



MUSSERT'S WALL

Lunteren, The Netherlands

52.095889, 5.646528



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Executive Summary

In 1936, the Dutch fascist party NSB constructed a complex in the town of Lunteren called Mussert's Wall (*Muur van Mussert*), where they would hold political rallies. After being neglected for decades after World War II, in 2015, a national discussion arose following requests by local and national heritage organisations to turn Mussert's Wall into an educational memorial. A complex decision-making process followed until 2018 when the Wall was transformed into a national monument. This case study analyses the process of contestation and posterior institutionalisation of the Wall.

Introduction

Mussert's Wall is the only remaining structure of a complex built by the Dutch fascist party NSB in 1936 near the Dutch town of Lunteren to hold its political rallies. After being neglected for decades after World War II, a national discussion about the fate of the Wall started in 2015 after a request by local and national heritage organisations and prominent individuals to turn the Wall into an educational memorial.¹ After a complex decision-making process involving the private owner of the land and the municipal and national governments, the Wall was eventually designated a national monument in 2018. In the meantime, the public media debate and academic studies about the contested site show how the contestation around the Wall revolved around if or how the NSB and Dutch collaboration during WWII should be memorialised.

Background

Construction on the Nationaal Tehuis (National Home) NSB complex of which Mussert's Wall was a part started in 1936 but was never finished as construction halted in 1942. The Wall itself was completed by 1939. The Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (National Socialist Movement) was founded in 1933 by Cees van Geelkerken and the party's leader Anton Mussert. This Dutch fascist party grew rapidly, and the site was constructed to host the ever-growing membership of the NSB in its political rallies.² In the small town of Lunteren, now in the municipality of Ede, the land was bought by the NSB in 1936 and held a deep ideological meaning. The Goudsberg on which the site was built was considered sacred ground in party ideology: it was not only the official geographical centre of the Netherlands but seen as steeped in Germanic history, located in a rural environment commensurate with the fascist ideology of 'Blood and Soil'. Like the Nazi rallies at Nuremberg, after which the NSB site was modelled, the rallies were intended to help develop party ideology and identity by creating a sense of a pilgrimage back to the Germanic cultural roots of the Netherlands.³

However, the site was only used a few times, and Mussert only held two rallies on the Wall, which served to hold up a podium in 1939 and 1940. Similar to Nuremberg's mass rallies, they were only held once a year to increase their symbolic value. But the rallies ceased to be held after 1940 as the German occupation of the Netherlands made petrol scarce.⁴ Nevertheless, the Nationaal Tehuis was intended to be a lasting legacy of the NSB that would stand the test of time. Mussert claimed in 1938 that 'the woodwork will have perished, the ironworks consumed by rust, but the great meeting area will remain [...] And generations of people thereafter will talk about the history of the Dutch people, saying that in Alkmaar began the victory, in Lunteren at the Goudsberg began the resurrection.'⁵

After the war, the land was given to the Scouts and served as a meeting ground for various other organisations. It was sold via a developer to the Zoons family, who turned the site into a camping

¹ Maud Effting, "Wat te doen met de muur van Mussert?" *de Volkskrant*, December 2, 2015.

² René van Heijningen, *De Muur van Mussert*. (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015)

³ Claire Farbrace, *Heritage in the Making: The Case of Mussert's Wall and its Contested World War II Heritage*. Master Thesis FGw MA - Erfgoedstudies, University of Amsterdam (2019): 12.

⁴ *De Muur van Mussert*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 52

site in 1955. By this time, the place seemed to have lost its association with the NSB past. Owners and visitors now regard it as a recreation centre and nature reserve.⁶ A fierce local discussion about the site emerged in the 1990s when the Ede municipality proposed to turn the site into a refugee centre. The refugee centre was never built because of massive local resistance and declining refugee numbers. The possible NSB legacy was not regarded as relevant and not mentioned in this discussion. Thus by the turn of the 21st century, the Wall had become neglected and overgrown by plants and trees at the camping site, and its NSB legacy seemed to have been forgotten.

History of the Contestation

The contestation first began locally in 2004 when a zoning request by the current owner of the site Roderick Zoons reminded the Ede municipality of the existence of the Wall and its unique legacy.⁷ The Ede Monument Commission advised the executive to turn the site into a municipal monument. These plans evoked a fierce local discussion in the municipal council and the local media. Proponents argued that the 'unpleasant' parts of local history the site represented should be remembered and not erased. Former war-resistance members and the CIDI (Center of information and documentation Israel) objected, disputing the site's historical value, noting the risk of the monument attracting rightwing extremists and stressing the emotional damage done to victims of the war. The Ede municipality decided not to turn the Wall into a municipal monument.

