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War Belongs in a Museum: Experiencing the Cultural Memory of World War II in a Museum

Abstract

This thesis explores how visitors to World War II museums in the Netherlands experience and interact with the cultural memory of World War II. This research applies Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory to explore the experience of visitors to World War II museums. Today, 80 years after the war has ended, there are ever fewer people alive who can tell first hand stories of World War II. This makes examining how communicative memory is shifting into cultural memory more relevant than ever. The research took place at three different World War II museums in the Netherlands. At these locations a total of 22 rounds of intervening participants observation was done. This meant conducting a mix of observations and discussions with the participants while walking through the museum. From these museum visits several themes came up in relation to the visitor experience and the concept of cultural memory. At first, it became clear for what reasons people visited the museums. The next theme showed in what ways the museum was experienced, mostly unrelated to the concept of cultural memory. Visitors experience the museum both through emotions and through learning, with historical empathy and historical Verstehung as the deepest form of understanding. After this, the museum was explained as a space of relatability. The experience in a museum is highly dependent on what a visitor can relate to. This can occur in a multitude of ways, but it was found to be a significant aspect of the experience. Lastly, the findings suggest that personal stories, meaning communicative memory, are still an important part of the experience of cultural memory. Even while most of the visitors were not alive during the war, personal connections were an overarching aspect of the experience for most visitors. This challenges the understanding of the concept of cultural memory, because the binary, successive approach to communicative and cultural memory might be more fluid than proposed in the literature.

Keywords: Cultural memory, World War II museums, Experience, Intervening participant observation, Communicative memory

Word count: 20364

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1.0 Introduction

On the 12th of September 2024, Mesch in Limburg was the first town in the Netherlands to celebrate 80 years of freedom from the Nazi regime of World War II (WWII) (Provincie Limburg, 2024). In the 9 months after Mesch celebrated its freedom, places all over the country gradually commemorate their liberation from the deadliest war in history (Hughes, 2025). Festivals are organised and people party. However, there are also remembrance rituals that take place, like the lighting of the liberation fire and the 2 minute silence for the people who died during WWII and after (NPO Kennis, 2023). It becomes clear, through these cultural practices, that WWII is still an important part of the collective memory of the Netherlands. However, as the war becomes more temporally distant, the question arises whether its significance for the collective memory endures. Each year there are fewer people to tell first hand stories of their experience during WWII. As a result, younger generations increasingly rely on other sources, such as museums, media, and education, to shape their understanding and memory of the war.

At first, many of the personal war memories were orally transmitted (Vos, 2009). However, as audio-visual technologies developed in the post-war years, many of these memories were able to be recorded, displayed, and stored. The first two decades after WWII saw the Dutch collective memory going through different stages (De Graaf, 1995). In the early years after the war, myths surrounding Dutch bravery during the war were prevalent (De Graaf, 1995; Vos, 2009). In the 60s, friction arose between the post-war generation and WWII generations about the dishonesty regarding Dutch actions during the war. This led to the war becoming a discussable topic, with a more truthful representation of the Dutch in literature and cinema. De Graaf (1995) writes that it was the Eichmann trial that truly brought WWII back into the spotlight of the national memory. This was driven by the fear that his sentencing would signal the end of reflection on the war.

The post-war generations showed an interest in memorialising and learning about the war, which, in addition to Eichmann's sentencing, led to a museumification of WWII (Ribbens & Captain, 2011 p. 14). The collective memory was not solely created by communication between people anymore. The memory of WWII became crystallized in the objects, texts, rituals, and media of WWII, creating a collective form of memory that remains accessible to generations that did not experience the war.

It was Jan Assmann (1988), in a text later translated by John Czaplicka (1995), who made a clear distinction between the different forms of collective memory. He saw collective memory as starting from a communicative point where the people that experienced a certain event can tell what happened from their memory. However, as Assmann notes, the survivors of a certain event can only communicate their memory for as long as they are alive. If an event has made a significant impact on a community, then the memory can take the form of objects, texts, rituals, or media that serve as mnemonic devices to keep it alive. This is what Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) call cultural memory. Whereas communicative memory relies on communication between people, cultural memory relies on institutions and symbolic meanings (Assmann, 2011).

The aim of this thesis has been to gain an understanding of how people today, 80 years after the end of WWII, interact with and experience the cultural memory of WWII. This was done by focussing on visitor experiences in Dutch WWII museums, leading to the following central research question:

How do Dutch visitors to World War II museums in the Netherlands interact with and experience the cultural memory of World War II?

To be able to answer this question, an intervening participant observation methodology was used at three WWII museums in the Netherlands, namely Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, Generaal Maczek Memorial Breda, and Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland in Gendt. This thesis offers a new academic approach to cultural memory studies by applying participant observation to examine cultural memory in practice. Moreover, the findings suggest rethinking the concept of cultural memory to better fit the contemporary remembrance practices of WWII. Additionally, this thesis contributes to understanding how Dutch people experience the memory of WWII in a museum. These insights can help museums develop more engaging exhibitions that preserve the relevance of the memory of WWII for future generations.

In the following chapters begin with a review of the relevant literature, introducing the concept of cultural memory in detail and addressing other concepts present in the research question, such as experience and museums. The methodology chapter then outlines the research approach and explains how the study was conducted. Lastly, the findings chapter answers the research question through four main themes: the first explores visitors' motivations; the second focusses on the emotional and intellectual experiences; the third explains the museum as a

space of relatability; and the fourth discusses the role of communicative memory in the experience of cultural memory.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Visitor motivation

When trying to understand how visitors experience war heritage sites, a good place to start is the motivations people have for visiting these sites. Visits to concentration camps or war museums can be understood to fall under the broad and ill-defined field of dark tourism, a term popularized by Lennon & Foley (1996). Dark tourism generally involves visiting places associated with death and suffering. While the current thesis does not specifically go into dark tourism, the visitors to WWII related museums can be seen as engaging with dark heritage sites. It is therefore useful to go through the literature around motivations, experiences, and emotions of visitors to dark tourism sites. The motivations for people to visit 'dark' sites can usually be understood as coming in two ways: demand-oriented or supply-oriented (Isaac & Çakmac, 2014). A different term for the same idea can be intrinsic or extrinsic motivations (Powell & Kokkranikal, 2015). Demand-oriented or intrinsic motivations relate to the perceived usefulness of a visit to a museum for oneself, this involves personal factors like personal meaning and interpretation or education. In the field of dark tourism studies Seaton (1996) coined the term thanatourism which entails travelling to locations motivated by the desire for symbolic encounters with death. Visiting 'dark' places is, according to Seaton, motivated by desires for getting close to the ultimate Other, death.

On the other side there are authors who focus more on the supply-oriented or extrinsic motivations. Foley & Lennon (1996) understood dark tourism as a phenomenon that is interpreted and created for visitors by curators of the sites and museums. Events that are known to the public because of media can be visited or experienced through these interpretations. Isaac et al. (2019) however note that in dark tourism studies there are often a lot of conceptual ideas, which are not always proven empirically. Therefore they point to empirical studies, which they performed themselves as well. In their study on people's motivations for visiting the concentration camp Westerbork in the Netherlands they found that people's motivations to visit were to 'gain knowledge and awareness', 'remember', and to 'visit an unusual place'. Moreover, Biran et al. (2011) find similar results in their study of Auschwitz. They furthermore challenge Seaton's (1996) notion that symbolic encounters with death are the main reason for visits to dark sites. Interest in death was found to be the least important motivating factor for visiting Auschwitz according to Biran et al. (2011). Learning and understanding were found to be important factors together with having and emotional experience. The interest in being

emotionally impressed is a common finding in empirical studies (Niemela, 2010; Driessen, 2022; Yan et al. 2016; Isaac et al. 2019; Dunkley et al. 2011).

2.2 Experience and emotion

The following section will explore the literature around the experiences and emotions of visitors to 'dark' spaces and more specifically WWII memorials and museums. Pinell & Gilmore (1998) proposed the idea of the experience economy, which they argue follows the agrarian and industrial economies. In the service industry, where the experience economy is most prevalent, emotions are what shapes the experience (Volo, 2017 p.31; Bigné & Andreu, 2004). Emotions can be described as short-lived, felt responses to external stimuli (Reeve, 2024). Generally tourism and leisure services attempt to evoke positive emotions in visitors so they can create memorable experiences (Volo, 2017 p.32). Tourism is thus often viewed through this hedonic lens. This is evident in the literature on motivation and emotion, which often focusses predominantly on positive emotions (Mitas et al. 2012; Volo, 2017; Knobloch et al. 2017). In 1970, Peter Gray was the first to make a distinction between tourist roles by dividing tourists' motivation in either sun-lust or wanderlust. Iso-Ahola (1982) saw tourism motivation as both escape and seeking. This is similar to Dann's (1977) idea that tourists are in a state of anomie in their daily environment, which motivates them to seek escape. Such models assume tourism to be a positive alternative to everyday life. It is for that reason that tourism marketing research often places focus on how to elicit positive emotions in tourists (Prayag et al. 2017; Song & Qu, 2017; Gezhi & Xiang, 2022). However, the ever growing interest in places with dissonant heritage (Tunbridge, 1994) has shown that being emotionally impressed, whether positively or negatively, is sometimes a desirable outcome of a leisurely visit (Zheng et al. 2019; Biran et al. 2011; Driessen, 2022; Oren et al. 2021). This is in line with the empirical studies previously mentioned in section 2.1, which found that being emotionally impressed is one of the motivators for engaging with dark heritage.

While the topic of emotion has received increased attention in tourism literature, empirical research is still rather scarce related to dark heritage sites. Nawijn et al. (2024) studied how emotion clusters affect meaning for visitors to a concentration camp. Sympathy was found to have a significant effect on meaning, which they explain through the reflective capacities of empathy. Furthermore, Krakover (2005) conducted a study on the attitudes and feelings of Israeli visitors to the Holocaust museum in Israel. Emotional reactions such as thoughtfulness, sadness and melancholy were found. Interestingly, people with no personal

connection to the Holocaust exhibited more extreme emotions like revenge and anger. Nawijn & Biran (2019) found that negative emotions in dark settings do not necessarily result in negative experiences. There is a non-hedonic element to the experience, which can create meaning. But the experience that is recurring in the studies on motivations to places of dark heritage, and more specifically WWII sites, is remembrance. Winter (2009) studied the experiences of visitors to a war memorial in Australia. Findings were similar to other studies with the addition of visitors experiencing patriotic feelings at the memorial. Furthermore, she noted how emotion is an important part of social memory as emotional forms of memory are more persistent than cognitive aspects.

2.3 Experiencing memory

This thesis is concerned with how the cultural memory is experienced by visitors to WWII museums in the Netherlands. This is in some ways an odd question because how can memory be experienced? Therefore this section will look at memory studies to clear up this aspect of the research question. Getting to a clear definition of memory is no easy feat as the definition is dependent on what you consider memory to be. Gerard (1953 p. 118) however defines memory as involving the making of an impression by an experience, the retention of some record of this impression, and the re-entry of this record into consciousness or behaviour as recall and recognition. It is however important to note that there are two ways of remembering which Owens (1996 p. 320) explains as factional or propositional memory and experiential memory. The former refers to a type of memory for which no experience is needed to remember it, for example learning the dates of a historical event. It is not necessary for a person to have experienced World War II for this person to remember that the Netherlands was liberated on the 5th of May 1945. Experiential memory however requires the lived experience of an event in the past. It is from the experiential memory that new things can be learned about the past according to Owens (1996). The difference between factional or propositional memory was also found in experiments done by Tulving (1989 p. 16), however he refers to it as a difference between knowing and remembering. This can be an interesting aspect of cultural memory which will be discussed later on.

In the memory studies literature there are a number of articles that discuss the subjective experience of memory. The conscious experience of the present can be described as coming with subjective qualities, like sounds, colours, and emotions (Lau et al. 2022). Because of the subjective nature of these experiences, they are often understood comparatively to other

experiences. There is no objective measurement for an experience which makes comparing different experiences the only tool to create an understanding of the experience. Furthermore, a number of these studies tend to focus on the conscious and unconscious memory attributions (Cohen & Squire, 1980; Kelley & Jacoby, 1990; Simons et al. 2022). They discuss how unconscious experiences can still influence behaviour later on. This shows that memory is not necessarily something that can be recollected because events that were not consciously experienced can be stored away in the brain and unconsciously recalled at a later time. Moreover, Rosenthal (2006) writes about the idea that the actual lived experience and the recalling or retelling of that experience is mediated by the past and present. The experience of remembering then does not necessarily have to involve the lived experience anymore when the story becomes mediated by experiences between the past and present. The next section will look at how memory can go from the individual to the collective and in what way this manifests itself.

