



Communist work camps, extermination camps or re-education camps. Each European country has a camp history. Shocking stories about these often remain deeply hidden. Rob van der Laarse (VU Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam) uncovered many of these with an interdisciplinary European team.

Did you know?

Camp Westerbork was built by the Netherlands to accommodate German Jews who fled the Nazi regime. And the Germans, once in power, used German Jews from the camp as an order service when it became a transit camp for Dutch Jews.

Take Camp Westerbork in the Netherlands. Did you know that it was built by the Netherlands to accommodate German Jews who fled from the Nazi regime? And that once they had gained power, the Germans used the German Jews from the camp as marshals when it became the transit camp for Dutch Jews? The watchtowers were mainly manned by Dutch citizens. Hardly any German Nazis worked in the camp. 'Many German Jews eventually emigrated to America. Their children now visit Westerbork. But they don't get to hear this piece of history', says Rob van der Laarse.

Impressive European research

Van der Laarse is Professor of the shared Westerbork Chair on the Heritage and Memory of Conflict and War at the University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam. With funding from various parties, including NWO, he has over the past three years led the HERA project [Accessing Campscapes. Inclusive strategies for European conflicted heritage](#): impressive European research into the current role of former war and work camps in the national and European commemorative cultures. From national socialist extermination camps to communist work camps in Eastern Europe and Russian Gulags: researchers are developing strategies to make the concealed histories of these frequently vanished camps more visible and discussable for all concerned.



Preserved photo of Moluccans in 'woonoord' Schattenberg

Current refugee issue

The historian and anthropologist continues the story about Westerbork: 'After the war, the Netherlands placed members of the Dutch National Socialist Movement in the camp. After that, Dutch survivors of the Indonesian camps were housed in Westerbork. Between 1950 and 1970, Moluccans lived in the camp and it was then called 'woonoord' Schattenberg. What makes this extremely charged place so complicated is that many things are difficult to talk about. Due to this difficulty, we are scarcely capable of initiating a public debate in which the victims, perpetrators and bystanders still play a role.' With this remark, Van der Laarse is referring to the Holocaust and postcolonial memories but also to exclusion and the current refugee issue.

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From demolition to train hijacking

In those days, the Moluccans felt suppressed. That became even worse when a silent zone was imposed around the Westerbork radio telescope that encompassed Schattenberg, which in 1970 was no longer found on any map and was demolished without protest. Van der Laarse: 'That was necessary for the proper functioning of those telescopes, but the Moluccans interpreted that differently. They could no longer visit their past. That loss enhanced the radicalisation of a number of young people which resulted in the train hijacking of 1977.'

Did you know?

Disagreement about the number of victims is called Number War. For example, the Serbians and Croatians disagree about the number of dead in the extermination camp Jasenovac. Nevertheless, the researchers managed to bring the two parties into contact with each other.



The debate about how many people were killed in Camp Jasenovac still rages

The infamous "Auschwitz of the Balkans"

One war can cause another, according to Van der Laarse. He illustrates that with the trauma of Srebrenica in 1995. 'Serbian general Mladić expelled the Muslim men there under the supervision of Dutchbat. That extreme Serbian aggression was partly triggered by a travelling exhibition at the end of the 1980s about Jasenovac. In that infamous "Auschwitz of the Balkans", the Croats and Bosnians executed about 100,000 Serbians, Romani and Jews according to recent estimates. Serbians claim 700,000 were killed, but Croatian nationalists say at most 30,000.'

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Drones and radar

Van der Laarse works together with partners in various European countries – from archaeologists and historians to developers of virtual and augmented reality – to expose as many concealed and hidden histories as possible. 'We investigate the previous camp environs on foot and using drones. For example, those drones can make thermal measurements at certain moments of the day to distinguish wood from stone. We can use ground radar to find foundations and mass



Aerial photos of the camps

graves. We study old aerial photos and look for information everywhere, especially about aspects that are difficult to tell, or are concealed or modified. We have also excavated tens of thousands of objects with which we can tell new, more inclusive stories.'

Museums, virtual reality and portals

Van der Laarse and his colleagues have optimally disclosed the large quantities and layers of information. 'In the memorial camps that we work with, our Spanish partner has provided tablets on which all the camps have been interactively reconstructed with virtual and augmented reality. The accurate reconstructions include sources, historical photos and stories. You can virtually walk through the camps, like the long-forgotten Spanish Civil War camp Castuera, the Romani camp in the Czech Republic and the Treblinka extermination camp in Poland.' Not all knowledge will end up in museums. 'We are also producing specialist portals, for example for students who want to write a dissertation and other people who want to know more than the standard museum visitor.'



VR panorama in the Bergen-Belsen Memorial

Joint exhibition

He continues: 'For example, we are working with Scanlab (UCL, London), 4DResearch Lab (University of Amsterdam), Spinlab (VU Amsterdam), and SPECS-Lab (Barcelona) on 4D reconstructions of the commanding officers' quarters and the commander's office in Westerbork, in Bergen-Belsen and the Norwegian concentration camp Falstad. This allows us to disclose this lost heritage in the joint travelling exhibition without the need to reconstruct anything. We can also show various groups of descendants their past, such as the Moluccans who, when they saw a virtual reconstruction of Westerbork, recalled their time in Schattenberg.'

Westerbork seconded two members of staff to the project. Van der Laarse: 'They took part in the field trips and workshops in the various memorial camps. For each camp investigated, the researchers determined the research agenda with the partner or manager concerned. They designated icons, themes and storylines which reappear in a digital platform.'



Moluccan children in 'wonoord' Schattenberg

Unusable due to privacy laws

A setback for the researchers was the more stringent privacy legislation. 'We cannot use many of the photos for the time being. All of the descendants must first give permission and our memorial centres no longer dare to exhibit the material concerned. That is unworkable for a project that touches upon painful memories.'

Another setback is that our funding will run out in December 2019. 'With relatively little funding we have demonstrated that we can do valuable humanities research, and we can also achieve a lot in society. I hope that we manage to continue because, even if it is not necessary to map all camps using our approach, there is still a lot of important history to expose. And now we have brought all of the expertise together to do that.'

The project [Accessing Campscapes](#)

The project [Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage](#) (iC-ACCESS) involved, besides the University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam, five other universities in Norway, the United Kingdom, Spain, Germany and the Czech Republic. The researchers also worked closely with six memorial centres, museums, archives and ICT developers. The project received a grant of 1.3 million euros from HERA ([Humanities in the European Research Area](#)), a collaboration between 26 European research councils and the humanities, in which NWO is one of the partners.

Rob van der Laarse

Rob van der Laarse (1956) is Professor of the shared Westerbork Westerbork chair in War and Conflict Heritage at the University of Amsterdam and VU Amsterdam. He studied history and anthropology at the University of Amsterdam and worked within various NWO projects, including [Terrorscape](#)s. He was also one of the two leaders of the NWO research line [Dynamics of Memory](#).

Overview relevant websites

[Campscapes.org](#)

[Project on HERA-website](#)

[NWO-HERA research programme: Humanities in the European Research Area](#)

By Rianne Lindhout

Images: iC-ACCESS