A coalition of scholars : Archivists and Historians in the age of post-truth[1]

Nico Wouters

This contribution argues that historians and archivists within specific institutional contexts and working in fields related to historical periods of grave human rights abuses, could form a 'coalition of scholars': a structured form of collaboration and dialogue that respects the separate professional roles of archivists and historians, but enables them to better identify and confront common challenges in our current age of so-called post-truth. This essay does not aim to provide generally applicable conclusions or solid conceptual definitions. First, I will focus on a revaluation of the social power of the archivist (in particular when working with 'human rights archives') and second I will describe the common challenges of 'post-truth' for archivist and historians. To conclude I will apply this to the historiography and the archives of the Second World War in Belgium; mainly to indicate that even 75 years after a traumatic historic event of occupation and war, the challenges to their history and memories are not resolved but still remain.

1/ The agency of the archivist in history and memory

Handling human rights archives in transitional justice

Although there can be discussion on what constitutes "human rights archives"[2], suffice to say in the context of this paper that periods of (civil) wars, mass violence and genocide, dictatorial rule and colonial history in contemporary history are evidently politically charged events that almost inevitably create durable challenges to historic research and the handling of the records and archives.

Because of the specific nature of such collective traumatic periods in history, they tend to generate public records that are unique to that particular period. The most obvious examples are records of special branches of the military, of secret services or a political police, or records of a totalitarian party. During a first phase after the events, these public records often form a necessary and integral part of active transitional justice and transitional governance processes, with the overall aim to restore social stability. The public records will be used for 'transitional governance' – to manage the handling of the administrative, legal and institutional transition and restoration, searching for missing persons for example – and as legal proof for different procedures, most notably restitution for victims and punishment of perpetrators. Identifying victims and tracing missing persons is perhaps the most evident long-term task that in itself can create massive amounts of records: the most emblematic example of this are probably the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen (Germany) holding over 30 million documents created in the process of tracing victims of Nazi persecution (an archive which was included in the Unesco 'Memory of the World' register in 2013).

Both because of their specific nature as well as through sheer volume, the records produced during these periods often form unique archival collections that require specific policy measures and decisions.[3] The most obvious question is whether (parts of) such (an) archival collection(s) need a

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[1] Paper presented during the *Internationales Archivsymposion* (State Archives of Belgium, Leuven/Louvain, 6-7 June 2019). I am indebted to Gertjan Desmet's (CegeSoma/State Archives of Belgium) comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

[2] "(…) there is no general agreement among practitioners and academics on the definition and nature of a human rights archives". Ulrike Lühe, Julia Viebach, Dagmar Hovestädt, Lisa Ott and Benjamin Thorne, *Atrocity's Archives : the Role of Archives in Transitional Justice : guidance note,* p. 1. (https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxlaw/atrocitys_archives_guidance_note-final030818.pdf).

[3] Astrid M. Eckert, The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War. New York, 2012. See also: Patricia Kennedy Grimsted, "Twice Plundered or "Twice Saved"? Identifying Russia's "Trophy" Archives and the Loot of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt", in *Holocaust*

specific set of measures or whether the "normal" national archival framework(s) applies. Because a National Archive is an intrinsic part of the state, it might in some cases not be considered the most opportune custodial institution for these records, following a period of state dictatorship or authoritarian rule. Because of these specific issues, and often the sheer volumes of records, countries sometimes opt for specific measures.[4] This way, countries often opt to create state sponsored institutes with specific legal status or missions and/or specific characteristics.[5] Such institutes often turn out to be 'hybrid institutes' in at least two senses: first in that they combine tasks that are normally carried out in separate institutes (universities, museums and heritage foundations, national archives) and second in that they sometimes hold special mandates or government assignments (lustration/vetting, gathering of legal proof) and therefore have a specific institutional relationship with the state (e.g. a board of directors appointed by the government) or employ a heterogeneous staff that – apart from archivists and historians – can also include legal experts, communication experts, administration specialists etc. Examples of such institutes created after the Second World War are the National Institute for War Documentation (created in the Netherlands in 1945), the *Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent* (created in France in 1978 out of the fusion of several older centres) and the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (created as such in 1952 in West-Germany), that all came into being out of record-keeping activities and the study of the Second World War. Examples in post-Communist contexts are the Federal Commissioner for the Stasi Records in East-Germany (created as early as 1990), the Institute of National Remembrance created in 1998 in Poland, the Nation's Memory Institute created in 2002 in Slovakia and the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes created in 2006 in the Czech Republic.[6] There are many other examples outside of these evident fields; just as an example I would like to point to the important project that ran between 2015 and 2019 about Rwandan archives ("Atrocity's Archives: The Remnants of Transitional Justice in Rwanda", funded by the Leverhulme Early Career Trust Fellowship and the Faculty of Law Oxford University).[7]

