with social and political aspirations—the dominant nationalistic and ideological representations in which unity and continuity prevailed—began to shift in the 1960s. New, pluralistic perspectives created space for new groups of victims in the memorialisation of the war besides resistance fighters, soldiers, and political prisoners—in particular, Jews, Roma, Sinti, and other victims of Nazi persecution. The dominant view of the war was therefore no longer in line with that of historical continuity and national resurrection. Instead, it positioned the Second World War, and the Holocaust in particular, as a definitive breaking point in history.³² Still, during these decades in which Dutch memorial culture rapidly found new expressions, hardly any new monuments dedicated to the Hunger Winter were erected.

The two main exceptions were the monuments ‘Almost Free’ (1970) and ‘The Courier’ (1981)—the sculpture of the young woman on the bicycle mentioned in the introduction of this chapter (Image 4.1). ‘Almost Free’ is located in Achterveld (Gelderland), in front of a school building in which important negotiations between Dutch, Allied, and German authorities took place in April 1945. These conversations determined the terms of Allied food relief for the starving western Netherlands. The sculpture represents a young girl with a dove in her hand about to spread its wings, symbolising peace, hope, and freedom. What sets the monument apart from previous memorial objects of the Hunger Winter is that it was made by a female artist, Willy Albers Pistorius-Fokkelman. The fact that the unveiling was also done by a woman, Mrs. Beernink, wife of the Dutch minister of Internal Affairs, is indicative of changing gender relations, and perhaps even feminist agendas, in Dutch memorialisation practices in the 1970s.

The same is true for the sculpture of the young woman on the bicycle mentioned earlier (Image 4.1), which was made by artist Tineke Bot and financed anonymously by someone who had been in hiding during the war. The precise meaning of the monument remains rather ambiguous, with some calling the sculpture ‘The Courier’, as it allegedly expressed the important role of female couriers in the Dutch resistance, while others referred to it as ‘Woman on Food Journey’ or ‘The Food Bringer’. Based on the earliest

mentions of the monument in newspapers, the sculpture seems to have been intended to symbolise all women who ventured out to search for food during the final year of the war.³³ While the monument shows continuity with early post-war memorials in that it focuses on resistance and resilience, it significantly diverges from the previously described monuments as the only memorial object of the Hunger Winter without any obvious Christian symbolism. The fact that the statue attained a broader interpretation beyond the Hunger Winter and was scripted into the more popular resistance narrative, however, also demonstrates an important continuity with monuments of the early post-war decades.

Victims of the famine are only mentioned in two monuments dating from the period of 1955 to 1995. The first is a plaque on the outer wall of the Zuiderkerk (undated), a large Protestant church in the city centre of Amsterdam. In restrained words, the small and hardly noticeable plaque states: ‘From February until August 1945 this church was the Municipal Morgue. Through deprivation, hunger and German violence more people died in Amsterdam during the final year of war than could be buried. This was their temporary resting place’. The other mention of Hunger Winter victims is on The Hague Resistance and Liberation Monument (1992). This large monument, overlooking the Peace Palace, consists of four pillars, representing four socio-denominational groups of Dutch society: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and non-religious people. It was initiated by the Foundation for National Commemoration The Hague (*Stichting Nationale Herdenkingen ‘s-Gravenhage*), which consisted of former resistance fighters and representatives of the Interdenominational Committee, and designed by the well-known Jewish artist Appie Drielsma, who had been in hiding during the war as a child.³⁴ Although the text on the monument explicitly mentions the Hunger Winter, it remains very much grounded in the religious and political ideology that had dominated memorialisation of WWII since 1945, in the sense that it intends to commemorate *all* those who died during the war, without distinguishing between victim groups.

