Hurting Memories and Beneficial Forgetting
Posttraumatic Stress Disorders, Biographical Developments, and Social Conflicts

Edited by

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16 The Creation and Development of Social Memories of Traumatic Events: The Oudewater Massacre of 1575

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16.1 Culture and Memories

Every culture has its own memory practices, that is, ways of encoding and transmitting of memories in narratives, images, rituals, display of emotions, or coping strategies after traumatic events. Cultural concepts and conventions determine the behavior of individuals and the cultural group as a whole. Coping strategies after traumatic events are also culturally determined. Medical staff working in war zones all over the world find that cultural and social conditions very much affect the diagnosis, treatment, and resilience of war victims (North et al., 2005). Diagnosis by Western counselors is sometimes hindered by the unfamiliarity with the way people experience, express, and evaluate stress in non-Western societies (Knipscheer & Kleber, 2008; Shiraev, 2007). History offers an opportunity to study the development of memory practices over a longer period and across cultures. Although memory studies of the twentieth century are booming since the 1990s, only recently have historians of the premodern era (i.e., the period before 1800) taken an interest in the study of memory and, more specifically, in the way individuals and societies remembered war experiences (Fox, 1999; Ford, 2001; Harari, 2004; Pollmann, 2009; Walsham, 2011).

Europeans who lived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the countryside, had a fair chance of becoming victims of plundering armies. The Reformation provided one of the main sources of political conflict. In the Holy Roman Empire, territorial rulers waged war over religion. France suffered from bloody religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. In the Netherlands, the Habsburg regime executed thousands of people for their dissident ideas. Thousands of people must have had to cope with the distressing memories of these experiences. How did they cope with the memory of violence, humiliation, and loss?

The distance in time offers historians the advantage of a long-term perspective and the possibility of comparing societies, cultures, and historical situations. However, they also have to deal with the important drawback that the objects of
study are no longer alive and have never been diagnosed according to modern criteria. Moreover, in retrospect, it is impossible to know whether war victims developed disorders. Their memories, as well as the descriptions of their symptoms, if mentioned at all, are preserved in images and texts that speak in their own cultural idiom and that tell a story that must have made sense to their contemporaries but that is not necessarily understandable to us.

Still, there is something to be learned from the way past societies dealt with memories of war and atrocities. Reading studies on memories or memory practices in premodern Europe, we observe both continuity with and striking differences from modern memory practices. The differences, basically, concern the way people think about the relation between body, mind, and soul, about what memory is and can do to a person, and about the task and destiny of the individual in earthly life. The suffering of the soul is usually not medicalized, unless it is ascribed to physical causes, such as ‘melancholia’ (Gowland, 2006; Haskell, 2009; Lund, 2010; Schmidt, 2007). Secondly, one’s past is not evaluated in terms of personal development through experience but rather as a temporal road to eternal salvation, a road that is meant to be hard in order to test the true believers. Finally, the role of individuals in events like war is usually seen as part of a collective experience or as destined by a divine plan. Of course, these different premises have consequences for the way people make sense of their memories and for the coping strategies they develop.

From the therapeutic practices in modern postwar societies, we have learned that a number of preconditions seem necessary for the resilience of traumatized war victims: (1) safety, the socio-economic perspective of recovery, reconstruction, and future welfare; (2) recognition of victimhood, justice, solidarity, and social bonding, and (3) the production of a comprehensible narrative of what happened that gives meaning to the memory, that can be shared with others, and that creates a distance between the traumatic event and the actual situation that is no longer threatening.

The twentieth century offers many examples of postwar situations in which one or more of these preconditions were not in place. Some areas were in a state of war for more than a generation; children grew up in refugee camps or in shattered families or communities, without any perspective of a normal life in the nearby future. The lack of solidarity and recognition was one of the main problems that hindered the recovery and caused embitterment of both Holocaust survivors and practically all war veterans of the past century (Assmann, 2006; Hunt, 2010; Winter, 1999). The creation of a narrative has often been delayed or obstructed by the politics of forgetting, feelings of guilt or shame, conflicts about who is to blame for what happened, or the disintegration of the community that should have formed the audience. In preindustrial Europe, this was often the case as well. Elsewhere, we described under what conditions the massacres of the Dutch Revolt were publicly remembered (Kuijpers and Pollmann, 2013). In many cases, the political regime or the economic situation did not allow for the emergence of public memory practices. Local societies that were politically or religiously divided would not agree on a shared narrative of the past, and in the Habsburg Netherlands, various towns had to sign a treaty of oubliance, which stated that it was no longer permitted to talk about what had happened. In the Northern Netherlands, towns immediately started to remember their victories,
while the commemoration of atrocities, although generally acknowledged, would not start until much later.