2.4 Cultural memory

Individuals remember in communication and relation to others (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995) and it is from a collective that people construct their identity. A common identifier can be history, however the past cannot literally be preserved. It is therefore that mnemonic devices are used that can remind a collective of a shared history (Huyssen, 2016).

Maurice Halbwachs was the first to propose the idea of a collective memory in 1925. He is considered the founding father of memory studies. According to Halbwachs, there is an individual memory but outside of the individual there can exist a collective memory. The collective memory emerges from everyday communications through which each individual composes a memory (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). This memory is, according to Halbwachs, both socially mediated and relates to a group. Individual memories exist in relation to others and it is these others that make up groups, who conceive of their sense of unity through a common image of the past (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). Within the study of memory and collective memory it is important to understand the difference between memory and history. Halbwachs explains memory as allowing us to reconstruct the past as a lived experience, whereas history is a more abstract way of reconstructing the past (Dinter, 2023).

Dinter furthermore explains how Halbwachs' theory of collective memory laid the foundation for the theory of cultural memory in three main ways. First, collective memory can be deliberately constructed. This relates to the political nature of collective memory and

heritage. Santamarina & Beltran (2016) describe heritage not as an inherent reality but as a political construct that is reinvented by the past and identity. Second, it is organised in social networks. As mentioned before, Halbwachs believed that 'every individual memory constitutes itself in communication with others' (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995 p. 127). This means that for the creation of collective memory, social networks are required through which memories are interpreted and disseminated. Lastly, collective memory perpetuates itself through artefacts. The two theories of collective and cultural memory are interconnected to a high degree and cultural memory is built on the foundation of Halbwachs' theory of collective memory.

It was Assmann (1988) who made a clear distinction that exists between collective and cultural memory. Within collective memory, Assmann proposed, there is a communicative memory and a cultural memory. Communicative memory is noninstitutional, it is not formalized or stabilized by means of material symbolization (Assmann, 2011). It lives in everyday interactions and communication between people. Cultural memory on the other hand is an institution. It is a memory objectified and stored away in symbolic forms, which are stable and situation-transcendent. Assmann & Czaplicka (1995 p. 128) write that the transition from communicative to cultural memory happens the further it gets away from everyday communications. The living memory can only be transmitted orally or through informal traditions, according to Assmann (2011 p. 22). Assmann gives the communicative memory a time frame of about 80 to 100 years, a moving horizon of 3 to 4 interacting generations. They mention that Halbwachs' writing on collective memory went up to that transition point. Assmann & Czaplicka (1995 p. 128) assume Halbwachs must have believed that once living communication crystallizes in objectified culture that the group relationships and contemporary references are lost, from which collective memory stems.

In that case, the memory becomes history according to Halbwachs' theory. Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) contradict that assumption with the theory of cultural memory, which states that in the crystallized and objectified culture can exist connections to groups and their identity. It is at the nexus of memory, culture, and the group or society that the concept of cultural memory exists. Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) explain that it was the German art historian Aby Warburg that theorized the connection that exists between memory and culture, most notably images. In his works, Warburg sees humans, in body and mind, to be the living evidence of his own development (Forster, 1976). Warburg theorized art as telling and retelling the functioning of individual memory. This explains how a memory can be stored in objects, like an art piece. It was, however, Halbwachs who incorporated the social aspect of memory in his concept of

collective memory. Assmann recognized that the memory, culture, and collective can be combined into one theory. By combining those three elements Assmann thought of the concept of cultural memory.

Assmann & Czaplicka (1995, pp. 130-133) outline six key characteristics of cultural memory:

1. Concretion of identity: cultural memory shapes a group's identity by preserving knowledge, symbols, and traditions, fostering a sense unity and distinctiveness.
2. Capacity to reconstruct: as memories fade across generations, cultural memory must be continually reframed within contemporary contexts. Though crystallized in objects, language, or rituals, each generation may reinterpret them through appropriation, criticism, preservation, or transformation.
3. Formation: cultural memory is built through the stabilisation of shared meanings and knowledge. It becomes part of a society's institutionalised heritage, whether through material objects, language, or imagery.
4. Organisation: unlike diffuse communicative memory, cultural memory is formally structured. This often results in specialised institutions that act as custodians of memory.
5. Obligation: cultural memory carries normative weight, shaping a group's values and moral lessons. It includes both formative (educational) and normative (guiding) dimensions, influencing how communities understand right and wrong.
6. Reflexivity: cultural memory enables critical engagement with the past. It is practice reflexive, in that it embeds itself in everyday rituals that sustain the memory. It is also self-reflexive, in that it allows societies to critique and reinterpret their past. Lastly, it is reflexive of self-image, in that it shapes the collective identity based on historical self-understanding.

For a collective to come to a point of creating a cultural memory there is usually a fateful (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995 p. 129) or impact (Fuchs, 2011 p. 12) event. The collective experience crystallizes and becomes part of the cultural formation through symbols or objects. Rigney (2015) in her paper about cultural memory writes that there have been important studies into what material characteristics of particular media of memory affect meaning-making and circulation. Huyssen (2003) explained how historical trauma in different cities has generated the creation of artworks and that these monuments or buildings are mnemonic devices for

remembrance. Furthermore, Landsberg (2004) used the term 'prosthetic memory' to describe memories one can experience without having lived through the actual event. Landsberg argues that there has been a surge in these prosthetic memories due to the emergence of cinema and the techniques used within film. Additionally, Hoskin (2011) argues that another way people obtain prosthetic memories is through the internet. Hoskin sees the internet as such an effective prosthetic memory that there is no need to remember anymore, the author calls it a new 'careless memory'. Rigney (2015) mentions that these different media of memory do not operate exclusively from each other. Rigney explains that a monument in a city cannot move but the picture of that monument can be spread over the internet or between people. It is for that reason that cultural memory studies have now moved beyond exploring how memory is produced in one medium of memory or object but rather exploring the interplay between different media of memory.

The literature on cultural memory consists mostly of theoretical and conceptual ideas rather than empirical research (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Rigney, 2015; Brockmeier, 2002). Studies like those by Erll & Rigney (2006) or Lachmann (2004) examine cultural memory by looking at literature and Stone et al. (2014) used interviews to examine how cultural memory manifests in families. But empirical research into the experience of cultural memory is hard to find. There is some literature on how visitors interact with the warfare heritage, however these studies do not use a cultural memory approach but a social identity approach (Gieling & Ong, 2016). Gieling & Ong showed that group dynamics are relevant for people's memory at WWII sites. This is similar to Winter's (2009) finding at the war memorial in Australia that some visitors experience a patriotic feeling from these sites. These studies do not use cultural memory in their research but this could help in explaining the outcome.

2.5 Memory of World War II in the Netherlands

The Second World War is a clear example of an impact event (Fuchs, 2011 p. 12). According to Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) and Fuchs (2011 p. 12), such an event causes social remembrance practices to emerge. This was also the case in the Netherlands, because within three days of the liberation, the remembrance institute (Herinneringsinstituut) was founded (Jeurgens, 2010). This author compares this to the 140 years that it took for the remembrance institute for slavery to be established, thereby showing which event lies more in the foreground and which in the peripheries. The Royal Institute for War Documentation called on the population to hand in diaries and letters so that the institute could preserve them. There was an

intentional focus from the beginning to preserve personal stories (Jeurgens, 2010). The society was however not entirely truthful in how the war was remembered in the post-war years.

Lensen (2014) writes that the collective post-war memory in the Netherlands can be divided in three parts. The first phase is characterized by first-hand stories of survivors about their suffering during the war and the repression of memory. Vos (2009) presents an article in which the stories of survivors were shared. She explains that 'oral history' became more important in the early years after the war, due to technological developments. This is also in line with the intentional focus of the remembrance institute to collect a vast amount of personal stories (Jeurgens, 2010). Moreover, in these post-war years perpetrators and collaborators of the Nazis denied their participation in the war and they refused to take accountability. After the war, there was a commonly heard phrase used by Germans: 'Wir haben es nicht gewusst' (Prenger, 2024). But it was not just the Germans who had a chapter in their history to forget. Prenger (2014) writes that non-German governments, like the Vichy-French and Dutch, contributed actively to the deportation and persecution of Jews and other minorities. Estimates of Dutch collaborators with the Nazis come at around half a million people (Van der Heijden, 2011 p. 84). Furthermore, this author points out that not more than a handful of these collaborators publicly took accountability for their actions. The collective memory of the war was heroic and was shaped by brave moments in the battle against the Nazis (De Graaf, 1994). This gave rise to myths surrounding the Dutch and their actions during the war. Also because many of the people and, more importantly, institutions had to continue working after the war which meant that a lot was swept under the rug (Salomons, 2024).

The second phase, as described by Lensen (2014), contains the post-war generation who inherited the stories of suffering from their parents. This generation started to get more of a critical perspective on the war and the aspects their parents and grandparents did not talk about. De Graaf (1994) writes that the memory of the war started to shift around the 1960s. According to Contreras (2020), this shift was due to a research project that was funded by the government which was supposed to look into the war years. This started, what De Graaf (1994) calls, the incubation phase of the 1960s war memory. The growing body of research and knowledge on the events of the war caused tension between the generations. This culminated in the protest phase in which the younger generations put their mark on the discussion surrounding the memory of the war. The protests were, according to De Graaf (1994), more directed at the management of the war memory by their parents and grandparents rather than their actual actions during the war.

The third phase, from the article by Lensen (2014), is characterized by a temporal distancing from the war. This phase involves the grand-children of war survivors. Because this generation is further removed from the war years, they are also more emotionally disconnected from it. Lensen (2014) writes that this phase is furthermore characterized by more objective investigation of the war, emotionally as well as politically. This is noticeable in the academic literature surrounding WWII. There is now a vast amount of literature covering the role of Indonesia and colonialism during and after the war (Van Ooijen & Raaijmakers, 2018; Bijl, 2018; Oostindie, 2011; Locher-Scholten, 1999; Welvaart, 2023; Captain, 2011). These new perspectives are a way for the Netherlands to get past the myths of its innocence and complete victimhood. Van Ooijen & Raaijmakers (2018) talk in their paper about competitive and multidirectional memories that exist nowadays surrounding the war. The Netherlands is a highly diverse nation and the memories of historical events can become conflicting. Especially when considering the wealth of information available from the war with regards to personal stories (Jeurgens, 2010). It is therefore interesting to examine the state of the collective memory of WWII in the Netherlands.

2.6 The museumification of WWII

It was right after WWII that museums started to be established in the Netherlands with the first one being the War Museum in Overloon (Somers, 2014). Nowadays, many decades later the number is up to 83 museums dedicated to the memory of WWII. Ribbens & Captain (2011) point out that there is a wide variety of museums in the Netherlands. This is not surprising, according to Ribbens & Captain (2011), due to the millions of lives affected by the Nazi occupation and the different experiences that has led to. While there are a vast number of different types of WWII museums in the Netherlands, Contreras (2020) argues that the Dutch might still have trouble confronting certain elements of their past. The author provides the example of the debate surrounding the Namenmonument in Amsterdam, which entails a complex discussion on whether to memorialize the victims of the Holocaust or satisfy the people living in the neighbourhood the monument would be placed. On the one side of the debate people claim that the Dutch still struggle with confronting the past and what happened to the Jews (Polman, 2016). Recognition of Jewish memory is dampened by the ever present Dutch-guilt related to WWII (Contreras, 2020). The author continues to argue that the resistance hero myths are still prevalent and that this ‘complexly overshadows’ the persecution and deportation of the Jews. Debates like these seem to challenge the three-phases of collective WWII memory as explained by Lensen (2014). According to this model, the collective memory

of WWI should be in a phase where the people are not emotionally connected to the events anymore, which means people are able to look more truthfully at the events that transpired during the war.

Whether or not Dutch people feel emotionally distanced from the war, WWII museums remain popular in the Netherlands. In an article by Droog (2021), the author attempts to find the visitor figures for WWII museums in the Netherlands. The article estimates that in 2019, before the COVID pandemic, there were just over a million visitors to WWII museums in the Netherlands. Somers (2014 p. 40) found that in the year 2012 there were a total of 790 thousand visitors to WWII museums. Somers (2014 p. 38) furthermore shows that the number has been steadily rising for decades. This shows that the societal importance of WWII does not seem to be declining. Additionally, WWII stands out as a war that is very close to the society. Ribbens (2016 p. 3) writes that the appeal of other wars such as the Cold War or WWI is many times smaller than the appeal of WWII to the general population. Ribbens (2016) found that the majority of people (71%) interested in WWII have gained this interest through audio-visual sources like television and films. Museums and visiting historical places count for roughly 50%. It becomes clear through such statistics that history, and more specifically the history of WWII, is a part of the culture in the Netherlands. It is embedded in various layers of the society.