As in many other European countries, the mid-1990s marked a turning point in the Dutch commemoration of the war. Under the influence of European integration and globalisation processes, patriotic sentiments and Christian symbolism slowly gave way to the reconceptualisation of war experiences in relation to broader global issues of human rights, mass violence, and racism.³⁵ These new, globalised commemoration and memorialisation practices were reflected in new monuments connected to the Hunger Winter, which began to be focused almost exclusively on Allied relief efforts. Commemorative years proved especially important for the erection of these new Hunger Winter monuments. In particular, these monuments commemorated the Allied food drops—Operation Manna/Chowhound—which took place in the western Netherlands between 29 April and 8 May 1945 and which

became symbolic for the liberation of the Netherlands.³⁶ Again, by focusing on relief efforts, visual representations of suffering during the famine remained notably absent.

The first of these monuments was a plaque unveiled on 30 April 1995—50 years after Operation Manna/Chowhound—at horse track Duindigt (South Holland), which was one of the designated zones for the Allied food drops. The plaque was commissioned by the ‘Foundation Food and Freedom’, which organised the unveiling in the presence of British and American veterans who had been involved in the actual food drops. The plaque shows two mirrored bombers releasing food parcels, accompanied by text in both Dutch and English: ‘In grateful commemoration of the food drop operations, 29 April–8 May 1945’. Ten years later, on 30 April 2005, a similar plaque was unveiled in front of the town hall of Vlaardingen (South Holland), again in the presence of British and American war veterans. The plaque, entitled ‘Food from heaven’, as a reference to the Jewish and Christian legend of manna (Exodus 16), shows a remarkably similar image of a bomber releasing parcels. The text on the plaque briefly explains the historical background of the food drops, concluding: ‘With operation “Manna”, the Allies saved many lives in April and May 1945. After 60 free years, Vlaardingen says once again: “Thank you for coming!” [final sentence in English].’

The largest monument dedicated to Operation Manna—and to the Hunger Winter in general—was unveiled on 28 April 2006 by Secretary of State of Defense Cees van der Knaap. Built on top of a sound wall along the A20 highway in Rotterdam, the monument overlooks the Terbregge neighbourhood, another designated zone for the food drops. The driving force behind the monument was local citizen Hendrik Dijkxhoorn, who spent eleven years gaining support for the monument through fundraising and negotiations with local administrators until finally Ruud Reutelingsperger of the artistic group Observatorium was commissioned to design it.³⁷ The monument is constructed from metal crash barriers, resembling the fuselage of a bomber plane, with yellow steel constructions in its hold that represent stacked parcels featuring symbols related to the food drops: bombers, houses, and windmills. Opposite the main installation is a metal column, below a flag pole, with the same yellow symbols. On the one side, the column includes a quote from one of the bomber pilots: ‘For five years we spread death and destruction and in the last week we saved thousands from starving’. The other side lists all co-financers, including a neighbourhood committee, several families from the Netherlands and the USA, the local football club, the Centre of Visual Arts Rotterdam, and multiple other local foundations and companies. The footpath leading past the monument has been renamed ‘Air Commodore Geddes Path’, after the senior Royal Air Force officer Andrew James Wray Geddes who led Operation Manna from the British side. As such, the monument demonstrates how Hunger Winter memorials function

as connecting vectors between local, national, and transnational commemorations of the war.

The same can be said of a small plaque on the IJssel bridge (2005), which connects the cities of Hattem (Gelderland) and Zwolle (Overijssel). The bridge was an important crossing for people from the western Netherlands who ventured into the northeast of the country in search of food during the Hunger Winter. The commemorative functions of the bridge since 2005—aptly renamed ‘Bridge between fear and hope’—are, however, much more layered than the simple and sober commemorative plaque suggests. In 2007, a local commemoration committee organised a ‘hunger journey’ with veterans and famine survivors from various countries who walked from Rotterdam to Zwolle in multiple legs of 25 kilometres to commemorate the suffering during the Hunger Winter. Nowadays, the bridge is part of the bicycle route ‘Oorlogswinter’, named after the famous children’s book by Jan Terlouw. These commemorative performances show the inherent fluidity of famine memory, travelling beyond time and space.³⁸