The contestation erupted again in 2015, but this time on a national level. The Ede municipal executive restarted the process of conserving the Wall as a monument, and the debate resumed. In both national and local media, proponents and opponents were divided on the issue of whether the NSB legacy the wall represented should be memorialised. The national dimension of the discussion became even more pronounced when local and national heritage organisations like the Stichting Erfgoed Ede and Stichting Heemschut appealed to the RCE (National Heritage Service) to have the Wall designated a national instead of a municipal monument later in the year. The NSB legacy represented in the Wall, it was argued, was historically unique and a 'dark page' in Dutch national history that should be remembered.⁸

The most important arguments by both sides revolve around the issue of memorialising the NSB and the Dutch collaborating past. Central is often the 'wrong' nature of the site and the Dutch fascist party. Various studies have deemed the Wall 'perpetrator heritage,' which represents national shame about the collaborative past.⁹ Opponents of conserving the wall, like local history teacher Carel Verhoef argue that granting the Wall monumental status would fulfil Mussert's wish of creating a lasting monument to his movement. Proponents, like the senior editors of the national newspaper *Trouw*, refute the argument by contending that precisely the 'wrongness' of the Wall makes it a 'dark page' in Dutch history that should be memorialised to give a complete picture in

⁶ Kim Hensbergen, *Een muur van betekenis. De omgang met de 'Muur van Mussert' in Lunteren (1936-2016)*. Master Thesis University of Amsterdam (2016).

⁷ Ibid., 52

⁸ Maud Effting, "Wat te doen met de muur van Mussert?" *de Volkskrant*, December 2, 2015.

⁹ Kim Hensbergen, *Een muur van betekenis. De omgang met de 'Muur van Mussert' in Lunteren (1936-2016)*. Master Thesis University of Amsterdam (2016): 56.

the memorialisation of WWII.¹⁰ A right vs the wrong dichotomy has long been strong in both Dutch academic and popular understanding of the war. The historiographical tradition started with Loe de Jong, who wrote the definitive history of the German Occupation portraying the Dutch people and especially their resistance fighters as 'good' during the war.¹¹ Those who collaborated with Nazi Germany are condemned as 'bad' and 'un-Dutch.' To former resistance fighters and people such as Carel Verhoef, the memorialisation of the NSB would be wrong, as they are not regarded as part of Dutch national history: 'Do tear down the Wall...Its historical value is neglectful.'¹² Furthermore, the site's fascist legacy is feared to have the potential to attract right-wing extremists, an issue raised again in 2015 by the CIDI.

Yet the normative thinking about the NSB memorialisation proved not to be dominant. Proponents of turning the Wall into a monument like The NOID (Institute for War Holocaust and Genocide Studies) and its associated historian Rene van Heijngen certainly do not deny the Wall's 'wrong' legacy. Still, they stress the need to incorporate such 'dark pages' into WWII memorialisation culture. Historian Rene van Heijningen argues that the Wall is a unique site and should be preserved 'we have nothing at all about the NSB heritage and I think it's a pity if you have such a site available and to leave it untouched.'¹³ The CIDI had changed its stance by 2018, approving the conservation of the Wall if it could be for educational use. These ideas also reflect a shift in academic and public thinking about the war. A historiographical shift has stressed the need to avoid a normative framework when studying the Dutch war past. This idea is somewhat reflected in the proposal to turn the Wall into an educational and cautionary monument. A 2019 report by the University of Wageningen made at the request of a local heritage foundation Stitching Erfgoed Ede was aptly named 'What we want to forget but need to remember' and stressed the need to avoid glorification of the site if it is turned into a monument instead using it as an opportunity to learn from the past. One part of this study was a contest amongst students of the University of Delft on a potential design. The winning design by Rik Abelen would transform the Wall and its surroundings into a cautionary tale against extremism.¹⁴

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process regarding the transformation of the Wall into a municipal monument stalled in the Ede municipality in 2004 after a fierce local discussion. The municipal executive decision to stop the process of turning the site into a monument was seen as causing 'too much societal unrest.'¹⁵ The process between 2015 and 2018 was much more long-drawn and complex.