Nouwen (2008 p. 108) points out the struggle of historians and museums of popularising history for the general public. The popularisation of history in society is, according to Nouwen (2008 p. 108), often held responsible for the decline in historical awareness. Nouwen disagrees with this notion as it is exactly the popularisation of history that gets people engaged with it. The question just remains to what extend popularised history is representative of the actual historical events. In museums this same deliberation has to be made. Museums must find a balance between presenting the history academically or accessible to the visitors. This brings with it the question of authenticity. Van der Laarse (2011 p. 32) calls authenticity the fetish of the heritage sector. With this the author means to say that heritage is something that has to go through a process of determining its authenticity before it can be labelled as official heritage, thereby securing its authentic nature. In his text, Van der Laarse (2011) makes the point that authenticity interplays with identity when it comes to heritage. While authenticity may be the fetish of the heritage sector, identity trumps authenticity when it is related to cultural historic heritage. This seems to be in contrast with the assertion of De Jong & Grit (2022, p. 25), who wrote an article about the future of museums. They discuss the trend in museums of reinventing experiences to create a more holistic and inclusive version of

history. Van der Laarse (2011) writes about heritage as being something different from history, it is highly selective. Creating a holistic and inclusive version of history will bring parts of history with it that people do not want to identify with and, according to Van der Laarse (2011), identity goes above authenticity. This would mean that cultural historic heritage remains subjective and conforming to the identity of the people that engage with it.

Before moving towards the methodology and findings, some takeaways from the literature review will be provided here. Visitor motivations do not reflect the visitor experience, however, it is an important part of what happens before the actual experience. Motivations shape the perspective that the visitor takes with them into the museum. The literature showed how learning and remembering are important motivating factors for visiting a site of dark heritage (Isaac et al. 2019; Biran et al. 2011). Additionally, a number of studies found that being emotionally impressed is also a strong motivator (Niemela, 2010; Driessen, 2022; Yan et al. 2016; Isaac et al. 2019; Dunkley et al. 2011). While the literature on experiences and emotions related to dark heritage is limited, the main takeaway is the role of negative emotions. Nawijn & Biran (2019) showed that negative emotions can lead to positive experiences in certain settings. WWII museums are able to evoke both positive and negative emotions in people. It is therefore interesting to take the non-hedonic aspect of these experiences into account.

Obviously the literature on cultural memory will be important for the rest of this thesis. Mostly the distinction between communicative and cultural memory is noteworthy. This distinction is Assmann & Czaplicka's (1995) main contribution to the memory studies. Communicative memory happens in everyday communications and is not centralised, whereas cultural memory is formalised and stabilised in cultural forms. This dichotomic relationship between communicative and cultural memory will be critically explored in this thesis. Furthermore, the characteristics of cultural memory as described by Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) will return in the methodology and findings. They are used to link elements of the experience to concept of cultural memory. The concretion of identity and the reconstructive capacity of cultural memory will be used most prominently in the findings, whereas the other characteristics will be applied in less depth.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Methodological approach

The objective of this thesis is to explore how the cultural memory of World War 2 is experienced by visitors to World War 2 museums in the Netherlands. This objective requires qualitative data, which was collected through a form of intervening participant observation in three WWII museums in the Netherlands. This methodological approach meant that the researcher did not just participate in the activity of the participants, but also intervened by asking questions or directing the attention to a certain object. Although positivist approaches to research try to avoid interaction between the researcher and the research subject, participant observation embraces a post-positivist perspective that represents a more humanistic and interpretive approach (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). The immersive aspect of participant observation can prove helpful in gaining a more accurate understanding of the experiences of people in museums. This thesis seeks to explore the interaction of different elements of cultural memory and people. Becker & Geer (1957) explain that interviews alone fall short when they are used as a source of information about events that have already happened elsewhere and at another time. This is where being present during the experience of the participants can prove beneficial.

Participant observation is a means of gaining an understanding of the interaction between people, their physical environment, and objects (Guest et al. 2013). Although participant observation is most commonly used for exploring the behaviour of people in day-to-day settings (Kawulich, 2005; Schensul et al. 1999), the setting of WWII museums in this research is not a day-to-day environment and does not necessarily look at the behaviour of people. Participant observation is, however, still a more accurate methodological approach for understanding people's experiences and the interaction visitors have with the cultural memory of WWII as opposed to solely conducting interviews. The reason for this is the presence of the researcher at the time of the events that are under study. This thesis does not just want to explore the behaviour of people in museums, it wants to understand how the elements of cultural memory represented in WWII museums are experienced by the visitors. The objects and texts presented in the museums therefore acted as vignettes that elicit perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions in the participant (Barter & Renold, 1999). These vignettes were used as something resembling a topic list.

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Sample

The sample in participant observation studies is generally specific communities of people (Bogdan, 1973). In this thesis the sample population was Dutch people who visit a WWII museum in the Netherlands and are above 18 years old. A visit to a museum is not a day-to-day routine activity, it is therefore not possible to research one specific group of people, as participant observation studies often do.

16 WWII museums were contacted and asked whether the research could be performed at their site. Some of the museums wrote back that it was not possible to conduct a research in their museum. At other museums, the only option would have been to conduct the research with organised school groups. A deliberate choice was made not to opt for organised school groups as part of the sample for two reasons. One, including participant under the age of 18 brings with it ethical concerns but it can also lead to a less deep interaction with and discussion of the material in the museum due to the young nature of the participants. Second, school groups are rather large and can make the gathering of coherent and rich data difficult. There were three museums that communicated the possibility of interacting with unplanned visitors to the museums. These museums were: Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland, and Generaal Maczek Memorial.

All the participants were recruited on site in the museums. At Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland and the Generaal Maczek Memorial the participants were recruited at the entrance right after they paid their ticket. At Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, the visitors were asked to participate in the central area of the museum right after the introductory part of the museum. This place was chosen because of the size of Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, which has a lot of sections. The museum starts with an introduction to the interbellum and the events leading up to WWII. Then comes a section which goes into the history of WWII in the Netherlands. Further on in the museum there are several ‘experiences’ and a large warehouse with a wide variety of military vehicles and weaponry used in WWII. Due to the nature of this study, which is focussed on the cultural memory of WWII, only the section that tells the story of the history of WWII through texts, objects, photos, and videos was deemed useful for this research. This choice was made for two reasons. Firstly, the material in the exhibition of the history of WWII is more connected to the characteristics of cultural memory. Additionally, the other areas of the museum would not bring a novel elements of the cultural memory. The section containing

the military vehicles and weaponry does not contain much texts and this seemed to appeal more to people interested in the technology rather than the memory. Secondly, the museum is rather large and people were more interested in participating in the research if it would not take up their whole visit of several hours. This also allowed for more participant observation rounds to be conducted which led to a bigger sample size.

In all three museums, incoming visitors were approached and told about the nature and context of this research. They were told what the process would be during the visit and then asked whether they wanted to participate in the research. When visitors showed interest in participating, they would be asked to fill out the informed consent form, after which the visit would start. A total of 22 rounds of participant observations were done with a total of 47 visitors to the museums. The make-up of the groups of visitors ranged from solitary visitors to groups of four people. Bigger groups were avoided for the sake of gathering more rich, in-depth data from singular participants. A table containing the participants' pseudonyms, gender, and age is provided in appendix A.

3.2.2 The data

Research by Gold (1958) has provided a description of 4 different observer stances as a researcher in a participant observation study. In this thesis the researcher takes the stance of 'observer as participant', which entails the researcher taking part in the activity of the group but the collecting of data remains the main role of the researcher. The activity of remembering and learning through the museum is what is under study so it is necessary for the researcher to be a part of this process of remembering in order to get an understanding of how visitors experience this.

The data was collected over a period of roughly a month, in which 9 days were dedicated to the participant observation rounds in the three museums. 4 days were spent at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, 3 days were spent at the Maczek Memorial Breda, and 2 days were spent at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland in Gendt. This has resulted in 11 rounds of participant observation in Overloon, 3 rounds of participant observation in Breda, and 7 rounds of participant observation in Gendt. The variation in observation rounds per museum is due to the amount of visitors in each museum. Additionally, the Maczek Memorial Breda is not only a rather small organisation, but their visitors are mainly Polish people that come to commemorate General Maczek. This research is focussed on the Dutch cultural memory and therefore

requires Dutch people to participate. This has made it more difficult to recruit more participants at this memorial.

The 22 rounds of participant observation took a total of 22 hours and 25 minutes to conduct. This means that the average round in the museum took roughly one hour. During the visits to the museums, the time spent with visitors in the museum was noted down in a journal by hand. Shortly after the visit to the museum, these handwritten notes were written out and expanded on in a Word document, which forms the data file for this research. Initially it was the plan to include a reflective interview with participants after the visit to the museum to delve deeper into the material encountered in the museum. This has been attempted on several occasions, but visitors were less inclined to participate if more was asked from them. Usually visitors were just willing to participate in the participant observation rounds. The reflective interview was conducted twice, but the data obtained from these interviews did not add sufficiently to the data gathered during the visits. Therefore, the choice was made to include some of the more important interview questions in the participant observation rounds themselves. This choice proved to be rather beneficial for the quality of the data gathered. At first the participant observation rounds were more focussed on observing rather than participating and interacting with the visitors. However, after leaving out the reflective interviews and incorporating these into the visits, the participant observation rounds became almost more like a walking interview where the objects, texts, photos, and videos served as vignettes through which the experience of the visitors could be understood.

It is, however, not just the experience of visitors that this thesis aims to understand. It is the experience in relation to the cultural memory of WWII that is researched. Therefore, the notes that were taken during the visits to the museums are related to how people react, interact, and respond to the cultural memory of WWII. In order to make the connection between the experience of visitors and the cultural memory, the characteristics of cultural memory, as described in section 2.4, were used. Although the characteristics of cultural memory did not serve as the means by which the experience of cultural memory was measured, like in the study by Matters (2016), the characteristics did provide a theoretical framework by which to note down the behaviour and speech of the visitors. The six characteristics were also used in constructing interview questions which were later used during the visits to the museums.

During the museum visits with participants, notes were taken in a journal by hand. These notes would relate to what the participants were doing or saying during the visit. As

explained earlier, the choice was made to throughout the data collection process to engage more verbally with the visitors because mere observations would not result in rich enough data to answer the research question of this thesis. However, observational notes were also taken to create a more complete overview of the participants' experiences. It is a difficult task to note down all the things participants are doing during a visit to the museum, therefore notes had to be taken selectively. This required careful observation and deliberation during the visit about what behaviours and discussions relate to the research question.

3.3 Data analysis

The journal notes that were first written down by hand in a notebook were, after the visit to the museum, written out in a Word document. This document was then uploaded into ATLAS.ti where the journal notes were coded. A thematic analysis was performed to arrive at different themes. This meant that the data was first familiarised by going over it several times. After familiarisation with the data, the journal notes were coded. The themes were identified mostly inductively, meaning the themes arose from the data and not from the existing literature (Terry et al. 2010), although the existing literature had some influence on the coding process. This was due to the use of the six characteristics of cultural memory (section 2.4). These characteristics played a role both during the writing of the journal notes and during the coding. This led to the selective nature of the observational notes, which allowed for a more focussed analysis process. Using both the characteristics of cultural memory and the data itself to identify themes meant that there was an interplay between inductive and deductive coding. While the codes and themes came from the data, the characteristics of cultural memory provided the framework for identifying patterns in the data which relate to cultural memory.

The interview questions that were made for the reflection interview, which was later partly incorporated into the participant observation rounds, were based on the characteristics of cultural memory. The interview questions can be found in appendix B. Other questions were asked as well during the participant observation rounds, however the questions would be related to the concept of cultural memory as much as possible. By keeping the questions close to the characteristics of cultural memory, it was possible to recognize aspects of cultural memory in the analysis. This became most clear for the last two themes about relatability and communicative memory.

3.4 Ethical considerations

Participant observation as a methodology can, in certain instances, be ethically questionable, for example if the participants are unaware of the role of the researcher (Guest et al. 2013). For the purpose of this research it was, in addition to being very hard to achieve, not necessary for the researcher to be undercover, which meant all participants were aware of the exact role of the researcher. In this case it was also possible to provide the participants with necessary information regarding their rights and obligations as a participant and their oral or written consent was given. With regards to privacy concerns, pseudonyms were used for the participants in the journal and in further transcription and writing. Lastly, because of the sensitive nature of a subject like WWII, the researcher has been careful in the questions asked during the visit so as to not cause any psychological harm to the participants.

3.5 Limitations

Participant observation is a methodology that is not very standardized and has several limitations. DeWalt & DeWalt (2002) mention that participant observation is always conducted by a biased human being who is affected by their gender, nationality, and class which affects their observation, analysis, and interpretation. Furthermore, when employing a participant observation methodology, the researcher is likely to be excluded to some degree from the group under study (Kawulich, 2005). This has most likely led to instances where the participants have not been completely honest or where they withheld information. It is difficult to develop a rapport with the participants over the time of a museum visit. To minimize this, the researcher has tried to engage with the visitors from the beginning by asking questions and creating a safe space. Furthermore, participant observation generally requires a lot of time. However, due to the size of this thesis, time constraints will have played a role in the quality and richness of the data collected.