Another monument that manages to combine different levels of commemoration is ‘Manna’ (2020) in Amsterdam, a pop art memorial object designed by Dutch-Israeli sculptor and graphic designer Ram Katzir (Image 4.2). The



IMAGE 4.2 ‘Manna’ by Ram Katzir (2020), Amsterdam. Photograph by Ingrid de Zwarte.

artwork consists of five large slices of white bread, three standing up and two laid down, and is situated in a public park. The name refers to Operation Manna, while the artwork itself symbolises the Swedish white bread that was baked using Swedish Red Cross relief shipments during the Hunger Winter (and thus not from Allied relief).³⁹ Official photographs of the artwork show children playing between and on top of the bread slices, turning it into an active performative object. Katzir's design was selected by the municipality and local residents because it expressed 'gratitude' and 'commemoration', while potentially becoming a connecting factor in the multicultural neighbourhood Sloterdijk: 'Bread plays an important role in multiple cultures and brings people together. The artwork is designed as a meeting place for the neighbourhood'.⁴⁰ To facilitate cultural exchange, the municipality of Amsterdam intends to organise near the monument one of its many annual 'freedom meals', part of the 5 May Celebration, 'where people can bring food from their own culture to share with each other'.⁴¹

With 'Manna', we see how the effects of globalisation and migration make Dutch famine heritage part of a 'global memory culture'.⁴² At the same time, 'Manna' is the first Hunger Winter monument that functions 'multidirectionally',⁴³ by placing the Dutch famine in dialogue with other events. In this case, these are the possibly manifold hunger experiences of migrant newcomers in the Netherlands. As such, 'Manna' can be seen as an attempt to 'bridge the gap between famine legacies and today's communities in multicultural societies', and is a good example of how 'famine monuments can be inclusive of new groups of Europeans in heritage practices', including migrants and refugees.⁴⁴

In an entirely different way, the significance of the famine past for the social and political present also became evident through a temporary Hunger Winter monument: the 'Ferry-pontoon bridge' across the River IJ in Amsterdam (2015–16), constructed to commemorate the seventieth anniversary of the original bridge. It was commissioned by the municipality of Amsterdam and designed by its 4–5 May Commemoration Committee, which, unfortunately, produced several persistent myths about the bridge, suggesting that it was the 'last lifeline' for people during the Hunger Winter searching for food: 'Many did not survive the harsh cold during this journey'.⁴⁵ However, the bridge opened in April 1945, after the winter, and not to facilitate the hunger journeys but as a practical solution for the fuel shortage that prevented ferries from running.⁴⁶ In part, these misconceptions seem to have resulted from memory politics: probably not incidentally, the temporary monument coincided with the presentations of plans by the municipality to open a permanent bridge across the River IJ, thus showing the politically mediated nature of the famine past in the present.

Although we can see a clear shift after the 1990s memory boom from a local to a global orientation in famine monuments, some recent monuments

demonstrate continuity with early post-war memorialisation practices. For example, in 2017, former child evacuee Dirk van Reenen initiated the planting of a commemorative tree in Ruinen (Drenthe) to commemorate local efforts to foster malnourished children from the western Netherlands. Similarly, in 2021, football players from Ajax (Amsterdam) offered a plaque to football club VV Heerenveen to commemorate the aid they supplied, evacuating 12- to 14-year-old football players from Ajax and fostering them in Frisia during the Hunger Winter.⁴⁷

The still highly localised commemorative function of Hunger Winter monuments is also demonstrated by the fact that, from 2010 onwards, many were ‘adopted’ by local primary schools, which symbolically take care of these monuments, as a way to connect new generations with the war experience. Furthermore, many of these monuments function as memorial sites for the annual Remembrance of the Dead on 4 May, as is, for example, the case with the monuments in Lollum, Gouda, Rotterdam, and The Hague. A national famine monument remains absent in the Dutch memorial landscape until today.