Such a 'transitional period' can obviously greatly vary in length and nature, depending on the specific context. John Torpey indicates separate phases in the 'life-cycle' of dealing with collective historic

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and Genocide Studies, Volume 15, Issue 2, Fall 2001, pp. 191–244; Douglas Cox, "Archives & Records in Armed Conflict: International Law and the Current Debate Over Iraqi Records and Archives", in *Catholic University Law Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4, 2010; Bruce Montgomery, "Saddam Hussein's Records of Atrocity: Seizure, Removal, and Restitution", in *The American Archivist,* 2012, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 326-370; Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, Chicago, 2007; Despina Syrri, "On Dealing with the Past, Transitional Justice and Archives", in *Balcanica*, nr. XXXIX, Issue Year: 2008, pp. 221-242; Kirsten Campbell, "The Laws of Memory: The ICTY, the Archive, and Transitional Justice", in *Social & Legal Studies,* vol. 22 , nr. 2, 2012, pp. 247-269; Daniela Accatino, Cath Collins, "Truth, Evidence, Truth: The Deployment of Testimony, Archives and Technical Data in Domestic Human Rights Trials", in *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Vol. 8, nr. 1, 2016, pp. 81–100; Edward Klijn, "Archieven en de 'historische waarheid", in Ron Blom (e.a., eds.), *Macht en onmacht. De rol van archieven in oorlog en bij rechtsherstel*, Jaarboek 14 Stichting Archiefpublicaties, 's Gravenhage, 2014, pp. 29-49; Anna Robinson-Sweet, "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists", in *The American Archivist*, 2018, Vol. 81, no. 1, pp. 23-37.

[4] "A number of countries have created special research institutes to hold the records of security services or political parties or military forces. These institutes are most likely to arise when the entities that created the archives have been implicated in human rights abuses or involved in significant traumatic events". Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Archives, Agency and the State", in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds.), *The Handbook of State Sponsored History after 1945*, Basingstoke/New York, 2018, pp. 139-159.

[5] "They are distinct from general national archives in their focused mandate to keep and make available very specific bodies of archives, investigate and do academic research, and commemorate and educate the public about the historic injustices that are documented in the archives". Idem, quote p. 147.

[6] For an interesting global overview of state sponsored institutional policies after 1945 in this regard: Lutz Raphael, "State Authority and Historical Research: Institutional Settings and Trends Since 1945", in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds.), *The Handbook of State Sponsored History after 1945,* London, 2018, pp. 209-237

[7] See the dedicated website (consulted 2 May 2020): https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/atrocities-archives-remnants-transitional-justice-rwanda.

traumas, in which the phase of "communicative history" is the last.[8] However, although the sequencing of certain steps in transitional justice processes is of the utmost importance with regard to outcome and success, in reality such stages are hard to separate and distinguish. Somewhere during the transition, the active and dynamic public records will gradually become static historical archives and acquire a different legal status. However, this transition from one phase to the other – from active dynamic record-keeping and creation to historic static archives for research or fact-finding purposes - is usually never clearly distinguishable. As far as records are concerned, the end of the 'transitional' period and the beginning of the 'historic' period will mostly occur through a protracted period of overlap.[9] Seeking and identifying missing persons and victims for example, or managing the financial restitution for victims, is an administrative process that often stretches over many decades. Even "mere" judicial proceedings can take place decades after the events, as WWII shows for example (as perhaps the most emblematic examples) through the court trials against Klaus Barbie, Paul Touvier and Maurice Papon in the late 1980s and late 1990 - the so-called 'second postwar purge' in France against the backdrop of raised public awareness about the "Vichy syndrome".[10] The global wave of historic expert committees or restitution committees with regard to the persecution of the Jewish people during WWII and the Shoah are another example. After decades of silence and invisibility these victim groups took centre stage, which shows that when global perceptions and paradigms shift decades after the events, waves of new transitional justice initiatives can occur.[11]

Whatever the specific context, at a certain point systematic forms of academic investigations into those traumatic past events will begin, be it through independent (university) research or state sponsored initiatives of which truth or expert commissions are the most evident. Such state sponsored initiatives or other forms of transitional justice processes will in turn also produce different types of archives: court archives, truth and reconciliation committee and research archives, or perhaps survivor testimony archives.[12] The latter are of particular importance: the audiovisual records of witness testimonies sometimes recorded long after the events in specific contexts (academic research, remembrance procedures, victim agency, judicial investigations etc.) create archives whose specific nature pose a particular set of challenges. The specific nature of transitional justice processes – their broadness/inclusive character, their timing, the specific nature of the measures, their enduring effects, their political instrumentalization etc. – will therefore in itself become an integral part of subsequent memory regimes.[13]

The social power of archives in holistic transitional justice

All this meant that the four classic objectives in a holistic approach of transitional justice – how to defend the right to know, the right to justice, the right to reparations and the guarantee of non-

[8] Which he defines as "(…) a history oriented toward mutual agreement by the various parties that participate in re-writing historical narratives on the basis of a claim that they are (most) directly affected by the history in question". John Torpey, *Politics and the Past*, NY, 2003, p. 6.