4.0 Findings

After analysing the journal notes, several key themes came up in relation to the experience of the cultural memory of WWII. The following chapter will explore these themes in depth using examples from the journal notes. At first, the motivations of people visiting a WWII museum in the Netherlands will be looked at. This sets up the basis for a better understanding of the experience of these visitors. The next part of this chapter will explore the experience of visitors in the museum. After this, the themes will relate more to the characteristics of cultural memory as defined by Assmann & Czaplicka (1995). The experience of visitors will be explained by looking at the museum as a space of relatability. Lastly, the role of communicative memory in the museum experience will be explored and its consequences for the concept of cultural memory will be explained.

4.1 What brings people to a WWII museum

One of the questions that was most often asked during the museum visits was whether the visitors had any particular interest in WWII and whether they visit WWII museums more regularly. These questions were usually asked to break the ice and get the conversation started with the participants. It would generally lead to the participants explaining the reason for their visit. Additionally, asking this question led to a more complete overview of the participants and the people interacting with the cultural memory. This can be helpful in understanding how the visitors experience the cultural memory of WWII.

The motivations for visiting the WWII museums were rather varying, although there were some recurring themes. Interestingly, the different motivations for visiting were also somewhat correlated to the different museums, however, the motivations were not mutually exclusive. The different reasons for a visit were all present at each research site, some motivations were simply more prevalent at one rather than the other two. The different motivations identified in this research are defined as: a prior interest in the history of WWII, remembrance of personal connections to WWII, and simply visiting a museum as a leisurely activity.

A prior interest in WWII was found to be one of the more common motivations among participants. This motivation was especially prevalent at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, where many visitors were already knowledgeable about the history of WWII. Visitors often came to

refresh their memory or engage more deeply with familiar content, rather than to learn entirely new information.

The prior interest in WWII was framed this way, and not as 'learning and remembering', because participants typically framed it as a personal interest, particularly in relation to their interaction with the museum's material. It is important to note that these responses may have been influenced by the phrasing of the 'ice-breaker' question. While previous studies (Isaac et al., 2019; Biran et al., 2011) highlight learning and awareness as key motivators for visiting WWII heritage sites, this study suggests that relatability and pre-existing interest played a more significant role. This will be explored later on in section 4.3.

The remembrance of personal connections to WWII was found to be another motivating factor to visit a WWII museum. As a response to the 'ice-breaker' question, visitors would often respond by talking about a personal connection that they have to WWII through their family, although extra-familial connections were also found. For example, one visitor became interested in the museum through the story of her friend's father. Another visitor organised battlefield tours for the Dutch military and yet another was part of the VEVA study programme (Security and Craftmanship), which played a role in visiting the museum.

The remembrance of personal connections as a motivation was found at every research site, although percentage-wise it was most prevalent at the Maczek Memorial Breda. The few people that were able to participate at this location all had some personal connection that brought them to the museum. For example, one of the visitors was a grandchild of one of the Polish soldiers that liberated Breda. He explained that this background was obviously a strong motivator for him to visit the museum. Personal connections were an important reason to visit the Maczek Memorial compared to the motivation of having a specific interest in the history of WWII or just coming across the memorial.

The literature on visitor motivation for visiting a WWII museum does not discuss these types of motivations which are based on a personal connection to the material presented in the museum. Smith (2015) does challenge the idea that learning is the main motivation for visiting heritage sites and historical museums. She writes about the fact that reinforcement of the sense of self and identity also play an important role in the museum experience and motivation. Although the findings of this thesis do not necessarily support the ideas of Smith (2015), they do similarly show that visitor motivations to museums and heritage sites are wide ranging and not solely related to the objective of learning.

The final main motivation identified is called leisure or incidental visitation. For some participants, the museum visit was spontaneous rather than planned, especially at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland in Gendt. There, many visitors did not visit because of their specific interest in WWII or for remembering a personal connection to the war. This was largely due to the timing of data collection, which coincided with the Betuws Bevrijdingsfestival, attracting local visitors who attended the museum more spontaneously due to the festivities around the festival. While some visitors at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland did share the previously mentioned motivations, a larger proportion came simply for the experience or out of curiosity. This trend was also observed, though less frequently, at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, where some visitors were in the area for unrelated reasons or took advantage of the Museum Card, which offers free access to many Dutch museums. These visitors often stated they were not particularly interested in WWII but saw the museum as an accessible and convenient outing. This leisure-based motivation was entirely absent only at the Maczek Memorial Breda. In contrast, Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland had the highest occurrence of unplanned visits, likely due to the small town the museum is located in, its low entrance fee, and the ongoing festival, making it a casual stop for a number of visitors.

Stone & Sharpley (2008) or Isaac et al. (2019) note that dark tourism studies are often more conceptual and lacking empirically researched ideas. Although Stone & Sharpley (2008) pose this critique towards the field of dark tourism studies, their paper on dark tourism motivation proposes yet more conceptual ideas. Similarly to the well-known concept of thanatourism proposed by Seaton (1996), Stone & Sharpley (2008) also conceptualise visitor motivation to sites of dark heritage as being a way for people to engage with death and mortality.

While this idea is conceptually pleasing, empirical studies often do not support this notion. Moreover, the findings show that the motivation of people seems to have little to do with death and mortality. Knowledge and remembrance were found to be a more important motivator for visitors to WWII museums. The objective of this research was not to gain an understanding of the motivations of visitors, however, the results relate to this aspect of the visitor experience in a museum. It is thus important to mention that the ideas around thanatourism do not seem to apply to visitor motivation relating to a WWII museum in the Netherlands. Additionally, other research mentioned in the literature review, like that by Niemela (2010), Driessen (2022), and Yan et al. (2016), found that being emotionally impressed is another motivation that is often mentioned among visitors to WWII heritage sites.

This was also not found in this study, although it has to be noted again that the research methodology of this thesis did not go deep into the motivations of visitors. While being emotionally impressed was not mentioned by the visitors as being a motivating factor, it is something that can become part of the experience. In the next section, the visitor experience with relation to the emotions will be explored based on the data obtained from the participant observation rounds.

4.2 The experience

Experiences in a WWII museum can be wide ranging due to the variety of subjects presented in such a museum. In all three museums, there were parts that presented the tragedies that occurred during the war but also parts that presented the heroic deeds of resistance fighters, for example. This can lead to a variety of emotions that people experience. Winter (2009) showed how patriotic feelings came up with visitors to a WWII memorial in Australia. Other studies provide insight in how negative emotions play a role in meaning-making at dark heritage sites (Nawijn & Biran, 2019). Moreover, the work by Arnold-de-Simine (2013) explains how visitors to museums can fully experience the traumas, suffering, and identity of people presented in the museum through new technologies. All this is to say that experiences in a WWII museum can be wide ranging and are not limited to merely negative or positive ones. Two themes related to the experience were identified. These are the emotional experience and the intellectual experience. These two components of the experience of WWII museums will be explored in this section.

4.2.1 The emotional experience

A variety of emotions were found among the museum visitors. Although the literature on emotions at dark heritage sites tends to focus on negative emotions because of the site's relation to death and suffering, this research also found a significant amount of positive emotions that were expressed by the participants. Ribbens & Captain (2011) explain that the large number of WWII museums in the Netherlands is not surprising due to the number of lives that were affected by the war. This has led a variety of different experiences that can all be represented in some way in a museum. It was found that this might be the case within a single museum as well.

Sense of gratitude

All the visitors to the different museums were well aware of how tragic war can be, but visitors were also aware of the fact that they are still living in the aftermath of WWII.

Participants would often express a sense of gratitude for the fact that they live in peace and prosperity due to the actions of the Allied soldiers. This sense of gratitude was, however, most often expressed when the participants were confronted with the lives that were sacrificed by young soldiers who fought in the war. This makes it questionable whether the emotion can truly be identified as a positive emotion. This emotion is, however, categorised as positive, as visitors expressing gratitude did not always link it to sacrifice. Even when they did, it was experienced in a positive light. Excerpt 1 shows how Francien found it somewhat difficult to mediate the two different emotions when it came to feeling the gratitude.

Op het laatst vroeg ik hun nog of er bepaalde indrukken waren die ze kregen van dit gedeelte van het museum. Hier zei Francien dat ze wel moest denken aan hoeveel Amerikaanse soldaten hun leven hebben gegeven voor onze vrijheid. Ze kon het woord ervoor niet echt vinden. Ze zei 'geluk' maar dat vond ze niet echt passen. – Journal notes about Francien, woman (70-80)
At the end, I asked them if they had any particular impressions of this part of the museum. Francien said it made her think about how many American soldiers had given their lives for our freedom. She could not really find the right word for it. She said 'happiness', but felt that it did not really fit. – Translated journal notes about Francien (translated by the author)

Excerpt 1. Francien, woman (70-80). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 22/03/2025

This relates back to the findings by Nawijn & Biran (2019) into the emotions at dark heritage sites, where they found that negative emotions do not always lead to negative experiences. The sense of gratitude can therefore be a bit of both. On the surface it is a positive emotion, while at its core it is the result of something dark.

Admiration for the technology

Another positive emotion that was observed at all three museums was one of admiration for the technology of the past. One of the most common ways for a museum to display a war is through showcasing the weapons and machinery that were used during the war. Interestingly, at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon the admiration for the technology was expressed 6 out of the 8

times in relation to the technology used by the Dutch resistance fighters. In the other museums there was no section of the museum dedicated to the Dutch resistance so it is not possible to say whether the admiration in relation the resistance is also this prevalent in other WWII museums. Nonetheless, at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, the section about the resistance seemed to serve as an emotional breather for visitors. It was a moment to feel proud and impressed by what people were able to accomplish.

Iets verder kwamen bij het deel van het museum wat over het verzet ging en Gerrie was duidelijk gefascineerd en onder de indruk van wat voor technologie de mensen in het verzet gebruikten en maakten om tegen de Nazi's te vechten. Er waren voorwerpen zoals stempels en valse identiteiten. Deze vonden de bezoekers indrukwekkend. – Journal notes about Gerrie, woman (70-80)
A little further on, we reached the part of the museum about the resistance, and Gerrie was clearly fascinated and impressed by the kinds of technology people in the resistance used and created to fight against the Nazis. There were objects such as stamps and false identity documents, which the visitors found impressive – translated journal notes about Gerrie (translated by the author)

Excerpt 2. Gerrie, woman (70-80). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 08/03/2025

Another interesting contrast was found between the other two museums. At the Maczek Memorial Breda the participants were all closer to the material presented in the memorial. Additionally two of the participants in Breda were part of the Dutch military. This led to them being rather interested in the weaponry and technology used by the army during WWII. They had more knowledge of the weapons and were able to relate it to the technology of today. This made them admire the soldiers of the past even more.

As discussed earlier, in section 4.1, it was at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland where a number of visitors were not particularly interested in WWII. This would lead to the assumption, especially considering the findings from the Maczek Memorial Breda, that these visitors would also not find much to admire in the technology. However, several of the participants that were not interested in the war showed particular admiration for the technology presented in the museum.

Besides these more positive emotions, visitors also experienced emotions that can be described as negative. It has to be noted, however, that a negative emotion does not correlate to a negative experience, as described by Nawijn & Biran (2019). The non-hedonic element of negative emotions experienced at sites of dark heritage can create meaning for the visitors. In this research the experience of negative emotions can be grouped in three categories: worry, collection evoking emotion, and historical empathy.

Worry

A certain number of participants would start talking about their worry for the future when walking through the museum. It was generally the museum experience as a whole that would evoke this emotion, rather than one specific object in the museum. Worrying about the future often went together with worrying for the youth. The worry about the future relates to people worrying about history repeating itself in the present time. Visitors would be worried about antisemitism and fascists governments returning to the world. Logically, this would be combined with worry about the way that younger generations are dealing with the history of WWII in particular. These worries were only expressed by visitors over the age of 40. They felt that younger generations have very little knowledge about what happened during WWII. Excerpt 3 illustrates a visitor showing a real sense of worry for the knowledge young generations have of the war.

Mark vond vooral dat kennis van de geschiedenis hebben wel belangrijk is en dat de kinderen van tegenwoordig er helemaal niks meer over weten. Hij zei: ‘als je nu een kind vraagt over Auschwitz, zouden ze geen idee hebben wat dat is.’ – Journal notes about Mark, male (40-50)
Mark felt that having knowledge of history is important, especially because children today know nothing about it. He said: ‘If you ask a child today about Auschwitz, they would have no idea what it is.’- translated journal notes about Mark (translated by the author)

Excerpt 3. Mark, male (40-50). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 22/03/2025

Shocking objects

In other cases, emotions were evoked by specific objects or parts of the museum. These emotions were most often negative ones. For example, people would react with disgust to objects related to the Nazis. This could be upon seeing a copy of Mein Kampf or upon seeing a uniform worn by Nazi soldiers. This was not the case for every participant, some went through the museum without judgement. Others, on the other hand, would be more outspoken during the visit. It was with these more outspoken participants that these kinds of reactions could be observed. It is possible that the less outspoken participants felt the same way, but this might not have been detected due to the methodology applied in this research.