Explaining relative absence

Although there are clearly some physical traces of the Hunger Winter left in the Dutch memorial landscape, these stand in stark contrast to the numerous visual objects of, for example, the Great Irish Famine and the Ukrainian Holodomor. Why is this the case? Part of the answer to this question may lie in the difficulty of representing hunger and famine through monuments. Contrary to floods, famines are longer term disasters, making it more difficult to represent them in a single shape or form: there is often no clear beginning, middle, or end, nor are there specific geographical locations associated with famines. Famines are so-called slow-onset disasters, silent killers, which emerge gradually over time and with long-lasting social consequences. In this respect, the ‘plot’ is far more complicated than is the case with floods, where the narrative pattern is instantly ‘ready to use’ and entails identified individual victims, survivors, and known heroes and heroines.⁴⁸

Furthermore, as has been explained earlier, there had previously not been a tradition of memorialising historical famines in the Netherlands. This can be understood in terms of what Ann Rigney has referred to as ‘representational scarcity’, in this case, the limited cultural forms at our disposal for remembering famines.⁴⁹ Rigney has also referred to this scarcity in the context of ‘differential memorability’, meaning that ‘not all events are equally memorable because they do not equally lend themselves to the scarce number of cultural forms we have for talking about them’.⁵⁰

However, representational scarcity fails to explain why other countries did manage to find representational forms to commemorate famines. Most

notably, the trope of female and child victims has become globally connected to what Margaret Kelleher calls the 'inexpressible reality of famine', as women and children are 'figures that already occupy an ambiguous boundary between culture and nature'.⁵¹ These female and child figures 'not only furnish easier objects for compassion and pity but may also seem to secure an a priori distance from the cultivated spectator'.⁵² As such images can easily travel beyond their national contexts, mother and child victims are perhaps the most frequently used representative forms for famine monuments across the world.⁵³ Thus, while representational scarcity may help explain why hardly any famine monuments were erected in the Netherlands in the early post-war decades, it fails to explain why none were developed after the 1990s 'memory boom', which did witness a sharp increase in monuments of, for example, the Great Irish Famine.

A second part of the explanation seems to be connected to Dutch post-war memory politics. As mentioned, after the war, the political and social climate in the war-torn Netherlands focused on the restoration of national unity. Some parallels can be drawn with famine memory politics surrounding the Siege of Leningrad. As Lisa Kirschenbaum explains, monuments of the Siege only commemorated resistance and the collective heroism of those who survived the blockade, thus perpetuating the image of a united Soviet people rather than allowing space for victimhood and personal trauma suffered during the famine.⁵⁴ The main difference between both cases is, of course, that the Dutch famine was not 'silenced' in any way but found manifold expressions in media, museums, and educational practices, which allowed space for personal stories of trauma and victimhood.

In this sense, the Dutch case seems to fit with Andrew Newby's call for nuancing the alleged 'silencing' of the Great Finnish Famine of the 1860s. In Finland as well, large national monuments are absent, while the famine is commemorated locally with a wide variety of relatively small famine memorials and is also covered in popular writing and children's books. Newby therefore proposes a shift from the concept of 'amnesia' to the idea of 'relative silence'.⁵⁵ He explains the absence of national Finnish famine monuments by stressing that the Finnish government, albeit officially under Russian rule, had a high degree of self-governance and was therefore responsible for its own economic and political administration during the famine. This made it inconvenient to stress national trauma resulting from famine, as this could interfere with national identity formation.⁵⁶ Similar observations about the inconvenience of stressing national trauma and suffering because of famine can be made for the Spanish Hunger Years (1939–52), which took place under Franco's regime and was not only suppressed top-down as a result of political oppression and censorship but also did not serve as a unifying story after Franco's death because it was accompanied by feelings of shame. Rather than dwelling on the past, old