[9] The 'records continuum model' is highly relevant in this regard as well. For practical reasons, I have chosen not to further integrate this within the framework of this paper (https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/records-continuum.html).

[10] Richard J. Golsan, "The State, the Courts, and the Lessons of History: An Overview, with Reference to Some Emblematic Cases", in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds.), *The Handbook of State Sponsored History after 1945,* London, 2018, pp. 513-535.

[1111] Eva-Clarita Pettai, "Historical Expert Commissions and Their Politics", in Berber Bevernage and Nico Wouters (eds.), The Handbook of State Sponsored History after 1945, London, 2018, pp. 687-713.

[12] For a very informative report about the archives of Truth Commissions, see: Sandra Rubli and Briony Jones, "Archives for a Peaceful Future", *Essential 1*, 2013, http://www.swisspeace.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Media/Publications/Essentials/Essential_1_2013_Juni.pdf - (last consulted online 25 April 2020).

[13] Nico Wouters, "How to approach transitional justice and memory?", in Nico Wouters (ed.), *Transitional Justice and Memory in Europe (1945-2013)*, Intersentia, Antwerp/Cambridge, 2014, pp. 369-412.

recurrence[14] - are in fact always closely intertwined with archives-related issues. Such archival issues and questions are: how do we create public access to the records for the larger public (victims and their relatives), how do we understand and organize the "ownership" of the records, how do archive keeping and historical research support processes of remembrance, reconciliation or peace building.[15] A recent 'guidance note on archives and transitional justice' features a long list of roles archives can play in these processes. As sites of memory, these archival institutes can be sites of power, of societal contestation, of knowledge production, of memory-making, of education (about history, about human rights) and obviously also of academic research. Furthermore, according to this note, they can create opportunities for the inclusion of dissenting opinions, they can be an instrument for the advancement of transitional justice mechanisms (most evidently in trials or other investigations), a (symbolic) institute to pay respect to victims of atrocities (memorials), advocates to support victims and advocates of human rights, and repositories of memories. We are talking about many different processes with their own complexity: schematically, they are accountability and prosecutions, reparation and restitution, vetting and institutional reform, memorialization, education, outreach, and academic research.

Although historians or researchers are often put in a central role (e.g. in truth commissions), I primarily want to underscore the importance of the agency of the archivist or record-keeper.[16] Indeed, the above makes it abundantly clear that information specialists and archivists tasked with handling these records and archives on the longer term hold substantial power when performing their basic tasks, such as creating finding aids, providing access to information, carrying out digitization, appraisal and selection choices. The latter is especially pertinent and I would like to illustrate this with a longer citation of Terry Cook:

> "I would assert that a major act of determining historical meaning—perhaps *the* major act—occurs not when the historian opens the box, but when the archivist fills the box, and, by implication, through the process of archival appraisal, destroys the other 98 or 99 percent of records that do not get into that or any other archival box. And, further, what of the layers of archival interpretation (….) that highlight, or do not, the complex interrelationships among creators of records, their surrounding organizational cultures, patterns of contemporary record communication and use, and the record-shaping characteristics of information technologies and recording media—all these deeply affecting the meaning of the surviving records."[17]

Although in general terms one could say that appraisal and destruction is much less applied to human rights archives than to other large serial archival collections, the main point is that the social power of archivists making basic choices cannot be underestimated. These archival collections hold real political power in the construction of history and memories, and so do therefore the archival policies.[18] However, by definition the archivist needs to work in a broader professional and civic

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[14] Four axes of a holistic Transitional Justice approach to historic human rights violations put forward by the 1997 report of UN Special Rapporteur Louis Joinet.

[15] Anna Robinson-Sweet, "Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists" in *The American Archivist* 2018, Vol. 81, no. 1, pp. 23-37.

[16] Tom Nesmith, "Toward the Archival Stage in the History of Knowledge", in *Archivaria,* 80, 2015, pp. 119-145. See also : Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci, "What We Do Crosses over to Activism" The Politics and Practice of Community Archives, in *The Public Historian*, Vol. 40, no. 2, 2018, pp. 69-95; Gregory S. Hunter, "The Archival Profession and Society", in *The American Archivist*, 2015, Vol. 78, no. 2, pp. 285-287; Tanya Zanish-Belcher, "Keeping Evidence and Memory: Archives Storytelling in the Twenty-First Century", in *The American Archivist*, 82, no. 1, 2019, pp. 9-23.