Other ways that the museum evoked emotions was through specific sections of the museum. Only the Maczek Memorial Breda did not work with clearly defined sections that discuss different elements of the war. It is for this reason that this type of emotion was not found in the analysis. The other museums did, however, have multiple parts throughout the museum which clearly discuss different events of WWII. In some of these parts visitors would be emotionally impressed by what was presented. At Oorlogsmuseum Overloon the section about the persecution of the Jews evoked a lot of emotion in people. At Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland emotion was most often evoked in the part about the crossing of the Waal river. The emotions felt by people at these parts were negative ones. Visitors would feel sad or scared to some degree upon seeing these historical events. The part about the crossing of the Waal would lead people to think about the young soldiers that died. As discussed in section 4.2.1, this would result in some people feeling a sense of gratitude while others would simply feel sad that this is what was necessary to achieve freedom. One participant described feeling somewhat scared at the part covering the resistance. He explained he felt this way because it was scary to think how bad the situation must have been that people joined the resistance fight, knowing the risks of doing that. At Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, this way of emotions being evoked is best described through excerpt 4. This excerpt shows how this specific part of the museum transmits negative emotions to the participant.

It is noteworthy that this category of negative emotions is based around emotions evoked by the collection. This is different from the last category of negative emotions felt, which focusses on how visitors experience the trauma, suffering, and identity of the characters presented in the museum (Arnold-De-Simine, 2013).

Hierna kwamen we bij het gedeelte over de Jodenvervolging en dit was duidelijk ook weer indrukwekkend. Op de muur was een grote foto van een van de gaskamers in Auschwitz afgebeeld en deze werd even besproken. Vooral Gerrie was erg onder de indruk en het was op haar gezicht te zien dat dit wat met haar deed. Ze zei ook een woord daar: 'creepy'. Dit gedeelte van het museum was duidelijk het meest bewegend en Gerrie bleef somber en in ongeloof kijken naar de beelden en teksten. – Gerrie, woman (70-80)
Next, we arrived at the section about the persecution of the Jews, which was clearly very impactful as well. A large photo of one of the gas chambers in Auschwitz was displayed on the wall and briefly discussed. Gerrie, in particular, was deeply moved. It was visible on her face that it affected her. She also said one word: 'creepy.' This part of the museum was clearly the most emotional, and Gerrie remained quiet, looking sombre and in disbelief at the images and texts. – translated journal notes about Gerrie (translated by the author)

Excerpt 4. Gerrie, woman (70-80). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 08/03/2025

Historical empathy

In the previous paragraph, it was shown how the museum exhibit is able to evoke emotions in people. The last category of the negative emotions experienced in a museum is related to the actual experience of the history to a certain degree. Among the participants there were many that would describe being able to 'feel' the history. This is distinct from the previous category which is simply the feeling of an emotion based on the collection in the museum. The ability to feel the history requires more of an empathic stance of the visitor. Furthermore, whereas the previous category of negative emotions was evoked through objects, photos, or texts, the ability to feel the history was often invoked through interactive elements present in the museum. Arnold-De-Simine (2013) explores, in her book about the mediation of memory in the museum, how interactive technologies, like touchscreens, film installations, or digital reconstructions, can enhance affective engagement of the visitor. This means that visitors are presented with more than just the facts about history and learn through experiences. These interactive exhibits can evoke empathy and stimulate historical experiences.

This idea of interactive technologies leading to affective engagement of visitors is supported by this research. In all three museums there were interactive elements present. The findings show that visitors were able to understand the individuals who lived through the war better through interactive elements. At the Maczek Memorial Breda the most interactive element was the map which showed the personal journeys of different Polish soldiers. Most of the participants found this element of the memorial to be helpful in creating a sense of empathy. One of the participants described it afterwards as: 'heavy, but beautiful' (Klaas, male, 40-50). In the other museums visitors would also experience the history more deeply through the interactive elements in the museum. At Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland the recreation of the bomb shelter always evoked strong reactions in the participants. The added sound effects of planes flying over the shelter would help in truly being able to feel how this must have been 80 years ago. One of the older participants, who was born in a bomb shelter during the war, was even slightly afraid of entering the recreated version. This shows again that it is not only the facts or authentic objects that can evoke emotions. The recreation of history through immersive or interactive installations can lead to deep experiences.

Also at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon there were participants expressing this ability to feel the history. Although there were many interactive elements in the museum, some participants expressed that it was not just the interactive elements of the museum that transmitted that 'feeling'. For some visitors it was the combination of the different elements of the museum that made the history come to life. This might be due to the fact that the data collection was conducted at one part of the museum that focussed more on telling the history. Later sections of the museum contained highly interactive experiences that were specifically meant to bring the history to the visitor. Yet, participants still expressed that the interactive elements brought the history to life. The interactive parts of the museum did, however, not have to be highly sophisticated for the visitors to gain more empathy for the victims of WWII. The museum can also evoke historical empathy through low-key interactivity like confronting the visitors with questions that make the visitor relate the history to their own lives.

> We liepen verder en ik vroeg welke delen van het museum zij nou het meest indrukwekkend of levendig vonden. Regina vond de interactieve elementen wel erg fijn om te hebben. Deze hielpen haar om de herinnering levend te maken. Dit komt omdat je er dan over na gaat denken. – Regina, woman (50-60)

> We continued walking, and I asked which parts of the museum they found the most impressive or vivid. Regina said she really appreciated the interactive elements. They helped her bring the memory to life, as they made her reflect more deeply on what she was seeing. – translated journal notes about Regina (translated by the author)

Excerpt 5. Regina, woman (50-60). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 23/03/2025

The ability to understand the emotions of people who lived through the war leads to the next section which will focus on the visitor's ability to understand the actions of people in the past and interact intellectually with the museum. This is less of an emotional experience as described in this previous section. The next section will delve into the intellectual experience of the cultural memory of WWII.

4.2.2 The intellectual experience

Emotions can play a role during the entire visit to a museum about WWII. However, emotions as defined in the literature review are short-lived, felt responses to external stimuli (Reeve, 2024). During the rounds of participant observation, visitors were not constantly in a state of experiencing these short-lived responses to the material in the museum. There were many moments in between the emotions described in the previous part. Often these moments would include some form of intellectual engagement with the history of WWII. This aspect of learning and engaging in a less emotional manner with the museum was not limited to the visitors that were already interested in the history of WWII. Historical museums as a form of cultural memory are in many ways highly self-reflexive (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). Self-reflexivity refers to the cultural memory's ability to not just store the past, but also actively restore and reevaluate its own contents. Visitors to the WWII museums showcased the self-reflexivity of the cultural memory of WWII. Rather than just walking through the museum, taking up the information and reacting emotionally to this information, visitors engaged also on a deeper level with the history and memory. This deeper intellectual engagement with the cultural memory can be categorized in three ways: learning about history, discussing history, and historical Verstehung.

Learning about history

In all three of the museums visitors would learn new things about the history of WWII. While, most likely, a lot of the information in the museums is unknown to the visitors, it was not the point of this research nor a doable task to explore everything visitors learn in a museum. Rather, it became clear that there were a number of moments where visitors expressed they learned something new. This was generally expressed more as a surprise rather than an expected result of visiting the museum. Interestingly, it was often the same parts in a museum where something new was learned about the past. At Oorlogsmuseum Overloon there were many participants that would say they were not aware of the fact that the company AEG already existed so long ago. Upon realizing this visitors would feel like they learned something new. Furthermore, at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland, there was the part of the museum at the end which told about the flooding of the Waal during the war. Many people were not aware that this happened during that time in history. There were also other moments of learning for different participants, which were, however, not related to any specific element of the museum.

Discussing history

Beyond simply learning new information, a deeper level of intellectual engagement with the cultural memory involves visitors discussing the history with one another. This was identified as a somewhat reflective way of dealing with the material in the museum. Moreover, the ability to discuss the history among each other was also related to having at least some previous knowledge of the history. The reason for this is because the ability to discuss the history in more depth requires some knowledge of WWII besides that which is shown in the museum. For example, visitors would discuss the difference between work camps and destruction camps in WWII. This discussion arose after seeing the clothes that prisoners had to wear in one of the concentration camps. The discussions observed in this research were not related to each other in any significant way. The variety of discussions that took place between the different participants shows how many different experiences a visit to the museum can bring. These discussions about the history of WWII were also present in the form of critiquing parts of history. Although not a very common finding, it did show up in different museums. It is interesting that critiquing the history was either done by someone showing in-depth knowledge of WWII and being able to have critique based in knowledge or someone simply disagreeing with how things were managed during the war.

Ook had ze kritiek op de gebeurtenissen van de oorlog. Zoals het feit dat er bij de oversteek van de Waal niet genoeg paddles waren. Ze snapte gewoon niet dat ze daar niet voor hadden gezorgd. – Margriet, woman (50-60)
She also expressed criticism about certain events during the war—for example, the fact that there weren't enough paddles during the crossing of the Waal. She just couldn't understand how that hadn't been properly arranged. – translated journal notes about Margriet (translated by the author)

Excerpt 6. Margriet, woman (50-60). Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland on 06/04/2025

Historical Verstehung

The last aspect of the intellectual experience is called historical Verstehung. This term is derived and related to Weber's idea of Verstehen, which relates to someone's ability to understand the meaning of action from the actor's point of view. Tucker (1965) writes that Weber's approach to Verstehen was highly social. In order to be able to understand another person's actions, one must look at the social context in which this action is performed. This leads to two possible levels of Verstehen. The first is direct observational understanding, which means being able to understand an action just by observation. A deeper understanding is called explanatory understanding, which means being able to understand why someone acted a certain way.

During the museum visits, it was observed that visitors would often be able to gain a level of understanding for the actions performed in the past. This adds a temporal layer to the concept of Verstehen. Visitors were able to gain some understanding of the social context in which actions were performed in the past. This understanding seemed to be an important part of the experience for some visitors as it would allow new insights to be made. There was, however, not much of an emotional layer to this understanding, which is why it is categorized under the intellectual experience.

The most recurring way for people to gain an understanding of the actions of a person in the past occurred at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon. One of the sections in the museum is dedicated to the history of the Dutch royal family and their actions during the war. Most visitors to this museum would have some kind of reaction to the fact that the royal family fled the

country the moment the war broke out. Generally the response of visitors was that they disagreed with the decision of the royal family to leave their country, there was a sense of betrayal. However, some visitors were able to change their opinion after interacting with the material in the museum. One particular visitor was very outspoken at first about the queen Wilhelmina. She had little to no sympathy for the actions of the queen during the war. It was, however, after using the interactive part of the museum where visitors could ask questions to Wilhelmina, that she gained an understanding of why the queen did what she did. Not all visitors were as outspoken about the royal family, others would simply find the choice to leave the country weird. Also these visitors were able to reflect on the information that was presented to them and gain an understanding of the reasons for leaving the country. Also by imagining yourself in the shoes of the queen helped in gaining this understanding as people would say that they would do the same thing if it was them in that situation.

Another way that historical Verstehung would be achieved was by gaining an understanding for the actions of a group of people as opposed to one person in particular. These groups were either soldiers or Dutch citizens during WWII. In order to understand the actions of soldiers, from both sides of the war, a more philosophical approach was taken. The philosophical approach most likely stems from the fact that it is not the action of one person that is trying to be understood. One visitor to the museum in Overloon explained how the museum makes him think about why soldiers were fighting for their side. He did not make a judgement of Nazi soldiers because he understood that most of them believe they are doing the right thing. The ‘young guys’, as he described them, have no idea what is actually going on at the political level. They are told to defend their country and they simply do as they are told. This counts for soldiers from both sides. Furthermore, at the Maczek Memorial, there were two participants that were a part of the Dutch military. This led them to be able to understand the soldiers of WWII better through their experience of being a soldier today. Interestingly, these visitors would show this understanding not after making use of interactive elements but rather through photos and objects, like uniforms.

Other visitors were more able to gain an understanding for the actions of everyday citizens during the war. One way in which some visitors showed this understanding was in relation to the Dutch cooperation with the Nazis. Only Oorlogsmuseum Overloon explicitly presented the cooperation of the Dutch with the Nazis and it was only in this museum where visitors would show this form of historical Verstehung. These visitors were not appalled by the fact that the Dutch were not always on the ‘right’ side of history. They recognized that the

reality is not as black and white as we might think. The visitors were able to understand that a lot of people did not want trouble in their life and therefore cooperated with the Nazis. While it was found in the literature review that the Dutch memory of WWII is one that is still influenced by the resistance myth, several participants in this study clearly showed a more realistic understanding of WWII.