Francoist parties and a new generation of politicians sought to work towards rebuilding the future.⁵⁷

Some of these factors explaining absence and ‘silence’, or ‘relative silence’, related to the Finnish and Spanish famines can also be connected to the Dutch case, in particular the focus on national unity and progression towards the future instead of dwelling on the past. However, there is one vital difference: in the Netherlands, there was no political inconvenience in remembering the famine. On the contrary, already shortly after the war, the Hunger Winter became a symbol for the national suffering among all Dutch people throughout the occupation years 1940–45.⁵⁸ Instead of enforced forgetting, remembering the Hunger Winter through monuments could have potentially served an important role in nation-building processes in Dutch post-WWII society.

That is why we argue that there is one final variable that helps explain the relative absence of famine monuments in the Dutch public space while being abundantly present in other forms of memorialisation, namely the absence of engaged diasporic communities. Previous studies convincingly show that diasporic communities have played a crucial role in transmitting and instigating European famine heritage.⁵⁹ As Mark-FitzGerald has argued in her study of famine monuments in both Ireland and North America, memorialisation of the Great Irish Famine even became a ‘foundational myth of immigrant nations’, mythologising the ‘emigrant experience’.⁶⁰ The significance of diasporic communities is also demonstrated by the physical erection of Ukrainian famine heritage, both in the form of financing monuments as well as by developing famine education.⁶¹ The Netherlands, by contrast, does not have such strong ties with diasporic communities related to the Dutch Hunger Winter. Combined with the absence of a tradition of famine memorialisation and a disengaged Dutch state when it comes to commissioning monuments, this most likely explains why there are no national monuments to the Hunger Winter, while local famine monuments remain largely unknown to the wider public.

Concluding remarks

The few Hunger Winter monuments that have been erected after 1945 all reflect contemporary societal preoccupations and changing memorial practices of the war. While early monuments were inspired by Christian tradition and reinforced the opposition between good and evil forces, religious symbolism gradually disappeared from the 1960s onwards. Instead, following broader societal and political processes, more room was created for the role of women and Allied relief efforts during the famine. The most recent monuments combine different levels of local, national, and transnational commemoration and respond to broader issues, such as globalisation and

migration. Significantly, almost all Dutch famine monuments are about overcoming victimhood rather than suffering, which is very different from the material memorialisation of other European famines.

Explaining the relative absence of famine monuments in the Netherlands requires a long-term cultural-historical and comparative international perspective. History shows that the shaping of a Dutch national self-image has been primarily focused on memorialising flood disasters and wars, while a tradition of commemorating famines was notably absent. Furthermore, the Dutch state has traditionally never been involved in commissioning monuments, leaving their erection largely to private initiatives and local fundraising. This, in combination with post-war memory politics, which focused on the restoration of national unity and the absence of engaged diasporic communities, likely explains the relative absence of monuments from the Dutch Hunger Winter and may also help explain the presence and absence of memorialisation in other comparative famine contexts.