[17] Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape, in *The American Archivist*, 74, 2011, pp. 600-632 (citation : p. 613).

[18] Stefan Berger, "The role of national archives in constructing national master narratives in Europe", in *Archival Science* 13, 2012, pp. 1-22; Joan M. Schartz and Terry Cook, " Archives, Records, and Power: The

network. The archivist's work cannot be "(…) a contribution to justice and memory, without working hand in hand with others such as political stakeholders, nongovernmental partners and civil society, and citizens".[19] I want to focus on one of those partners and stakeholders, namely historians.

2/ History and memory in the age of post-truth

Post-truth and the challenges to science

The questions of how to tackle the history of these traumatic historic events are no less complex than those of how to deal with the records. The integration of these periods of war and dictatorship in a new national history, includes supporting new (democratic) political legitimacy, sustaining collective memories and commemoration and healing wounded national identities. Fact-finding endeavours and the quest for historic truth are accentuated when it concerns these historic traumas exactly because the historic interpretation of "truth(s)" inevitably overlaps with responsibility, guilt, moral evaluations, social stability in (local) communities and reconciliation between social groups and international relations. The famous quote by Michael Ignatieff seems to indicate that the overall social 'assignment' of historic research is clear cut, notably to "reduce the number of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse"[20]. Reality is far more complex however, partly because both the political and ideological abuse of history and the number of lies do not steadily decline when the distance in time to the event grows and the 'facts' progressively come to light. Reality shows that facts – even when available – can be ignored. It also shows that even when some kind of general consensus is established around what constitutes a certain "historic truth", this is delicate and can be fundamentally put into question. It was astounding, for example, to see that during the centenary commemoration of the First World War (2014-2018), the issue of a historic controversy that everyone considered to be almost evidently resolved by a generally accepted academic consensus – concerning the responsibilities in the violence by the German military against Belgian civilians during the invasion of Belgium in August 1914 – was suddenly yet again fundamentally contested by a new book of a German scholar that was supported by one of the leading scholars in this field.[21] But WWII offers many more obvious examples of problematic revisionism, as recent debates around Polish revisionism of domestic Nazi collaboration and Polish responsibilities in the Jewish persecution and the Shoah prove. Arguably, the political and symbolic use (or abuse) of history strengthens after 1989: "The past has never been as relevant for the present as it is in today's post-truth world: (…) many of our political leaders are promising to bring us back to a past that never existed – the Great America of Trump, the Lost Empire of Farage or the French Resistance of Le Pen".[22]

The term 'post-truth' is a buzzword that seems to capture different forms of pressure on traditional scientific knowledge. Although the term predates the Trump era and was already used in different

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Making of Modern Memory", in *Archival Science*, 2002 nr. 2, pp. 1-19. See also : Michael Karabinos, "The Role of National Archives in the Creation of National Master Narratives in Southeast Asia", in *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, Volume 2, 2015, art. 4.

[19] Ulrike Lühe, Julia Viebach, Dagmar Hovestädt, Lisa Ott and Benjamin Thorne, *Atrocity's Archives : the Role of Archives in Transitional Justice : guidance note,* p. 8.
See : "Archives and Dealing with the Past" project of Swisspeace (http://archivesproject.swisspeace.ch/ (last consulted on 25 April 2020).

[20] Michael Ignatieff, *The warrior's honor. Ethnic war and the modern conscience,* New York, 1998 (citation : p. 188).

[21] Christoph Brüll & Geneviève Warland, "Débats récents sur l'invasion allemande en Belgique en 1914. À propos d'Ulrich Keller, Schuldfragen", in *Journal of Belgian History*, L, no. 1, 2020, pp. 112-124.

[22] C. de Saint-Laurent, I. Brescó de Luna, S.H. Awad and B. Wagoner, "Collective memory and social sciences in the post-truth era", in *Culture & Psychology* 23 (nr. 2), pp. 147-155 (citation p. 147) (doi: 10.1177/1354067X17695769).

meanings in earlier scholarly works, it clearly rose to the fore in academia but even more in public consciousness in 2016 when 'post-truth' was elected as the Oxford English Dictionary's 'Word of the Year'.

