

EXIBITION

Fair to Cloudy? The Netherlands and Germany after 1945 on Display

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“Heiter bis wolkig” (“Fair to cloudy”) and “Zimmer frei” (“Rooms to let”) are the titles of two exhibitions on Dutch-German relations. They were presented both in Germany (“Heiter bis wolkig,” Haus der Geschichte, Bonn: 22 Nov. 2000 – 16 Apr. 2001) and the Netherlands (“Zimmer frei,” Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam: 26 May – 16 Sep. 2001), focusing on the relations between the two countries after the Second World War.

What follows reviews and comments on these two (allegedly identical) exhibitions in two different places and nation-states. They were developed as “one” exhibit in cooperation with two museums, yet one finds a range of differences between them, for they express what the creators of the respective “national exhibitions” assume the people of one nation know about themselves and are supposed to know about the Other. The exhibitions, therefore, also provide insights about the history of Germany and the Netherlands over the past 50 years. That is to say, the exhibitions deal with the two “nations” as such, the relations between these “nations,” and their respective “peoples” -- “the Germans” and “the Dutch.”

Putting on display the question “What do the Germans think of the Dutch and what do the Dutch make of the Germans?”, the exhibitions portray “facts and fictions” regarding the neighbors’ postwar contacts. Addressing seven themes (tourism, politics, economics, culture, cross-border ties, postwar relations, and war remembrances) and including 600 sites, the collection is composed of various types of exhibits, including photographs, posters, advertisements, artworks, official documents, garments, film- and sound-fragments, as well as a (Dutch) caravan and a (German) Volkswagen Beetle. Altogether, these sites expose the complexity of Dutch-German relations – relations that are characterized by mutual economic dependency, untroubled holiday pleasure, and the difficulties both parties have in dealing with the terrible period from 1940-45, when Nazi-Germany occupied the Netherlands.

As the exhibitions disclose, the Dutch have relied on anti-German sentiments (because of wartime occupation), but this has been accompanied by the need

and wish to do business with the Germans, i.e. the Dutch attitude remains ambivalent. The exhibitions also reveal that Dutch public opinion can quite easily become anti-German again (e.g. after racist attacks against foreigners in Germany or soccer matches between the two national teams). For the Germans, on the other hand, the Netherlands is only one of nine neighboring states and thus, "not that important." Apart from the latent but well-hidden German sense of guilt, the attitude towards this neighbor tends to be one of friendly ignorance. For the Dutch, there seems to be an inferiority complex of a small country towards its bigger neighbor at work.

Political relations between the two countries only began to normalize 25 years after the end of WWII. A political basis for this was established when Princess Beatrix married the German Claus von Amsberg in 1966, an event that was accompanied by public unrest in the Netherlands. During the wedding, "Claus raus!" ("Claus out!") demonstrations took place in Amsterdam. These protests mirrored the widespread anxiety of "another German invasion." Paradoxically, the first Dutch-German cross-border region was established as early as 1958 and, as an *Euregio*, became a model for the more than one hundred cross-border regions now found throughout Europe.

The underlying ambiguity of Dutch/German relations can also be found within the exhibitions' tourism theme. The title of the Dutch exhibition, "Zimmer frei" ("rooms to let," which is a play on signs advertising vacancies at guesthouses on the Dutch coast), refers to the fact that many Germans spend their holidays on the Dutch North Sea coast. At the same time, it hints at the relationship's ambivalence. According to the exhibits, the Dutch have not really wanted the Germans to come ("again"), but their "commercial mentality" considers these visits to be an easy way of making money. The flow of tourist traffic is not unidirectional, however, as the Dutch like to go hiking and skiing in the hilly and mountainous regions of Germany as well. As a result of these mutual visits, images of "typical Germanness" are produced in terms of a "German occupier mentality" that reveals itself in claiming ("occupying") parts of the beaches and building sandcastles. Among Germans, "typical Dutchness" is evoked in turn, and is revealed in the word "Carawahn," a play on the words caravan and mania – due to the traffic jams caused by slow Dutch caravans on German motorways in the summer.

One example of "encounters" in the popular culture theme is "Frau Antje," a blond woman dressed in traditional garb who advertises Dutch cheese on German TV; she has been part of German TV for over forty years. While she is practically unknown in the Netherlands, she is known by 90 percent of the Germans and symbolizes "the Dutch" in Germany. Conversely, TV-detective Derrick (Horst Tappert) is "the most famous German" for the Dutch. Soccer matches between the Dutch and the Germans are also displayed as part of the

popular culture theme. Since the German national team beat the Dutch in the Soccer World Championship finals in 1974, soccer between Germany and the Netherlands has gained significance far beyond sports. Particularly after the Dutch triumph over Germany in the 1988 European championship semi-finals, soccer in both countries has become part of popular culture in which many national stereotypes as well as nationalistic images and prejudices are employed. In the exhibitions, there is a poster portraying the Dutch soccer player Frank Rijkaard and the German one Rudi Völler having breakfast together. As part of a (Dutch) advertising campaign for dairy products, it reads: "With real butter, one gets them at one table again," referring to an incident in which Rijkaard spat at Völler during a 1990 match between Germany and the Netherlands. Over the last decade, this image of Rijkaard spitting at Völler has become part of Germany's popular collective memory.

In a curious Alice-in-the-looking-glass way, Dutch-German relations in the postwar period have evolved beyond the idea: "You are entering Germany: end of the civilized world" (which was a signpost at the Dutch-German border in 1945 and was displayed in the exhibitions) to that of an earlier motto: "May friendship mend what frontiers rend" (which was a wooden post at the border set up in 1911, and was also displayed). Yet, one of the European Union's primary goals and premises – integration (and thus borderlessness) – is far from having been achieved between Germany and the Netherlands. As the two exhibitions show, the border continues to separate the two neighbors and each people's (national) identification. Nevertheless, the exhibitions also reveal differences in how national frameworks shape common knowledge and ideas. Whereas the Amsterdam exhibition paid less attention to German occupation and caravan-holidays, it placed much more emphasis than the Bonn exhibition on the "Claus raus!" events and on Dutch-German military co-operation since the early 1960s.

Overall, the forecast (and title) "fair to cloudy" mirrors the uneasy relationship between Germany and the Netherlands; however, it also serves as a metaphor for the exhibitions' themes, composition, and objectives. The showcasing of Dutch-German relations as well as the exhibitions themselves rely very much on clichés. Germans are associated with beer, being fat, loud and xenophobic, while the Netherlands is reduced to beach holidays, agricultural products (especially greenhouse vegetables, tulips, and cheese), windmills, caravans, and drugs. Nevertheless, the exhibitions attempt to move beyond clichés by applying well-known stereotypes and "typical attributes" of the respective Other. Thus, one of the exhibitions' objectives is to employ the stereotyped conceptions of the Other in order to contrast them with actual contacts. Whether or not this has the effect of opening people's minds is debatable.

It seems that the creators of these exhibitions assumed that visitors – by experiencing the full effect of the 600 sites – would be motivated to question prejudices and enter into a discussion about stereotyped images in general and national images of Self and Other in particular. In fact, since the exhibits are displayed in a very creative and lively manner, it is easy for visitors to dive into any one of the seven themes. But, when analyzing comments left by visitors in the exhibitions' visitor books as well as the media reports about the exhibitions, it becomes clear that – at least in the short run – little has changed in the collective memory of either country, although contacts on the individual level appear much less ambivalent. In general, both Dutch and German forms of identification demand an opposition in order to function; their national identities are constructed through and against their neighbor. Germany thus continues to function as the Other for the Netherlands and vice versa.