Historical Verstehung was found in a slightly different way at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland. Visitors to this museum were more able to understand the situation and emotion of the civilians during WWII. This was mostly due to the realistic displays of how people lived in that time. There were two replicas of a Dutch home and one bomb shelter which brought a degree of understanding to the visitors. Most of the participants could really get a sense of what the people must have gone through. This led to a more imaginary kind of Verstehen by which visitors could understand what people must have done and felt in such a place. One pair of participants was describing the events that could happen during the war in the Betuwe, for example having to hide in a bomb shelter. These visitors were able to better understand the war times through describing these scenes and at the same time looking at a reconstruction of the past.

While many participants seemed to gain a level of historical Verstehung through the museum, for others this was more difficult to achieve at certain moments during the visit. From time to time visitors would come across a piece in the museum that drew up questions they could not answer. The lack of understanding was most often the result of seeing something related to the Nazis. Some could not understand why people in Nazi Germany would hang a portrait of Hitler on the wall or why people would wear clothing related to the Nazis. Whereas visitors with more historical Verstehung could rationalize the choices made by people in Nazi Germany, the visitors with a lack of Verstehung expressed disbelief and confusion. For most of the visitors expressing both historical Verstehung and a lack of it, this was a momentary experience. However, one of the participants went through the museum with a recurring lack of Verstehung. This woman visited the museum alone and was therefore talking more with the researcher which might have made the lack of Verstehung more clear. She could not understand the choices made during different historical events of WWII relating to both the Allied and Nazi side. For example, she could not understand why the British did not take care of enough paddles for the crossing of the Waal. At another moment she was in disbelief at the fact that two brothers helped getting cargo across the river but not people.

The previous section has shown how the experience of visitors in a WWII museum can be wide ranging. Most of these types of experiences are only happening at one time or another during the visit, except for learning and discussing the history. Emotions are only the short-lived responses to objects, texts, photos, or videos, whereas the intellectual experience can be longer sustained during a visit. However, these elements still do not fully capture how people interact with the cultural memory of WWII. The next two chapters will fill in the gaps, the parts that happen in between and around the emotional and intellectual experience.

4.3 The museum as a space of relatability

The first two characteristics of cultural memory that Assmann & Czaplicka (1995) describe, are the ability of cultural memory to concrete the identity of a group of people and its reconstructive capacity. In order for a memory to become cultural it has to become a stable, organised representation of a historical past. In this organised representation of the past, the identity of a group of people is depicted. The cultural memory has meaning through the ability of people to identify with it. In the WWII museums this became visible through the visitor's ability to relate to the material in the museum. The act of relating to the different elements in the museum happened in different ways. It was found that being able to relate to something is of importance to how the museum is experienced. This is not to say that people do not interact with parts they are unfamiliar with, however, visitors seemed to engage more deeply and more frequently with elements they could relate to. Relating is distinct from the previously mentioned Verstehung because the act of relating does not imply understanding. Visitors engaged more deeply with relatable material, however, this did not necessarily lead to a greater understanding of historical actions. Furthermore, the reconstructive capacity of cultural memory also plays a role in the museum as a space of relatability. When interacting with material from the past, the present serves as the most relatable matter. The following sections will explore the different ways people experienced relatability in a WWII museum.

Ability to relate

Before getting into the specific forms relatability took for the visitors, the ability to relate will be explained more generally. This idea was first noticed when one of the participants, Tim, was explaining why he was not bothered by the omission of the war in the Dutch Indies. He said that he, and many other visitors, would not be able to relate much to that part of history anyways. Whether what Tim said is true or not can be debated. Van Ooijen & Raaijmakers (2012) write about the multidirectional memory of the Netherlands, relating to the post-WWII and post-colonial memory. These are memories that are conflicting and can be, according to

Van Ooijen & Raaijmakers (2012), competitive. It is possible that Tim recognized this multidirectional aspect of the collective memory and therefore felt that the two competing memories could not be presented in the same space. Regardless, after this conversation, the ability to relate was noticed among all participants.

Someone who expressed their interest in the military technology was obviously more engaged with these parts of the museum. It is interesting that the opposite of the previous sentence was also observed, meaning someone not having much interest in WWII and therefore not engaging particularly deeply with the museum. One participant at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland explained that he was not really interested in WWII. The reason he gave for this was because he never got conscripted in the military, so he had nothing to relate to he said. The things he could relate to, which were shipping and the local area, also gained more attention by this visitor. He would walk past many parts of the museum, but the parts that involved shipping or showed pictures of his village would suddenly grasp his attention. He started to engage both visually and verbally with the material he could relate to. This example shows how the museum can be experienced through relatability and context. In the following sections this will be further explained by looking at different ways that people were able to relate in the museum.

Relating to home

A common way relatability influenced the museum experience was through visitors connecting the material to their own homes. This could involve relating an object to something they have in their own home, or simply connecting something from the museum to their hometown. This form of relatability was particularly pronounced at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland in Gendt as most visitors were people from the area and the museum specifically focusses on the history of the Betuwe. This led to many people walking through the museum continuously finding new objects, texts, or photos to relate to. Furthermore, it was noticed how the interaction with a relatable element was disproportionate to the interaction with something less relatable. This was clearly visible when people would relate an aspect of the museum to their home. It is something people are most familiar with and can therefore interact more deeply with. This can be best described by the following excerpt from the journal notes.

Toen we verder liepen kwamen we bij het gedeelte over de werkkampen en hier was een foto van een kamp in Ommen. Dit was dichtbij waar zij wonen en toen werd deze foto aandachtiger bekeken en dit was gelijk interessanter voor hun beide. – Anneke & Bert, Woman & Male (60-70)
As we continued, we reached the section about the labour camps, where there was a photo of a camp in Ommen. Since this was close to where they live, they looked at the photo more closely, and it immediately became more interesting to both of them. – translated journal notes about Anneke & Bert (translated by the author)

Excerpt 7. Anneke & Bert, female & male (60-70). Oorlogsmuseum Overloon on 23/03/2025

Excerpt 7 shows that these visitors found a photo in the museum which was made somewhere close to their home. They both stopped and gave more attention to the photo after reading where it was made. They discussed the photo a little bit, like the exact location for example. Similarly, other visitors would focus their attention to an object which they recognized from their home. Many people still have old food stamps, newspapers, or other objects collected at home, most often inherited from their (grand)parents. This shows that the cultural memory of WWII is not necessarily fixed and limited to places of memory, but that it might still be somewhat diffuse. This will be explored in section 4.4 of this thesis.

Relating to the present

One of the more common findings among all participants was how people relate the material in the museum to the present day. This was most often done by relating the history of WWII to the current geo-political situation of the world. As briefly described in the introduction of section 4.3, the capacity to reconstruct is an important characteristic of cultural memory, as explained by Assman & Czaplicka (1995). Assmann writes that cultural memory always relates its knowledge to a contemporary situation. The past may be moored to places of memory such as museums, but every new generation of a society can reinterpret this anchored memory differently depending on the context provided by their world. Although the Netherlands has been at peace for 80 years now, the world certainly has not. Through the processes of globalisation and technological development, people have become more connected to the entire world then ever before. This is reflected in how people from a country

that is not at war, are often deeply engaged with a country that is. Moreover, global politics also become a part of the general knowledge through the connectedness that exists in the current day.

Ougaard (2004) discusses this political globalization, as he calls it, in his book with the same name. Ougaard makes the point that nation-states are no longer individual, independent entities, but nation-states have become part of a global political system in which different states and international organisations interact in complex ways. This global interaction that happens at the political level trickles down to the society. The effects of the globalized political system now provide context through which people interpret the cultural memory of WWII.

Most often, visitors would use politics to relate the content of the museum to the present, however, other ways were also observed. For example, at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon there were some people that reflected on the objects and technology used by the Dutch resistance fighters by imagining how this would be done nowadays. Some visitors would be quite impressed upon seeing how the resistance fighters came up with ways of deceiving the Nazis. This relates back to the chapter on the emotional experience (section 4.2.1). This admiration for the technology was only enhanced when visitors would relate it to the present day. By trying to imagine what it would be like to be a resistance fighter today, visitors were able to increase their historical empathy. It is difficult for people that live today to imagine what the world was like 80 years ago. Therefore, through the context of the modern world, visitors were able to reconstruct the information and knowledge embedded in the cultural memory to the present. Whereas the resistance fighters in WWII used falsified stamps and documents, some visitors to the museum would talk about computers, CCTV, and heat detection technology for example. This illustrates the reconstructive capacity of the cultural memory of WWII.

A much larger amount of the participants related the material in the museum to the current political situation in the world. The reference was most often made to the current war between Russia and Ukraine. The war between Israel and Hamas was also referenced a few times, however this was far less common. Not everyone related the history of WWII to the present through specific objects or elements of the museum. Some visitors simply started reflecting on the current global political system without making any reference to one section in the museum. This form of relating mostly occurred at the beginning of the visit. This suggests that the reconstructive capacity of cultural memory can be somewhat automatic. There is the

possibility that after entering the museum space, people try to make sense of what they are confronted with. This often seems to be done by finding a contemporary context for the material presented in the museum.

Visitors that related the museum more generally to the present, meaning without specific reference to a piece in the museum, would do so by relating it to Russia and the United States. The museum seems to lead people to think about power and the reasons why something like WWII was able to happen. The reconstructive capacity of cultural memory leads people to look for similar patterns in powerful figures of the modern day. One of the visitors to Oorlogsmuseum Overloon said, at the start of the museum: 'oh, there you have our Putin'. There was, however, no mention of Putin throughout the museum. This could suggest that some visitors make an automatic connection between the past and the present. Moreover, the capacity of cultural memory to reconstruct, as explained by Assmann, might then not only be a characteristic of cultural memory but also a human mechanism to understand the past.

The majority of participants that would relate the history of WWII to the present did so after interacting with a specific object, text, photo, or video. It is highly plausible that the visitors who used the museum more generally to relate to the present, also found a specific part of the museum to do so, however, this was not explicitly observed or expressed by the visitor. Other participants would specifically mention which part of the museum they were relating to. This way of relating to the present could vary quite a lot, however, the subject of relation still came down to mostly political issues of today. Some examples will follow that illustrate this way of relating the history of WWII to the present.

One of the visitors at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon came past a boat that was used by Dutch people to cross the Channel to the United Kingdom during WWII. This visitor started contrasting the way that these Dutch refugees were welcomed in England and how the refugees from today are not treated in the same way. He mentioned how the Dutch were seen as 'heroes' and the refugees of today as criminals. This shows also the reflexivity of cultural memory, meaning that it can be criticised and reinterpreted over time. Similarly, other visitors saw a doll in Nazi clothing doing the Nazi salute. They immediately started saying that people are performing the salute again. It was unclear whether the participants were talking about the recent video of Elon Musk seemingly doing a Nazi salute or whether it was about the rising influence of the AFD in Germany. Regardless, the relating was done to a situation in the present.

At Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland, some visitors were able to relate the experience in the bomb shelter to the war going on in Ukraine. While the primary thought was still about how that must have been during WWII, some people would still reflect on the fact that people are living like that today. Similarly, one pair of visitors found a question that was posed in the museum which asked whether the visitor would let people hide in their home at the risk of their own life. Instead of answering this question in relation to WWII, they related it to Ukraine and what they would do if that situation got worse. This led to a discussion among them about the possibility of getting drafted, something they saw in a video in which locals talked about getting drafted during WWII.

The relatability that visitors experience in a WWII museum connects strongly to two characteristics of cultural memory, namely the capacity to reconstruct and reflexivity. Visitors experience elements of a museum by relating the material to something familiar. Identity plays a role in this aspect of the experience. Barton & Levstik (2004) explained that history students are only able to understand and have empathy for historical figures they are truly interested in. This became somewhat visible with visitors who showed deeper engagement with material that related to their interests. Moreover, in a research about WWII museums by De Bruijn & Savenije (2020) with students of a migrant background, they found that these students were not emotionally connected to WWII. However, they write that the historical stories from a migrant perspective led to a sense of identification and affective engagement among the students. This shows the importance of relatability in the museum experience, especially when combined with learning. The characteristic of cultural memory called ‘obligation’ involves the idea that the memory carries normative weight and moral lessons. This thesis shows that relatability plays an important role in how a visitor interacts with a WWII museum. Relatability leads to deeper engagement, which then leads to higher chances of the moral lessons to be learned.