Oudewater, a small town in Holland, halfway between Utrecht and The Hague, will serve as an example of how and why a violent past could be publicly remembered across the centuries. This case shows that, even when the conditions for mental recovery are optimal, the creation of a narrative that frames victimhood in a satisfactory way is not self-evident and takes more than one generation.

16.2 The Destruction and Massacre of Oudewater in 1575

In the summer of 1566, a wave of iconoclasm by Protestants spread through the Netherlands. The Habsburg regime, headed by Philip II of Spain, responded with severe persecution combined with a centralistic policy that undermined the autonomy and privileges of both towns and nobility. By 1568, the Low Countries had plunged into a civil war that would last 80 years until peace was signed at last in Munster, 1648. In April 1572, a growing number of cities in Holland, Brabant, and Flanders openly rejected the Habsburg regime and declared their support for the rebel prince William of Orange. The Spanish regime began a violent military campaign to force the rebel cities to surrender. The cities that had themselves invited the rebels in or that had refused to take in a Spanish garrison were punished by putting them to the sack. In the towns of Mechelen, Zutphen, and Naarden, hundreds—of men, women, and children were murdered or died when trying to escape. Many others were tortured in order to get as much money from them as possible.

The small Holland town of Oudewater had sided with the rebels since June 1572. On August 6, 1575, the Spanish commander Hierges besieged it and subsequently captured, sacked, and burned down the town on August 8. Hundreds of the approximately 3000 inhabitants—men, women, and children—were killed; the exact numbers are unknown. One of the Protestant ministers was hanged outside the town walls. There are eyewitness accounts by survivors who fled, wounded, half naked, and barefoot, to other towns in the area. Many people lost their possessions and loved ones. It is hard to say how badly Oudewater was destroyed. One source states that only the church and eight houses were left standing. Probably many survivors went to live elsewhere. By the end of 1576, Oudewater was recaptured by the rebel army of the Prince of Orange. At that point, the town was still in ruins, and it would take a while for the town to be fully restored. An Amsterdam diarist mentioned the burial of a former inhabitant of the town of Oudewater. This man went back to his hometown in 1578 and, seeing its desolate condition, got ill and died of grief a few days after his return to Amsterdam (Jacobsz, 1959, II, p. 724). Yet local research shows that the restoration and economical recovery of the town took place more quickly than one would expect. Oudewater was exempted from land taxes for a long time, and the States of Holland invested in the restoration of the fortifications and gates because the town was strategically important. In the accounts, we find wages for the transport of debris and rubble until 1579. The number of new citizens rose every year in the 1580s. By 1588, the renovation of the town hall was also completed (Boon, 1975).
16.3 The Production of Collective Memory

While the survivors in Oudewater were rebuilding their town, the event became canonical in the history of the Dutch Revolt. Various actors were involved in the production of the collective memory of this event. At that time, Hogenberg, a printer in Cologne, produced news accounts immediately after each political or military event (Mielke & Luijten, 2009). These broadsheets found their way all over Europe to a public that was longing for information, news, and excitement (Figure 16.1). The news about the massacre of Oudewater thus spread rapidly. The Hogenberg image shows the plundering and burning of the town of Oudewater and says in its caption: “Here you can see what tyranny and cruelty took place in Oudewater by God and infamous felons. They killed, spoiled and violated, both virgins and married women. One of which they hanged naked, tore the fruit from her womb, and threw it away like filth.”

The hanging of a pregnant woman in her doorway in

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1“Hie ist zu sehen in was Gestalt, Gross tyranni und Gross gewalt, Zu Oudewater wird angerichtt, Durch Gott und eherlose boswicht, Die morden, plundern unzucht treiben, Schenden vill jungfrawn und weiber, Deren seie ein nackt auff gehenckt, Gar iemerlich haben geschendt, Die frucht auss irm leib gerissen, Und schenlich die hinweg geschmissen.”
Oudewater, as depicted by Hogenberg, became an icon of the so-called black legend of Spanish cruelty in the Netherlands and was used as war propaganda by the protestant party (Figure 16.2). The theme underlines the innocence of the victims on the one hand—with the unborn baby as the epitome of innocence—and the devilish cruelty of the soldiers on the other hand. In the early seventeenth century, both in popular pamphlets and history books, this theme must have become widely known and connected to the Oudewater case. However, comparison with earlier prints about Spanish behavior in the Americas and of Catholic violence against Protestants in France has shown that the killing babies and women formed an iconographical
theme that probably preexisted, a reference as well to the massacre of the innocents in Bethlehem, and that does not need to reflect what actually happened in Oudewater (Cilleßen, 2006). In any case, these images were circulating throughout Europe long before any of the personal stories of victims appeared in print.