Notes

- 1 The unveiling of the monument, which was donated by an anonymous person to the city's council and made by the artist Tineke Bot, is described in *Leeuwarder Courant* (4 May 1981).
- 2 See the different interpretations in *Leeuwarder Courant* (4 May 1981), *Trouw* (12 August 1982) and *De Telegraaf* (12 August 1982).
- 3 See Ingrid de Zwarte, *The Hunger Winter: Fighting Famine in the Occupied Netherlands, 1944–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 4 The Canon of the Netherlands is used in primary and secondary schools. See *De Canon van Nederland. Vijftig vernieuwde vensters voor onze tijd* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 93. See also <https://www.canonvannederland.nl/en/tweedewereldoorlog>, last consulted 2 September 2022.
- 5 James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 4. According to Young, the memorial encompasses the entire field of commemorative forms and practices that also include the monument, making monuments into a 'subset of memorials', while a memorial 'may be a day, a conference, a space, but it need not be a monument'. Ibid.
- 6 See Emily Mark-FitzGerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Wiktoria Kudela-Swiatek, *Eternal Memory: Monuments and Memorials of the Holodomor* (Toronto: Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies, 2021).
- 7 An inventory of the monuments of the North Sea Flood of 1953 was made by Marijke van Hamelsveld, Piet van der Have, Simon van der Haagen. See *De monumenten van de watersnood 1953. Supplement*. (Ouwkerk: Watersnoodmuseum, 2010), and the supplement: Marijke van Hamelsveld, Piet van der Have, Simon van der Haagen, *De monumenten van de watersnood 1953* (Ouwkerk: Watersnoodmuseum, 2016).
- 8 See the inventory on: <https://www.4en5mei.nl/oorlogsmonumenten>.
- 9 See, for example, Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–33; and Aleida Assmann, 'Four Formats of Memory: From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past', in Christian Emden and David Migley, eds., *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World Since 1500* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004), 19–37.

- 10 Jay Winter, 'The performance of the past: Memory history, identity', in Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, Jay Winter, eds., *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity in Modern Europe* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 11–23.
- 11 Lotte Jensen, Joep Leerssen and Marita Mathijssen, eds., *Free Access to the Past. Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2010). The shaping of national self-images by celebrating the past had older roots. See Lotte Jensen, ed., *The Roots of Nationalism: National Identity Formation in Early Modern Europe, 1600–1815* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016).
- 12 'L'essence d'une nation est que tous les individus aient beaucoup de choses en commun, et aussi que tous aient oublié bien des choses'. Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* (Paris: Ancienne Maison Michel Lévy Frères, 1882), 3. The translation used here is by Ethan Rundell, accessed at http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf.
- 13 Lotte Jensen, *De verheerlijking van het verleden: Helden, literatuur en natievorming in de negentiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2008). This glorifying of the national past emerged in the seventeenth century. See Lotte Jensen, *Celebrating Peace. The Emergence of Dutch Identity, 1648–1815* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2017).
- 14 Marita Mathijssen, *Historiezucht. De obsessie met het verleden in de negentiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2013), 390–2.
- 15 Exceptions to this rule are, notably, two monuments of persons who played an important role in the colonial past as governor-general of the Dutch East Indies: J.P. Coen (1587–1629, realised in 1893) and J.B. van Heutz (1851–1924, realised in 1935). See *Het Vaderland* 25 (1893): 96; and see Vilan de Loo, "'Tot het einde toe op den ingeslagen weg blijven voortgaan": Het testosteronproza van generaal J.B. van Heutz', *Indische letteren* 33 (2018): 405–16.
- 16 Daniel Curtis et al., 'Low Countries', in Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda, eds., *Famine in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 123–33.
- 17 Lotte Jensen, *Water: A Dutch Cultural History* (Nijmegen: Radboud University Press, 2024).
- 18 *Ibid.*, 233–7.
- 19 The concept 'grand narrative' was developed by Jean-François Lyotard in *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Menuit, 1979).
- 20 Frank van Vree, 'De dynamiek van de herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context', in Frank van Vree and Rob van der Laarse, eds., *De dynamiek van de herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context* (Amsterdam: Bakker: 2009), 21–2.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 32–7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 39–40.
- 23 For a complete overview of all Dutch monuments of the Second World War, see: <https://www.4en5mei.nl/oorlogsmonumenten>, last consulted 2 September 2022.
- 24 *Weekblad Kerknieuws* (5 July 1947). For more on food relief and child evacuations during the Hunger Winter, see Ingrid de Zwarte, 'Coordinating Hunger: The Evacuation of Children during the Dutch Food Crisis, 1945', *War & Society* 35, no. 2 (2016): 132–49; And Ingrid de Zwarte, 'Fighting Vulnerability: Child Feeding Initiatives during the Dutch Hunger Winter', in Tatjana Tönsmeier et al., eds., *Coping with Hunger and Shortage under German Occupation in World War II* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 293–310.
- 25 All translation of Dutch quotes are ours.
- 26 *Friesch Dagblad* (20 November 1947).
- 27 'Toen het water tot de lippen was gerezen gaf God ons de bevrijding'.