The most common and general definition of post-truth is that of "a diminishing role of accurate information in public discourse by politicians or opinion leaders", mostly characterized by four aspects : (1) a public and often vocal disagreement about facts and data, (2) a conscious blurring of lines between opinion and fact, (3) the increased value and weight of personal opinion over objective facts, (4) and the use of alternative sources of information or de-legitimizing traditional and formerly respected academic sources of information. To further fine-tune this, I would like to refer to Marius Gudonis' recent paper about Holocaust denial, in which he distilled several conceptual key characteristics of the term 'post-truth': the use of emotional arguments (particularly anger and resentment), references to personal beliefs and experiences, hyperbole and exaggeration or even blatant caricatures, a clear disregard for facts, references to what one "feels to be true", references to in-group identity, a blurring between fact and opinion, blatant contradictions, unethical rhetorical devices (notably ad hominem arguments), no reference to facts, anti-establishmentism, anti-expert cynicism, lack of trust in institutions, metaphors and irony, xenophobia, and moral or epistemological relativism.[23] It is of particular importance to note that Gudonis adds one essential element to define the current types of 'post-truth' that distinguishes it from older, pre-existing forms of manipulations of the truths, propaganda or outright lying, notably the fact that current types of 'post-truth' are based on a fundamental *indifference* to truth. This means that in contrast to older forms of truth manipulation, the distinction between truth and lies itself is no longer considered as a relevant factor. In current incarnations of post-truth, we are confronted with the rejection of truth as a relevant factor of evaluation or judgement; the absence of the realization that truth holds value.

The risks of moralized memories

This pressure on historical research is exacerbated by our current presentist moralized memory regime, which is spearheaded by WWII memory regimes and in particular the Holocaust, but affects memory cultures more broadly. The idea of a duty of memory was launched in the wake of the dominance of the Holocaust as major memory paradigm. [24] State policies underscored the idea that 'resolving the past through memory work' could serve as a therapy for social trauma[25]. As new actors appeared in the field of history and public memories, national states seemed to be able to answer with pro-active memory and history policies. New heritage paradigms modernized cultural nationalism. States stimulated a 'moral redress' of the past to strengthen their own self-legitimizing identity politics.[26] Synergies emerged between states and cultural NGOs and private companies (commemorative tourism, for example). This post-1995 'duty of memory' thus translated in a set of

[23] Marius Gudonis, "How Useful is the Concept of Post-Truth in Analysing Genocide Denial?: Analysis of Online Comments on the Jedwabne Massacre", in *Zoon Politikon,* pp. 141-182 (consulted online on 22 April 2020 : https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/acec/20628c25f0ca812fc5f5300e5fd08cb6a915.pdf).
[24] Jan Eckel und Claudia Moisel (eds), *Universalisierung des Holocaust? Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik in internationaler Perspektive*, Göttingen, 2008.
The idea and term of a 'duty of memory' already circulated in a variety of ways and in often loose and different meanings shortly after WWII, mostly in networks of victims and survivors. As a more canonized term, it rose to the fore after the Klaus Barbie trial in France in 1987. For an overview of the history of the term : Olivier Lalieu, 'L'invention du « devoir de mémoire »', in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 2001/1, no. 69, pp. 83-94.
[25] C. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims. The Decay of the American Character*, NY, 1992; F. Furedi, "History as Therapy", in: *Spiked*, no. 5, 2008.
[26] Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition", in A. Gutmann (ed.), *Multiculturalism. Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, 1994, pp. 25-73.

dominant political, social and cultural mechanisms that interact with and reinforce each other in a situation where states have recognized that memory policies are part of their core tasks. Absolute moral categories are communicated as 'lessons from the past' to be used for citizen education. This political and moralized approach merged with the era of instant (digital) documentation and online debate, creating a situation where fleeting moments determine our concept of time and history itself. While state sponsored memory policies and victim-centred participative approaches have gained traction and grown more confident these last 30 years on the one hand, one could say the opposite happened in certain strands of historic research when several postmodern 'turns' replaced the traditional certitudes of historical knowledge with existential doubt.

The replacement of history with cultural memory is a characteristic of a fundamentally presentist memory regime (to use the term of François Hartog) in which memory and cultural heritage policies need to permanently make the past "present". This leads to permanent tensions with the fundamentally historicizing approach of historians, but also archivists.[27] In such a presentist memory regime, post-truth creates common challenges for historical research. Although we cannot and should not return to obsolete notions of neo-positivism, a historicizing scholarly approach towards the past should nevertheless regain its confidence and agency to reclaim its place as societal actor. I firmly believe that our present challenges show that normal, rigidly defined forms of collaboration between archivists and historians are insufficient in many cases and that we should think about more structural and better organized forms of collaboration. This is why I believe this diagnosis of a common problem could lead in some contexts to a mobilization effort to create a 'coalition' of historians and archivists. Traditionally, academic researchers turn out to be major players in transitional justice research when activating archives.[28] They too should therefore recognize more strongly that archives hold very real power over memory construction and transitional justice processes. [29] By the way, in my view such a debate almost completely surpasses the age-old, traditional debate about the professional relationship between archivists and historians as core tasks and specific specialisms are not put into question.[30] While everyone can perfectly maintain individual professional roles within such a coalition, it is feasible however to lay a more structured foundation for dialogue, based first on a similar scholarly historicizing approach to the past and its sources, second on a basic respect for the historical organizing principles of archival collections as well as their historical content and context and third on a stronger mutual sense of shared professional identity within society around some main principles and tasks.