The first seriously documented histories of the events were quite factual about the military aspects, the numbers of soldiers on both sides, the number of shots fired at the city on August 7, the condition of the fortifications, and other details. In his 1599 history of the Revolt, the London-based author Van Meteren mentions he heard that Protestant citizens had staged a mock procession on the town walls in order to provoke the Spaniards, thus knowingly signing their death sentence. According to his account, no more than 20 men survived the massacre (Van Meteren, 1599, Fol. LXXXV). More detailed information and eyewitness accounts came from the military and from prominent citizens who survived and reported to the Prince. They were first cited by the well-informed historian Peter Bor, whose voluminous 1621 edition of the history of the war contained the first extensive description of the taking of Oudewater. One of the few eyewitness accounts Bor cited was the local bailiff named Crayestein, who managed to escape by pretending to be one of the plundering soldiers and hiding in a ditch overnight. He arrived in Gouda naked, was dressed by friends, and was brought to the Prince of Orange where he reported on the sack (Bor, 1621, VIII, p. 121v). During the rest of the seventeenth century, most authors copied Bor’s history. Others just name Oudewater as a gruesome example of Spanish cruelty, without adding any historical detail.

The question is what happened with the personal memories of the victims of the sack. Did they identify with the story as it was published? Did they talk at all about what happened to them? The fact that the Oudewater massacre had become a well-known event in the history of the Dutch Revolt had some practical advantages. For example, little had to be explained if one needed help. This was certainly the case for Anna Jansdochter, widow of the Reformed minister of Oudewater who had been hanged 2 days after the sack in 1575. In 1582 she solicited a pension from the States of Holland. Her request was accompanied by an attestation by the burgomaster of Gouda on the condition in which the corpse had been found when the rebel army reconquered Oudewater 16 months later. According to him, the body was still fully intact, the color normal, the face not yet hollow, the eyes fresh and bright as if the corpse had been hanging there for only 4 days, this “being a divine miracle.” The States of Holland were impressed and granted Anna’s request in view of “her husband’s perseverance and the miraculous ways of the Lord with him” (National Archive, The Hague, Arch. 3.01.04.01).

At some point—it is unclear when exactly—the States of Holland also decided to give a pension to all survivors who were still alive. From 1615 onward, we possess the lists on which the Oudewater magistrates annually recorded the names of survivors. The 1615 list still contained 321 names while the last list, dating from 1664, mentions two old women as the last living survivors of the sack (Old town archive Oudewater, Inv. Nr. 165). This is the first and only instance we know of where no distinction was made among the survivors; they were all considered to have suffered
equally by virtue of having been in Oudewater at the time. One woman who was still in her mother’s womb during the sack, even made a successful claim for compensation.

16.4 Time for Commemoration

It was more than 30 years before the survivors in Oudewater started a public commemoration. In 1608, we find the first notice on an annual memorial service and sermon held on the first Sunday after August 8 or on the eighth itself, the day of the massacre. Another 30 years later, the next generation decided that this was not enough. Around the time when the Peace of Westphalia was signed in 1648, the Oudewater burgomasters commissioned an immense artwork to commemorate the massacre. The painting, by the relatively unknown painter Dirk Stoop, is 5 m wide and still hangs in the town hall today (Stoppelenburg, 2005). From 1650 onward, the annual memorial service in church was followed by a visit to the painting in the town hall. This tradition is carried on until today.