The characteristic of reflexivity can be observed most clearly when visitors relate the museum to the present. Reflexivity is about critical engagement with the past (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995). When visitors recognize political flaws of the present in the past, they engage critically with the cultural memory. The ability to critically reflect on the cultural memory also illustrates its reconstructive capacity, as the reflecting usually happened in relation to the present. The reflexive nature of cultural memory means that it is not just preserving facts of the past, but that it is also reinterpreted over time in light of present concerns. This can be seen in the way the visitors relate the history of WWII to the wars going on in the world today. Visitors could reinterpret both the past and the present by making the connection between the

two. This was done, for example, by recognizing the rise of antisemitism in the world today due to the war between Israel and Hamas. The reconstructive and reflective capacity of cultural memory are connected to the act of relating, as relatability provides the basis for these characteristics to emerge.

Relating to personal story

The main distinction between communicative and cultural memory, according to Assmann, is the degree to which the memory is formalized and centralised. In the last form of relatability, this idea of cultural memory is somewhat contradicted, as it involves visitors relating the museum to a personal story. This section will be kept rather brief as the last chapter will discuss this aspect of personal connections to, and stories from, WWII in more depth.

Personal stories and connections to WWII played a big role for visitors in all three museums. It comes as no surprise then that these stories and connections also served as ways of relating to the museum. The connections a visitor can have to WWII does not have to be related to WWII temporally, it can also be a thematic connection. For example, there was a visitor who worked with a metal detector to find, among other things, mostly WWII material that is still in the ground. Another visitor used to work for the BB, Bescherming Bevolking (Civilian Protection), who would recognize objects from the war that he still used in his time working for the BB. For most, however, the ability to relate parts of the museum to personal stories and connections came from the stories that were passed down from parents and grandparents. These stories provided a context or frame of reference through which the museum could be experienced. The personal stories and connections played a role throughout the entire museum visit, however, the stories only became relatable at specific parts of the museum.

A participant at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon explained that her grandfather had to go into hiding during WWII. At a later point we came across the section of the museum that was dedicated to the resistance in the Netherlands. There was a story about a farmer that had helped a large amount of people go into hiding at his farm. It became clear that this participant was interested in this story. She even told her family members, who were with her during the visit, to come and take a look. The fact that her grandfather experienced something similar during the war made this item more interesting for her. Another example of a less direct connection to WWII being relatable comes from an older visitor who told a story at the beginning about how they used to make clothes from parachute fabric. At the end of the museum, there was a presentation of an old wedding dress made of parachute fabric. She instantly noticed this and

started talking about it. In other cases, relating the museum to a personal story or connection could be more subtle. This was more of an observation rather than something explicitly talked about between the participants. An example of this was someone at Maczek Memorial Breda who was the grandchild of a Polish soldier. He never knew his grandfather, but he spent a lot of time trying to figure out what he was like. This participant kept showing more interest in the personal stories of the Polish soldiers, indicating that he might have been looking for some answers to his own questions.

4.4 The role of communicative memory in the museum experience

The last theme that will be explored is how the communicative memory, meaning the non-institutionalised stories and memory of WWII, plays a significant role in the experience of the cultural memory of WWII. Visitors would, during nearly all museum visits, engage with the museum through some personal stories or connections they have with WWII. In the previous theme it was explained how visitors were able to relate to material in the museum through personal connections. While the other forms of relatability were more specific and related only to parts of the museum, the personal connections and stories were, in some instances, a more overarching part of the visitor experience. The important role of personal stories especially has some interesting consequences in relation to the concept of cultural memory as explained by Assmann & Czaplicka (1995). The personal stories and connections to WWII could manifest themselves in different ways into the visitor experience. For some, it was just something to relate the museum to, for others it was an overarching part of the experience, and for even others it was the whole reason to visit the museum. In this last theme, the different roles that communicative memory takes in the experience of cultural memory and the interaction between the two modi memorandi will be explored.

As explained before, some visitors were aware of a story from their family during WWII, however these stories did not affect their experience in the museum much. These visitors would only briefly mention what happened to their family when looking at something that reminded them of the story. For example, one of the younger participants saw some old documents and related these to his grandfather who lived in Amsterdam during the war. This was discussed among the group for a moment and then they continued their visit. The discussion of the personal story among the visitors demonstrates the active role of communicative memory in the museum experience. Even though personal stories were not present throughout the entire visit for these participants, the communicative memory can emerge momentarily during the visit. Another example of this comes from a participant at

Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland who started talking about her grandparents having to slaughter a pig and eat it during the war. This was just mentioned once and never returned to during the visit. This shows that the museum evokes a sort of prosthetic memory through the objects, however these memories are only noted and not engaged with on a deeper level.

In other cases, the personal stories would play a more important role during the visit. For these visitors, the stories are more present in their minds during the visit. This leads them to be more engaged with the communicative memory than the cultural one. One of these instances was observed at Oorlogsmuseum Overloon where Anna, who is already mentioned in section 4.1 about motivations, was focused on the story of her friend's father. She mentioned at the beginning of the visit that she became interested in the history around WWII through that story. During the visit, she alluded to the story several times, either by paying closer attention to elements of the museum related to it or by talking about it directly. Instead of noting the story once, she kept coming back to it suggesting that the story plays a bigger role in her experience of the museum. Another clear example of this type of visitor comes from Oorlogsmusem Niemandsland, where two of the participants were visiting with their family. They had lived their whole life in the area where the museum is located. This led to them being constantly reminded of the stories of their own lives or their family's lives. Although the museum can only present the history in a more general way, these visitors were able to create a deeper narrative of the events and they added a personal layer over the museum's general information. Excerpt 8 shows how the communicative memory was incorporated into the museum experience by telling the personal stories to the new generations. This exemplifies the non-centralised manner in which the memory of WWII is still transmitted.

Daarna vertelden Gert en Trudie wat van hun ervaring van na de oorlog. Bijvoorbeeld hoe ze door verwoeste dorpen liepen. Ze vertelden dit duidelijk aan de jongere persoon van hun familie, en ook aan mij. Ze probeerde duidelijk te maken hoe het toen was. – Gert & Trudie (80-90)
After that, Gert and Trudie shared some of their experiences from the post-war period, for example, how they walked through destroyed villages. They clearly told these stories to the younger family member, and also to me. They were trying to convey what it was like back then. – translated journal notes about Gert & Trudie (translated by the author)

Excerpt 8. Gert & Trudie, male & female (80-90). Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland on 05/04/2025

For some visitors, the museum visit was centred entirely on personal connections to WWII. In these cases, communicative memory was not just important, it was the primary reason for visiting the museum. This was the least common way that the communicative memory would be present during the visit, however it was observed at least once in all three museums. This role of communicative memory goes one step further than how it was explained in the previous section. For example, at the Maczek Memorial Breda one of the visitors, Klaas, was a grand child of one of the Polish soldiers. He was there that day with his cousin to show him the memorial. The reason for them being there was to let the communicative and cultural memory interact. Klaas has some knowledge of his grandfather, but this was very limited. The memorial created an opportunity to get closer to a communicative rather than cultural memory. Another example from the Maczek Memorial comes from a grandfather and his grandchild, Joop and Tim, who also visited the memorial due to the connection it has to a personal story. Joop's parents took in Polish soldiers at the end of WWII, when they were stationed there. One of the Polish soldiers gifted the parents a little sculpture as an act of gratitude. Joop brought his grandson to the memorial to possibly find out more about the Polish soldier, but also to see whether the sculpture will be gifted to his grandson or to the memorial.

These kinds of examples show how embedded the communicative memory of WWII still is into the experience of visitors to WWII museums. It was observed that the interaction of communicative and cultural memory could take the form of understanding one through the other. This meant that some visitors expressed they were able to better understand the museum through the personal stories and vice versa. It was more common for visitors to better understand the personal stories through the museum than the other way around. However, it was mentioned explicitly on two occasions that personal stories can serve as a way to get a better understanding of the history presented in the museum. Klaas, the participant from the Maczek Memorial, explained that the older he got the more he became interested in the history around WWII. He said that having some personal family history to rely on can help in understanding the history better. Additionally he mentioned that the personal stories can help in better understanding the emotions of the people presented in the museum. This relates back to the historical empathy written about in section 4.2.1 about the emotional experience. Communicative memory in connection to cultural memory can thus be reinforcing the understanding of each other. This becomes more clear when looking at how the museum helps visitors understand their personal stories.

In all three museums, visitors explained the role the museum played in creating a better understanding of what their family members went through during the war. This is again close to the idea of historical empathy (section 4.2.1). However, the empathy explained earlier in the findings was bounded by cultural memory. The understanding of personal stories through the museum bridges the gap between communicative and cultural memory. This challenges the assumption that cultural memory happens after communicative memory has died out. This will be further explored later on. For now, some examples will be given that show in what ways the museum helped to better understand the personal stories of people.

Visitors were able to create a better picture of the past through the way the museum was set up with objects, photos, videos, and texts. Historical empathy can help in better understanding the personal stories, which can be created through interactive elements (Arnold-De-Simine, 2013). This was clearly observed at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland, where visitors could experience the bomb shelter. Many of the visitors to this museum were from the region and they often told stories of their family having to live in a bomb shelter during the war. There were even two visitors that were born in these shelters. This led to the experience of the cultural memory being applicable to the communicative memory. One of the participants that was born in a bomb shelter described it as: 'yeah it all comes back a bit this way' (Erika, 80-90). Other participants also described the experience as being helpful to imagine what their parents and grandparents went through. At the other museums some visitors expressed similar thoughts. It was generally not found that specific elements of the museum created this historical empathy, except for the bomb shelter at Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland. The personal stories played more of an overarching role for some visitors. This makes the role of communicative memory distinct from the role of relatability in the museum. Relatability occurred almost exclusively in relation to specific objects or texts in the museum, whereas the personal stories could be applied throughout the whole museum. The difference comes down to the direction of action. Specific objects or texts are applied to something relatable, while personal stories were applied to the objects and texts.

The previous paragraphs show that communicative memory is not separate from cultural memory. While Assmann's understanding of cultural memory suggests that collective memory happens in stages, this thesis found that the interaction might be more complex. Visitors to a WWII museum brought with them personal stories which they applied to the museum. Cultural memory might be a fixed and formalized form of collective memory, but the interpretations can be mediated by unstable and diffuse forms of memory. Some more thoughts

will be given on this in the conclusion, where these findings are put against Assmann's understanding of cultural memory.

5.0 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis has been to gain a better understanding of how visitors to WWII museums experience and interact with the cultural memory of WWII. Today, 80 years after the war, the communicative memory time frame should be coming to an end. As newer generations become temporally distanced from the war, there is the possibility of them also becoming more emotionally disconnected from what happened during WWII. Lensen (2014) writes that the emotional disconnect of younger generations allows them to look at WWII without the bias of older generations. On the other hand, people may fear that an emotional disconnect can lead to an uninterest in preserving the memory WWII. One of the characteristics of cultural memory, as explained by Assmann & Czaplicka (1995), is 'obligation'. This refers to the sense that the cultural memory engenders a clear system of values and relates to the group's self-image. People feel obliged to keep the memory of the terrible events of WWII alive. However, in this time of rapid change and increasing emotional disconnect, how do people interact and deal with the memory of WWII?

The findings of this thesis suggest several important aspects to the visitor experience in a WWII museum. At first, a more general overview of the experience was given, relating to the emotional and intellectual experience. These two types of experiences complement each other. While the history of WWII can be emotionally impressing, for many, the museum also served as a space for learning. The most profound form both the emotional and intellectual experience took were in understanding. For the emotional experience, this meant visitors gaining historical empathy, where they were able to 'feel' the history and understand the emotions of people in the past. For the intellectual experience, visitors were able to achieve, what has been called in this thesis, historical Verstehung. These visitors were able to understand the actions and rationale behind either historical figures or a group as a whole. A lack of historical Verstehung was also observed in some visitors, who were unable to understand the actions of people in the past.

While the different forms of the emotional and intellectual experience were observed across all participants, these experiences were rather temporary and could vary widely across participants. Relatability and communicative memory were found to be aspects of the experience that are central to understanding the visitor's interaction with the cultural memory of WWII. The capacity to reconstruct is an important characteristic of cultural memory which refers to its ability to be relevant in the future by relating its knowledge to a contemporary

situation. It was found that visitors would constantly relate the material in the museum to something within their frame of reference, which could be their home, the present, or a personal connection. Especially the present was found to be a common way to relate to the history. Visitors were able to interact with the museum by relating it to current conflicts in the world, or powerful political figures. Relatability was not just a way to understand the past, it was found to be the fundamental part of the experience. The ability to relate to something was necessary for interaction. This means that the emotional and intellectual experience were only possible through the role of relatability.