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[27] François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, Columbia University Press 2015.

[28] "It has been indicated that the archives of international organisations are often used more frequently by academics for research purposes, rather than by TJ-practitioners or personnel of TJ-mechanisms for practical guidance". Ulrike Lühe, Julia Viebach, Dagmar Hovestädt, Lisa Ott and Benjamin Thorne, *Atrocity's Archives : the Role of Archives in Transitional Justice : guidance note,* p. 5.

[29] "Archives can thus be the foundation for understanding process, context and actors, but they can, if used out of context and for a particular agenda, also be misused. In such cases, the past is misrepresented by disassociating information and records from their archival as well as from their originating context"; and also : "Archives are also a way of bringing the past into the present, and of shaping the future through righting the wrongs of the past". Ulrike Lühe, Julia Viebach, Dagmar Hovestädt, Lisa Ott and Benjamin Thorne, *Atrocity's Archives : the Role of Archives in Transitional Justice : guidance note,* p. 4.

[30] George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well", in *Archivaria* 1983, nr. 16, pp. 5-25. (https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12642); H. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (re-issue of 2nd revised edition, London, 1965) p. 125; F. Hul1,"The Archivist Should Not Be A Historian," *Journal of the Sociey6.* No. *5* (April 1980); Thomas T. Spencer, "The Archivist as Historian: Towards a Broader Definition", in *Archivaria* 17, 1983.

Such a coalition of scholars is basically nothing more than an organized and institutionally embedded structured dialogue, but it is necessary because we are currently faced with a rejection of the shared basic values of the scholarly, historicizing approach to the past. It is basically a view shared by Cook's analysis on the historian-archivist 'divide': "Until recently, it has been in the interests of both professions to deny (or at least not interrogate) the subjectivity of archives. Both professions could benefit significantly, therefore, from a renewed partnership centred upon the history of the record to produce better history".[31]

Because each particular national, institutional or professional context will differ, it makes little sense to try and outline a one-size-fits-all model for such an archivist-historian's scholarly dialogue. The professional background and formation of archivists and historians in a specific field can greatly differ, for example depending on the context (in some contexts, the majority of archivists might hold a BA or MA in history, in other contexts the situation might be completely reversed). The institutional and academic culture of research and publishing will also greatly differ.[32] Indeed, the specific institutional or legal assignments and therefore audiences can also greatly vary.[33] So can the organization of the decision-making process of appraisal and destruction of public archives.[34] The level of digitization is also an essential and evident factor of difference: the presence of fully trained digital archivists, or the application of concepts such as 'digital humanities' and 'digital history', will also greatly differ within different fields or depending on specific professional and institutional working contexts.[35] The current "hyper-specialisation" in records- or information management (in domains such as data administration, information resource management, etc.) can be very different: the demarcation line can run through different generations rather than between historians and archivists. In short: situations will greatly differ. A coalition of archivists and historians is therefore always a flexible form of structured dialogue, finding a balance between what is possible and

[31] Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape", in *The American Archivist*, 74, 2011, pp. 600-632.

[32] Sometimes archivists have an exclusive assignment to create finding aids while sometimes tasks of accountability, freedom of information, protection of rights, heritage education, and civic community connection with the past can come to the fore. In the latter situation, a scholarly publication culture of more reflective theoretical and/or historic research results might be more appropriate. It is a sensitive subject. Traditionally, objections are sometimes raised against archivists doing historical research themselves: "Traditional beliefs that archivists should not research in their own collections, inadequate training and background, and lack of interest in pursuing such research are other reasons why archivists have not engaged in historical research".
Thomas T. Spencer, 'The Archivist as Historian: Towards a Broader Definition', in *Archivaria* 17, 1983. p. 297.
There is also an ethical argument here, notably that archivists should not 'take advantage' of archival collections that remain – for the moment – still undisclosed for the larger public. See the International Code of Ethics of the International Council of Archives (https://www.ica.org/sites/default/files/ICA_1996-09-06_code%20of%20ethics_NL.pdf)(in particular article 8).

[33] Thomas T. Spencer, 'The Archivist as Historian: Towards a Broader Definition', in *Archivaria* 17, 1983.

[34] The 'triangle process' in the Netherlands of talks between the producer of the archives, the administrative responsible of the records within public administration and the representatives of the national archives for example is explained by Paul Drossens, head of the State Archives in Ghent, in: Paul Drossens, "Het Nederlandse verleden geherwaardeerd. Een nieuwe visie op archiefwaardering bij onze noorderburen", in *Bibliotheek- en archiefgids,* nr. 4, 84, 2008, pp. 28-33.