It thus seems that around 1650 there was a renewed interest in the 1575 massacre. The list of survivors applying for the States’ pension in 1650 shows that there were no more than 32 of them left, all of very old age, because 75 years had now passed. The names on these lists have short marginal comments, such as “she lay under corpses” or “lost his father and mother.” Possibly, the annual compiling of the list facilitated the appearance and transmission of individual stories in the public domain in Oudewater. In 1669, almost a century after the massacre and after the last survivors had died, Arnoldus Duin, a local grocer, took an interest in them and wrote a very detailed history of the events. In his introduction, Duin emphasized that Oudewater, now prospering again, should forever remember the tales of ancestral suffering. To this effect, he included a great number of completely “new” eyewitness accounts and personal stories, “from old people who heard these stories many times from their ancestors” and “from people who I have known and who I have spoken to myself, who have a good knowledge of the event and who were already 17 years old” (Duin, 1669).

Some of these again focused on spectacular escapes, the bravery of the citizens, and the demonic cruelty of their assailants. It is interesting to see how individuals framed their own experience in the preexisting narratives. In the course of the seventeenth century, a number of eyewitnesses came forward, to testify to the hanging of a pregnant woman in Oudewater, for instance. In 1624, Judith Adriaensdochter testified for a notary in Utrecht that Anna van Danswijck, mother of Marrichgen and Trijntge Thonisdochter, was hanged in her doorway (Stoppelenburg, 2005). In the list of survivors of 1650, Anna Pelgrums, at the age of 82, attests that “two” children were cut from her aunt’s body (Old town archive Oudewater, Inv. Nr. 165). Duin mentions one Aeltgen Pieters and notes that she was pregnant, this time with triplets (Duin, 1669, p. 18). Typically, witnesses to the death of fellow citizens attest that they died either heroically or devoutly like martyrs. “A certain citizen named Pieter...
Willemsz, hearing the crying and moaning of his wife and children, bid farewell as he did not think he would return, walked out of his house with an axe in his hand right into the arms of his enemy. He slashed around furiously, thus ending his life in battle” (Duin, 1669, pp. 11–12).

There is also praise for a mother who forbids her children to kneel and implore Spanish soldiers to save their lives: She “pulled the child out of the Spanish hands with courage and steadfastness, and exhorted her children that they should not beg the soldiers, but pray to God who gave them their lives and who was the only one who could save them” (Duin, 1669, pp. 17–18). Throughout Duin’s story, the working of divine providence can be discerned. Before the sack, some women assisting a woman in childbirth had seen prodigious signs in the sky. They saw an army, heard the noise of weapons and gunfire, and saw blood dripping down on the earth, followed by a fire. Three children survived although they had been fully covered with molten lead, pitch, and tar, and a baby remained silent for 3 days under a heap of straw, without anything to eat or drink. Another mother was taken to her child by a fair young man without being seen, although they passed through streets where soldiers were plundering and killing. Some people thought he must have been an angel (Duin, 1669, pp. 23–24).

The account also tells of indignation, anger, and blame, mostly about the lack of solidarity and compassion of the neighboring towns. To begin with, the town of Gouda, also siding with the Revolt, nonetheless refused to pierce the dike in order to inundate the fields around Oudewater; Their harvest came first. In need, you get to know your friends, Duin comments. People from Montfoort, a nearby town still loyal to the king, came over to Oudewater to look for goods in the burnt houses after the sack. They fished corpses out of the harbor, in order to steal the clothes. There are two stories of women who fled to Montfoort with their children in a deplorable state and were refused shelter, scolded as heretics, and chased away. One of them was even sent away by her own sister (Duin, 1669, p. 23).

Duin also included tales that are less loaded with moral portent. To modern readers, the stories seem very authentic because they are unspectacular and focus on minor details and sensory experience. One is the tale of Japikje Pieters, who was a young girl in 1575 and who had lived until the 1650s. Japikje herself was severely injured in the sack. She survived because she was hidden under a pile of corpses before she was eventually found by a Spanish soldier, who took her with him through the city and into the Spanish encampment from which she was redeemed by someone from Utrecht who felt compassion for her. Her mother survived as well, though she gave birth to a misshapen baby. Spanish women gave her clothes “to cover her shame.” In Oudewater, she lost 14 sons and two daughters whose clothes she later recognized in a second-hand store in Utrecht (Duin, 1669, p. 14).

There are also the memories of one Jan Dirksz van Dam, who also was still a child in 1575. He was taken by a Spaniard who made him carry goods to the military camp. Tradeswomen bandaged him in the Spanish camp. He witnessed how people had to undress before they were killed in order to keep the clothes clean. He saw German soldiers on a cemetery dividing animals that were burned by the fire and how they carried the burnt meat to their camp. He saw Spaniards bathing in the river
IJssel moaning because lead had been poured over them. The Spaniard who kept little Jan seemed about to kill him several times, taking him away to hidden places and forcing him to undress. He also had to walk barefoot through the streets, burning his feet on the hot stones and smouldering wood (Duin, 1669, pp. 14–15).