The last theme focussed on the role of communicative memory in the experience of a WWII museum. The literature on cultural memory suggest communicative memory has to fade for cultural memory to emerge. The findings of this thesis show that this is not necessarily the case, as nearly all visitors used communicative forms of memory to interact with the cultural memory of WWII. Stories of family members who lived through WWII are still present in the minds of museum visitors today. For many, these stories are important parts of the experience in a museum. While the cultural memory of WWII already exists, the communicative memory seems to be more prominent for museum visitors. This can be seen in how some visitors were using the museum to better understand and visualise the personal stories. This thesis shows that it might be necessary to reimagine the concept of cultural memory. The following paragraphs will examine how the concept of cultural memory holds up in light of this thesis's findings.

Assmann & Czaplicka (1995 p.128) write that the transition to cultural memory happens the further the memory gets away from everyday communications. By framing it as a transition, the authors imply that the two forms of collective memory are successive. There is a certain logic behind that framing. However, the findings of this thesis counter this logic to some extent, although not completely. WWII museums can be understood as cultural memory, they are objectifications of the living memory of the war. The living memory can only be transmitted orally or through informal traditions, according to Assmann (2011 p. 22). Assmann gives the communicative memory a time frame of about 80 to 100 years, a moving horizon of 3 to 4 interacting generations. The end of WWII is now 80 years in the past, meaning that it is not strange that communicative memory is observed in people visiting a WWII museum. The noteworthy finding of this thesis, however, is how it interacts with the cultural memory.

Assmann's binary view of collective memory might be explained by how he came to write about the concept of cultural memory. Jan Assmann is an Egyptologist and cultural

historian. In his works on cultural memory it can be observed that the concept of cultural memory comes from research into the remembrance practices of ancient civilisations or less complex societies. Assmann (2011 p. 18) references Jan Vansina's anthropological work regarding African oral societies. Vansina (1985) found that knowledge of events discussed in everyday communications has a limited lifespan. This is about 3 generations, after which knowledge either fades into oblivion or becomes structured in formal ways of remembering. In these societies, there is a clear distinction between informal communication of the recent past and formal communication of the distant past. The society in which WWII happened is not an oral one and is far more complex than the societies in which there was a clear distinction between communicative and cultural memory.

After the regained independence of the Netherlands both cultural and communicative forms of memory started to arise. Communicative memory is the obvious one, the survivors of the war are able to transmit their individual experiences to their family and immediate surroundings. According to Assmann's concept of cultural memory, it would be atypical that cultural forms of memory started to emerge immediately after the war. Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, for example, was established in 1946. However, if we look at the binary, successive understanding of cultural memory as coming from oral societies, then it becomes less surprising that different patterns emerge in modern Dutch society. The findings of this thesis suggest that communicative and cultural memory can emerge side by side and interact with each other, at least within the time frame of 80 to 100 years, as proposed by Assmann (2011 p. 22).

The fact that the horizon of communicative memory is nearing can have some significant consequences for the experience in WWII museums. It will be interesting to examine how relatability and communicative memory in the museum are affected by the crossing of this horizon. Relatability in the museum is correlated to some extend to the reconstructive capacity of cultural memory. According to Assmann & Czaplicka (1995), cultural memory works through this capacity to reconstruct. It must always be able to relate itself to a contemporary situation. If this is the case then the experience of the museum as a space of relatability should not be affected much by a definitive shift to a purely cultural form of memory. That is, as long as there are contemporary situations that can relate to the history of WWII. The findings of this thesis show that as long as there are powerful figures and wars, there will be something for people to relate such events to.

The role of personal stories can, by definition, not play a role beyond the communicative memory horizon. There is a real possibility that there will come a time where personal stories are completely absent from the experience in a WWII museum. However, this time might well be beyond the 80 to 100 years horizon as proposed by Assmann. While some visitors expressed their worry for the way WWII is being remembered in recent years, specifically by younger people, there were nonetheless many young people interacting with the museums. The younger visitors all had a certain interest in WWII and were well aware of stories from their grandparents. It seems unlikely that the transmission of communicative memory ends with the current generation. Moreover, due to the technological advancements after WWII, there were many possibilities to record the oral history of WWII survivors (Vos, 2009). This has resulted in the documentation of a large amount of personal stories. This is furthermore reflected in the curation of Oorlogsmuseum Overloon, where the history is told based on the personal stories of different people. Communicative memory seems to be integrated into the cultural remembrance of WWII, so that even when visitors to WWII museums are not aware of any personal connections, they can still relate on a personal level to the memory. Moreover, the experience of visitors in the future can become more immersive through ever developing interactive exhibition techniques. The personal stories can be presented in new ways, through their capacity to reconstruct, leading to increased affective engagement among visitors (Arnold-De-Simine, 2013).

The role of communicative memory in the museum experience suggests a reconsideration of the binary understanding of communicative and cultural memory is needed. While Erll (2011 p. 31) already recognized the ‘simultaneity of the non-simultaneous’, no alternative understanding was proposed. This thesis proposes moving beyond the notion that communicative and cultural memory are mutually exclusive or non-simultaneous. In the complex societies that exist today, it is possible for the two modes of memory to interact and overlap. A better way of looking at communicative and cultural memory is by seeing them as opposites that can be weaved together in different contexts. A WWII museum becomes a place where this weaving is most prevalent. The two forms of memory exist on their own but they can reinforce each other when they interact. The following decades will show whether communicative memory remains important as people become more temporally distanced from WWII. For now, however, it can be said that communicative memory is an integral part of the experience of the cultural memory of WWII.

The methodology applied in this thesis was a form of intervening participant observation. This meant that the researcher walked with participants through the museum and observed how they interact with the different elements of the museum. Additionally, to increase the validity and richness of the data, questions were asked to the participants during the visit. This was done as a replacement for reflective interviews, which were not feasible for this research. This methodology proved to be effective for gathering data right at the moment of the experience. Moreover, the experience became more clear through the asking of the right questions during the visit. In most cases, these questions opened up the participant and led to better quality data.

The non-binary understanding of cultural memory can provide an interesting basis for further research. By looking at cultural memory as being able to weave together with communicative memory, it is possible to gain a better insight into the collective remembrance practices of societies. Furthermore, relatability in the museum can also be further explored. The current thesis has shown how visitors experience a museum through material they can relate to. Further research can focus on this aspect of the museum experience and determine to what extent the visitors interact with unfamiliar content. This can provide useful information for museum curation. Lastly, the timeframe of communicative memory is possibly the most interesting aspect to investigate further. The temporal distance from WWII is such that communicative memory is supposedly fading. However, the findings of this thesis suggest that this is not yet the case. The coming years will be able to show whether the concept of cultural memory must be reimagined even further. This thesis suggests that the understanding of the relation between communicative and cultural memory needs to be reconsidered to fit in the context of contemporary, complex societies. It has, however, not been possible to make a claim about the timeframe of communicative memory. Future research can further explore the communicative-cultural memory dynamic in the context of WWII.

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7.0 Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1 – Overview of participants

Name	Age group	Gender	Museum	Date of observation
Ingrid	70-80	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	07/03
Ferrie	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	07/03
Gerrie	70-80	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Kees	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Anna	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Henk	50-60	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Jana	20-30	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Britt	20-30	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Jolene	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	08/03
Dirk	20-30	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Tim	20-30	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Jens	20-30	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Mark	40-50	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03

Linda	20-30	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Francien	70-80	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Lianne	20-30	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	22/03
Henk	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Jannie	70-80	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Anneke	60-70	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Bert	60-70	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Rita	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Roel	50-60	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Regina	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Rob	50-60	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Overloon	23/03
Klaas	40-50	Man	Generaal Maczek Memorial	30/03
Piet	40-50	Man	Generaal Maczek Memorial	30/03
Martijn	50-60	Man	Generaal Maczek Memorial	12/04

Joop	80-90	Man	Generaal Maczek Memorial	13/04
Tim	20-30	Man	Generaal Maczek Memorial	13/04
Paul	50-60	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Janine	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Gert	80-90	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Trudie	80-90	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Rick	30-40	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Joy	30-40	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Anniek	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Bert	50-60	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Johan	40-50	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Marieke	40-50	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Ad	80-90	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Erika	80-90	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	05/04
Ids	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04

Ronald	30-40	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04
Julia	30-40	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04
Margriet	50-60	Woman	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04
Jeroen	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04
Berend	70-80	Man	Oorlogsmuseum Niemandsland	06/04

Appendix B

B1 - Questions for the interview in Dutch

Introductory questions about the visit

Concretion of identity

Had u het gevoel dat het museum een gedeeld Nederlands perspectief op de Tweede Wereldoorlog presenteert? Waarom wel of niet?

Waren er momenten waarop u verbinding voelde met uw eigen nationale of culturele identiteit?

Hoe denkt u dat dit museum de rol van verschillende groepen in WO2 definieert? (slachtoffers, daders, verzetstrijders, burgers)

Werden er perspectieven gedeeld die voor u nieuw of onverwacht waren?

Ability to reconstruct

Maakt iets in het museum u bewust van hoe de herinnering aan WO2 vandaag de dag anders is dan hoe u er eerder over heeft geleerd?

Denkt u dat de manier waarop dit museum de WO2 weergeeft wordt beinvloed door hedendaagse normen en waarden? Hoe?

Formation

Was er een specifiek object, artefact of tentoonstelling die de geschiedenis voor jou bijzonder tastbaar of levendig maakte? Waarom?

Droegen bepaalde zintuiglijke elementen (bijvoorbeeld beelden, geluiden, belichting, interactieve displays) bij aan je emotionele verbondenheid met het verleden?

Waren er artefacten die je dichter bij de mensen brachten die de Tweede Wereldoorlog hebben meegemaakt? Welke en waarom?

Waren er delen van het museum die je hielpen de emoties of ervaringen van mensen tijdens de oorlog beter te begrijpen?

Organisation

Hoe beïnvloedde de opzet, structuur of inrichting van het museum de manier waarop je de herinnering aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog beleefde?

Had je het gevoel dat het museum een gezaghebbende versie van de geschiedenis presenteerde? Waarom wel of niet?

Voelde de manier waarop het museum het verhaal vertelde objectief aan, of leek het een specifieke boodschap of agenda te hebben?

Obligation

Had je het gevoel dat het museum bepaalde morele lessen over de Tweede Wereldoorlog probeerde over te brengen? Zo ja, welke?

Maakte een bepaald deel van het museum je aan het denken over hedendaagse maatschappelijke of politieke kwesties? Zo ja, welke?

Hoe deed het bezoek je nadenken over verantwoordelijkheid – van individuen, naties of samenlevingen?

Had je het gevoel dat het museum bezoekers aanspoort om actief met geschiedenis om te gaan, of was het meer bedoeld voor passieve observatie?

Reflexivity

Heeft dit bezoek je aan het denken gezet over je eigen relatie met geschiedenis en herinnering? Op welke manier?

Waren er momenten waarop je je eerdere kennis over de Tweede Wereldoorlog in twijfel trok of heroverwoog?

Heeft het bezoek je mening veranderd over de rol van musea in het vormgeven van cultureel geheugen? Waarom wel of niet?

Hoe denk je dat je persoonlijke achtergrond (bijvoorbeeld nationaliteit, opleiding, familiegeschiedenis) invloed had op de manier waarop je dit museum hebt ervaren?

B2 - Questions for the Interview in English

Introductory Questions about the Visit

Concretion of Identity

Did you feel that the museum presents a shared Dutch perspective on World War II? Why or why not?

Were there moments when you felt a connection to your own national or cultural identity?

How do you think this museum defines the role of different groups in WWII? (victims, perpetrators, resistance fighters, civilians)

Were there perspectives presented that were new or unexpected for you?

Ability to Reconstruct

Did anything in the museum make you aware of how the memory of WWII today differs from how you learned about it previously?

Do you think the way this museum presents WWII is influenced by contemporary norms and values? How?

Formation

Was there a specific object, artifact, or exhibit that made the history feel especially tangible or vivid to you? Why?

Did certain sensory elements (e.g., visuals, sounds, lighting, interactive displays) contribute to your emotional connection with the past?

Were there artifacts that brought you closer to the people who experienced World War II? Which ones and why?

Were there parts of the museum that helped you better understand the emotions or experiences of people during the war?

Organisation

How did the layout, structure, or design of the museum influence how you experienced the memory of World War II?

Did you feel that the museum presented an authoritative version of history? Why or why not?

Did the way the museum told the story feel objective, or did it seem to convey a specific message or agenda?

Obligation

Did you feel that the museum was trying to convey certain moral lessons about World War II? If so, which ones?

Did any part of the museum make you reflect on contemporary social or political issues? If so, which ones?

How did the visit make you think about responsibility—of individuals, nations, or societies?

Did you feel that the museum encourages visitors to engage actively with history, or was it more intended for passive observation?

Reflexivity

Did this visit make you reflect on your own relationship with history and memory? In what way?

Were there moments when you questioned or reconsidered your previous knowledge about World War II?

Did the visit change your opinion about the role of museums in shaping cultural memory? Why or why not?

How do you think your personal background (e.g., nationality, education, family history) influenced the way you experienced this museum?