Up until 2018, the Wall remained on property owned by Roderick Zoons. He has essentially

¹⁰ Trouw, "Behoud de Muur van Mussert als waarschuwing," *Trouw*, December 28, 2017.

¹¹ Claire Farbrace, *Heritage in the Making: The Case of Mussert's Wall and its Contested World War II Heritage*. Master Thesis FGw MA - Erfgoedstudies, University of Amsterdam (2018).

¹² Carel Verhoef, "Sloop die Muur van Mussert toch vooral," *Trouw*, January 6, 2018.

¹³ Claire Farbrace, *Heritage in the Making: The Case of Mussert's Wall and its Contested World War II Heritage*. Master Thesis FGw MA - Erfgoedstudies, University of Amsterdam (2018): 23

¹⁴ Roel During and Rosalie van Dam, "Wat we niet willen weten en ons toch moeten herinneren. Toekomstperspectieven voor de Muur van Mussert in Lunteren," *Wageningen University and Research Report* 39 (2019).

¹⁵ Kim Hensbergen, *Een muur van betekenis. De omgang met de 'Muur van Mussert' in Lunteren (1936-2016)*. Master Thesis University of Amsterdam (2016): 10.

supported conserving the Wall and turning it into a monument, providing it would mean either local or national government would buy the site.¹⁶ Zoons was, however, put in a difficult position because of the long-drawn process of deciding whether to turn the Wall into a monument. Zoons primarily used his campaign for housing Eastern European migrant workers, but the Ede municipal government started a program to improve conditions in camping and recreation centres which incentivised Zoons to request to tear down the Wall in 2017 to make room for more recreational housing.¹⁷ This request put additional pressure on the proposal to turn the Wall into a monument. The municipal government did not want the structure torn down until the RCE and Ministry of Education Culture and Science decided on the Wall. Although a stakeholder, the owner thus had limited control over what would happen with the Wall. When it was announced that the Wall would become a national monument, Zoons was relieved because it had finally become clear what would happen to the site.¹⁸

During the 2015-2018 contestation, a debate occurred within the Ede municipality. Still, the executive decided to support appeals for turning the site into a national instead of a municipal monument because of the Wall's important legacy on the national level. The final decision moved to the national government, specifically the RCE and the Ministry of Education Culture and Science. The 2015 request to the RCE was refused because the organisation was itself going to investigate WWII historic sites like the Wall in 2017. Repeated requests by the municipality and heritage organisations were politely refused by Minister Jet Bussemaker, who wanted to avoid making a decision about the Wall at the end of her time in office.¹⁹ The result was that the national government had needlessly prolonged the decision-making process since 2015. The threat of the Wall being torn down by the owner put more pressure on the decision-making process. Bussemaker's successor, Ingrid van Engelshoven, appointed the Wall a national monument in 2018 after the advice of the RCE.

Summary and Conclusions

The contestation around Mussert's Wall ended in 2018 when it was designated a national monument. The Wall's contentious legacy and the interplay between the owner, municipal and national government significantly delayed the government's decision-making. After a lengthy public debate, a commission has been organised to deliberate on how best to turn the Wall into an educational monument. A not-for-profit foundation has been set up to look for funds to build an educational centre.²⁰ However, the years-long discussion and decision-making process exposed the difficulty of dealing with 'perpetrator heritage' or sites that are seen as representing the 'wrong' side of the Dutch war history. This larger public discussion remains relevant. It may lead to contestation at other sites associated with the Dutch collaborative past, or maybe a restart of

¹⁶ Roel During and Rosalie van Dam, "Wat we niet willen weten en ons toch moeten herinneren. Toekomstperspectieven voor de Muur van Mussert in Lunteren," *Wageningen University and Research Report* 39 (2019): 23.

¹⁷ Erika van Gils, "Sloop dreigt voor Muur van Mussert in Lunteren," *de Gelderlander*, November 7, 2017.

¹⁸ Roel During and Rosalie van Dam, "Wat we niet willen weten en ons toch moeten herinneren. Toekomstperspectieven voor de Muur van Mussert in Lunteren," *Wageningen University and Research Report* 39 (2019): 23.

¹⁹ Trouw, "Minister vertraagde bescherming Muur van Mussert," *Trouw*, December 23, 2017.

²⁰ *Ede Stad*, "Recreatie, nieuwe natuur en bezinning bij Muur van Mussert", February 1, 2020.

contestation of the Wall when its reconstruction is finished.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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