[35] Cook, Terry. "The archive (s) is a foreign country: Historians, archivists, and the changing archival landscape." The American Archivist 74, no. 2 (2011), pp. 600-632 ; Alex H. Poole, "Archival Divides and Foreign Countries? Historians, Archivists, Information-Seeking, and Technology: Retrospect and Prospect", in *The American Archivist*, vol. 78, nr. 2, 2015, pp. 375-433. Richard Kesner, "Automated Information Management: Is There a Role for the Archivist in the Office of the Future?" in *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), p. 163. See also Richard J. Cox, "Textbooks, Archival Education and the Archival Profession," in *Public Historian*, 12, 2 (Spring 1990), pp. 73-81.

necessary. For it to work, it first seems important to certainly create an institutional structure and empowerment, second to invite a variety of people with enough different sets of expertise and third to start from the collections and agree on clear and concrete targets (for example within the framework of a project financing).

Whatever the exact form or nature such a dialogue will take, essential aspects are: (1) the full recognition that in exercising their core tasks for designing record keeping, creating finding aids, appraisal and selection, communication, digitization etc., archivists hold as much social power over memory and historical identity as historians, (2) that – most certainly concerning these difficult periods in history – there is a 'natural' connection of historicizing scholarly approaches between archivists and historians working within a specific field on a particular period, and (3) the conviction that there are common challenges arising from a post-truth memory that threatens this scholarly approach to the past.

3/ WWII in Belgium: a case study

To conclude, I will look at WWII studies in Belgium, 75 years after the end of WWII. Despite the very different ways countries like Belgium, France, West-Germany and the Netherlands dealt with the legacy of WWII, there were commonalities. Even in countries with strong top-down transitional justice processes or a strong central policy of memory, incidents and controversies surfaced that ruptured the assumed dominant memory regime and consensus.[36] In very general terms, one can observe that the generational shift of the 1960s was foreshadowed by 'memory incidents' during the 1950s, just as the shift after 1989-1994 was foreshadowed by developments during the 1980s. In my edited volume on transitional justice and memory in Europe, I indicate some of the relevant factors in explaining why a dominant memory consensus can be ruptured, among others: civil society agency of particular memory communities, generational shifts and increased national political division/instrumentalization. Academic historical research in fact "played a significant yet never essential or determining role" in fundamental ruptures of memories or shifts (while it remains difficult to exactly measure the impact of popular culture such as movies, television, museums, literature, digital media). The exact interaction between national domestic events and large international shifts (the Cold War, the iconic years 1968 and 1989, the global human rights culture) is difficult to measure as well. In most cases, large national controversies around the legacy of WWII were often based on transitional justice policies that were perceived as being unsuccessful (unsatisfactory): scandals around pardoning of war criminals, scandals around the hidden war past of public officials, elite complicity with the dictatorial regime, lack of recognition for victims. Perceived unresolved issues were retroactively used to defend and implement new cultural and moral values. In any case, it is important to note in this regard that even 70-75 years after the end of WWII, access to information can remain difficult as archives can still remain closed (for example the opening in 2015 of WWII-related archives in France[37] or the opening of the Vatican Archives of the Pontificate of Pius XII in March 2020,).

With this introductory remark in mind, we can look at the specific case of Belgian WWII history. Both World Wars of the 20th century are prime examples of the records-generating capacity of wars

[36] This is based on : Nico Wouters, "How to approach transitional justice and memory?", in Nico Wouters (ed.), *Transitional Justice and Memory in Europe (1945-2013)*, Intersentia, Antwerp/Cambridge, 2014, pp. 369-412.
[37] "Ouverture d'archives sur la Seconde Guerre mondiale", in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 2016/2 , no. 130, pp. 163-168.

and occupation. These 'total wars' created more interventionist state and military administrations, often leading to a mass-production of records and archives. Specifically for Belgium, WWII and postwar transitional justice and governance created a mass of occupation archives.[38] The archives of occupation administrations remained integrated in administrations while assets of abolished collaboration administrations – including their archives – were put under state sequester.[39] The Belgian state also created and expanded new state services to manage reconstruction and compensate for war damages, to punish and sanction collaborators and war criminals, to search for missing persons, to compensate war victims and recognize resistance fighters.[40] According to a calculation of Pierre-Alain Tallier, director of the Brussels department of the State Archives of Belgium, the archives directly related to WWII and its immediate aftermath represent 11% of the total volume of almost ten centuries of archives preserved in the State Archives. Taking only the contemporary collections into account (1795-2010), WWII-archives amount to 13% of the total.[41] Three exceptionally large archival collections are also in part responsible for this high number: the archives of the military courts responsible for postwar purges, the archives of the 'war victims' administration (including amongst others forced labour and resistance during the war, and repatriation, restitution and search for missing persons after the war) and the archives of the institutions responsible for compensating 'war damages'.[42]

