



Jasper van der Steen, *Memory Wars in the Low Countries, 1566-1700* (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2015, 370 pp., ISBN: 978 900 430 048 4).

The title *Memory Wars* refers to the various stories, interpretations and condemnations of the ‘wrong’ reading of events. Jasper van der Steen commenced the endeavour to study different ways of recalling the Revolt and the fierce reactions that attacked these memories. With that he places himself within the tradition of *memory studies*. Here, for instance Simon Groenveld and Alastair Duke noticed that during the sixteenth century identity formation was mainly a local affair. Raingard Esser, Marianne Eekhout and Erika Kuijpers have focussed their research on local memory formations during the seventeenth century. Van der Steen, however, takes a different stand from these studies as he focuses on the ‘national level’. Moreover, he places the ‘memories of what happened’ in a comparative perspective by focussing both on the Northern and the Southern Netherlands and attempts to find an explanation. With this approach he surpasses the works of Jan Romein and Simon Schama who did not seek to explain why certain events were remembered while others were forgotten.

The book consists of seven chapters, with a chronological approach covering the period from the outbreak of the Revolt (1566) until 1700. This lengthy period of time is used to answer three questions. First, how and why did conflicting interpretations of the Revolt arise? Second, why were these conflicting interpretations relevant for a very long time? Finally, what role did these memories play in the identity formation of both the Northern and Southern Netherlands? It is interesting to see – in regard to the first question – that in the north the Revolt was celebrated as a successful struggle for independence, yet in the south the episode seems to be concealed out of disgrace. The Northern celebration, according to Van der Steen, was not self-evident as there was little legal ground to back the rejection of Philip II’s rule. Philip had violated *local* privileges such as the *Joyous Entry* in Brabant, but there was no conclusive situation in which national privileges were violated. At the same time, the position of the Prince of Orange had to be rooted in history, to substantiate his position in the Northern Netherlands. In the Southern Netherlands narrators focused on the enduring position of the Roman Catholic church and the dynastic position of the House of Habsburg. Not having to account for a break in history, the Habsburg Netherlands brushed away the awkward situation the Revolt had caused. They went as far as claiming that all people had suffered at the time, but that this was mainly caused by heretics.

Van der Steen's second question focuses on the relevance (and need) of having various politicised interpretations. Here two episodes are used to illustrate the instrumental usage of history in attempt to monopolise events from the Revolt. In the North the religious conflicts show that during the period 1618-1621 the public memory of the Revolt could be a political and religious weapon. At the end of the day, the Counter-Remonstrants 'won' the debate and henceforward their interpretation of history became commonly accepted. In the Southern Netherlands, the defection of Count Hendrik van den Bergh, who originally fought for the south, is a concrete example of the selective use of history. Where Archduchess Isabella expressed her dismay by referring to the noble deeds of Van den Bergh's family, Van den Bergh himself applied historical examples to his own situation: during the early years of the Revolt army leaders often defected from the Spanish army when the situation left much to be desired.

Van der Steen's third question is answered mainly in the last part of his book where he discusses the Revolt in retrospective. During the 1672 crisis, the Republic dragged the Revolt's history up again. Orangists attributed William III with much power as William of Orange had made sure that the Northern Netherlands had survived, while their opponents claimed that heirs should not automatically receive honour. In the south, the period of the Revolt was remembered for the Habsburg monarchy taking a stand against conflicting elements in society and respecting the local privileges (contrary to the usurping French monarchy). It was exactly that same threat of the French monarchy that caused a more uniform 'national' story to appear in the Republic.

*Memory Wars* is an attractive, well-written book with many appealing examples. Additionally, the illustrations are an asset and well-embedded in the text. Van der Steen takes his reader by the hand and walks him through the history, explaining events and illustrating them with an impressive amount of source material. As this book covers both entities of the Low Countries (North and South) as well as 134 years of history, it is understandable that choices had to be made. Van der Steen explains his choices by focusing on the political memory practices at the national level, leaving the local practices to others to research. Despite this limitation, references to the local level are abundant and thus the research is still well embedded in this respect.

Overall, *Memory Wars* is a refreshing comparative history on the Netherlandish identity and the memories of the Revolt. It is an exposé of the sophisticated public reaction to the political developments in the Dutch Republic and the Habsburg Netherlands. This work represents a major advance for memory studies and political-cultural history – and cannot be overlooked when studying the identity-formation of the Low Countries. We should hope for a Dutch translation of this book – with a far less expensive publisher – to open this research to a wide audience.