16.5 Conclusion

We shall never know what happened in Oudewater on August 8, 1575, nor will we be able to assess the psychological damage done to individuals on that day. We can observe, however, the rise and persistence of public memory practices until today.

The emergence of public memories of victimhood is not self-evident, yet in Oudewater the necessary preconditions were present: The town recovered rapidly after the sack and lived in wealth and peace from the seventeenth century onward. Moreover, the victimhood of the survivors was acknowledged by both political authorities, by the public media, and by the community itself. Finally, a comprehensible narrative of what happened was produced that gave meaning to individual memories. This offered individuals the opportunity to share their memories with others.

The creation of a narrative of victimhood is complicated. Victims often feel shame. Important elements in the successful creation of a shared narrative of the Oudewater victimhood were striving for unity and a unifying history by way of blaming the enemy on one hand and by highlighting their own innocence, heroism, and endurance on the other. Contemporary religious beliefs offered the semantic categories to do so; because God tests his chosen people, suffering made sense.

One important condition for the collective commemoration of violence is the existence of what Aleida Asmann has called a Solidargemeinschaft, a community of solidarity (Assmann, 2006, p. 75). Victims share their experiences with their peers, with their community, and ultimately with the world at large only if these are prepared to listen and acknowledge their experiences. This does not always happen in postwar situations, let alone when war continues and there is a threat of further violence or when people are set adrift or are completely preoccupied with survival. Yet in the Northern Netherlands, the Revolt succeeded and Oudewater became part of the new Dutch Republic and was completely restored in about 10–20 years. By 1600, the local economy must have been flourishing as never before. Moreover, the fate of its citizens was acknowledged as part of the founding history of the new Protestant state. This history was marked by collective suffering under a tyrannical regime, heroic struggle, divine mercy, and faith. The memory of the internal division of the citizenry in the 1570s and issues of political blame and shame had to be buried. Oudewater, too, had been divided. Catholic survivors blamed their fellow citizens for having provoked Spanish fury, if not punishment from above (Jacobsz, 1559). Whereas Arnoldus Duin had remained silent on the mock procession on the walls, in 1712 Catholic priest Ignatius Walvis suggests that the massacre was not forgotten easily. He knew “a reputable person who had heard a very old woman in Oudewater tell repeatedly” of the mock procession with saints’ images and a dog with a chalice, which had incited the Spanish to even greater fury and trashed the last chance
of clemency (Walvis, 1999, p. 143). Instead of focusing on internal divisions, Duin, instead, scapegoats neighboring towns and anonymous outsiders.

It is possible that victims did not talk much about their memories until at least 30 or 40 years after the massacre, when the annual commemoration had been started and lists of survivors were compiled for the first time. Initially, only the stories of martyrdom and heroism were highlighted, a process that was facilitated by the existence of templates for such narratives in the media. Telling others of one’s memories is a way to recovery, yet to be able to talk about painful or terrifying memories requires one to find a semantic category in which to do so. Victimhood was nothing to be proud of unless you endured it as a martyr, which implies moral victory. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century accounts of the sacks and massacres, we therefore find two general categories of narratives: the one emphasizing the innocence of the victim (such as the unborn baby) and the inhumane cruelty of the aggressor, and the other stressing individual or collective heroism (or martyrdom). The stories of Japikje Pieters and Jan Dirksz van Dam did not need to be heroic or very devout because they were still children at the time and thus innocent.

The historical material suggests that the victims of the massacre of Oudewater were offered quite optimal opportunities for coping. The religious and social environment provided for narrative schemata that made perfect sense of what happened. One’s fate in earthly life is of secondary importance to those who believe that suffering is a test and that redemption will follow hereafter. Moreover, cross-cultural medical research suggests that, of all coping strategies, the solidarity of victims and witnesses, as well as the rebuilding of the social world, is most crucial. This is what the Oudewater community did. They restored social order, went back to work, and provided solidarity to the victims. Moreover, good had overcome evil, the true church had triumphed, and suffering had led to a better world."God has always been an avenger of the blood of his elect,” Duin writes. History serves to remind mortal souls that they will stand before his throne at the last day.

References