- 28 Already in late May 1945, the church's minister Dubois and Gouda's mayor had decided that a future war monument should commemorate 'all those who had fallen' during the war, asking for donations in August of that year. See *De Vrije Pers* (31 May 1945); *Trouw* (15 August 1945).
- 29 *Het Parool* (24 September 1955).
- 30 Van Vree, 'De dynamiek van de herinnering', 24–5.
- 31 Ann Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory', *Journal of European Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 15; Astrid Erll, 'Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the 'Indian Mutiny'', in Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney, eds., *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 109–38.
- 32 Van Vree, 'De dynamiek van de herinnering', 32–4.
- 33 *Leeuwarder Courant* (4 May 1981); (10 August 1982); (12 August 1982); (2 May 1986).
- 34 *Limburgs Dagblad* (6 July 1991). Drielsma, among other things, also designed the Mauthausen Monument (1986).
- 35 Van Vree, 'De dynamiek van de herinnering', 39–40.
- 36 De Zwarte, *The Hunger Winter*, 141–56.
- 37 *Reformatisch Dagblad* (28 April 2006).
- 38 Astrid Erll, 'From "district six" to district 9 and back: The plurimedial production of travelling schemata', in Chiara de Cesari and Ann Rigney, *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2014), 29–50.
- 39 *Het Parool* (6 July 2020).
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 *Ibid.*
- 42 Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 155.
- 43 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Recollecting the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 7.
- 44 Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 213; Marguërite Corporaal and Ingrid de Zwarte, 'Heritages of hunger: European famine legacies in current academic debates', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 28, no. 1 (2022): 41.
- 45 *Het Parool* (7 March 2015); (2 April 2015).
- 46 Ingrid de Zwarte, 'Brug over het IJ speelde geen rol in Hongerwinter', *Het Parool* (22 April 2015).
- 47 The initiative came from Janneke Lenstra, daughter of Frisian football hero Abe Lenstra, who also fostered and trained evacuated children during the famine. See *Het Parool* (16 October 2021).
- 48 Lotte Jensen, 'Floods as shapers of Dutch cultural identity: Media, theories, practices', *Water History* 13, no. 2 (2021) 217–33.
- 49 Rigney, 'Plenitude, scarcity and the circulation of cultural memory', 16.
- 50 Ann Rigney, 'Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism beyond the Traumatic', *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 371.
- 51 See Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
- 52 David Lloyd, 'The Indigent Sublime: Specters of Irish famine', *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 163.
- 53 See Erll, 'The plurimedial production of travelling schemata'.
- 54 Lisa Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941-1995: Myth, Memories, and Monuments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113–50.
- 55 Andrew Newby, 'Finland's 'Great Hunger Years' Memorials: A Sesquicentennial Report', *Collegium* 22 (2016): 173–214.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 178.

- 57 Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco and Peter Anderson, 'Introduction: Famine, Not Hunger?' in *Franco's Famine: Malnutrition, Disease and Starvation in Post-Civil War Spain*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 2–5; Claudio Hernández Bugos and Gloria Román Ruiz, 'Remembering the Spanish Famine: Official Discourse and the Popular Memory of Hunger during Francoism', in Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco and Peter Anderson, eds., *Franco's Famine: Malnutrition, Disease and Starvation in Post-Civil War Spain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 205–24.
- 58 De Zwarte, *The Hunger Winter*, 257.
- 59 Corporaal and De Zwarte, 'Heritages of Hunger', 35–6.
- 60 Mark-Fitzgerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine*, 275.
- 61 See Kudela-Swiatek, *Eternal Memory*; educational materials have been developed by the Holodomor Research and Education Consortium.

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