However, WWII historiography did not immediately follow in Belgium.[43] The first period (between 1945 and 1969) is that of the 'absent state, the absent archivists and the absent historians'. The Belgian state proved unable or unwilling to launch an active history and archives policy (no 'national institute' for research or archival collection was created until 1967). Contemporary history was not an organized academic field at universities and academic historians consciously steered away from the domain of WWII historiography.[44] Another factor was the absence of a national archival law in Belgium, which was only voted in 1955. The first decades after 1945, the State Archives of Belgium gave priority to (pre-)modern archives. Transfer to the state archives of WWII-related archives happened rather ad hoc, mostly in smaller fragments and often very late. This changed between 1969-1995 (the 'golden era' of WWII-historiography). Indeed, a national state sponsored centre for the study of WWII (later CegeSoma) was created. The largest archival collections remained fragmented but Belgium now at least had a central collection point for private archives pertaining to WWII, while

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[38] For an overview of available archival collections : Dirk Martin, «La Seconde Guerre mondiale», in Patricia Van den Eeckhout & Guy Vanthemsche, (eds.), *Sources pour l'étude de la Belgique contemporaine, 19e-21e siècle*, Bruxelles, Commission royale d'Histoire, 2017, pp. 803-822.

[39] On the 5 May 1945 law and its implementation: Luc Vandeweyer, "Oorlogsinstellingen liquideren. De vereffeningsadministratie na September 1944 en de archiefvorming. Een verkennend onderzoek", in Michel Van der Eycken en Erik Houtman (eds.), *Lach : liber amicorum Coppens Herman*, Brussel, 2007, pp. 451-481. See also: Ibidem, 'De archieven van het ministerie van Financiën', in: Pierre-Alain Tallier (ed.), *In de nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Beschikbare bronnen en stand van het onderzoek,* Brussel, 2011, pp. 57-75.

[40] Patrick Nefors, *Inventaris van het archief van de Dienst voor de Oorlogsslachtoffers,* Brussels, 1997. See also: Maurice-Pierre Herremans, *Personnes déplacées (rapatriés, disparus, réfugiés),* Marie-Julienne, 1948.

[41] *Les Archives de l'État en 2018. Faits et chiffres*, Bruxelles, AGR, 2019, p. 4.
As quoted in: Pierre-Alain Tallier, «Les archives des dommages de guerre aux biens privés, un ensemble atypique en matière d'archives concernant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale et la sortie de guerre ? », in Nico Wouters (ed.),*75 years of Second World War history in Belgium, Journal of Belgian History*, XLIX, 2019, 2-3, pp. 119-132.

[42] Pierre-Alain Tallier, Les archives des dommages de guerre aux biens privés.

[43] Unless specified otherwise, this overview is based on my article : 'The Second World War in Belgium: 75 years of history (1944-2019)', *Journal of Belgian History*, XLIX, 2019,nr. 2-3, pp. 12-82.

[44] Other academics had less qualms about this by the way, and so the first big researches about WWII were published by legal experts, economists, and sociologists.

several archival collections within the State Archives were now transferred to this new institute.[45] WWII studies were launched as an academic field and involvement of the Belgian universities lead to a peak between 1991 and 1997. Contemporary history matured at universities and there was a generational shift. The enormous success of several TV-series in the 1980s and 1990s made WWII a 'hot topic' for young early career academics in the 1980s. The years between 1991 and 1997 saw the culmination of the 'authoritative expert-historian'. During these years, a strong national community of historians matured with a sense of identity and a confident interpretation of their societal mission. Somewhat in contrast to this, many of the important archival collections remained fragmented and closed (or even 'hidden').

After 1995 (the commemorative year where the world celebrated 50 years since the end of WWII) Belgium saw stronger and accelerated politics of memory and cultural heritage policies. This included active policies by the newly created regional governments (Flemish and Francophone). The 'human rights paradigm' definitively replaced the obsolete national-patriotic prism of interpreting WWII. The U-turn was especially marked in Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. The political rise of the xenophobic far right party *Vlaams Blok* instigated a period where the traditional defensive stance towards Flemish national collaboration during WWII rapidly eroded. This coincided with the international rise of the Holocaust or Shoah as the dominant theme. 'Memory' (and the duty of memory) became a policy term and WWII basically became one big didactic project, with the goal to distil practical instruments for civic education. Abovementioned global evolutions impacted Belgium as well.

This meant the inevitable decline of the 'gatekeeper-historian': the expert whose authoritative voice had earlier played such an essential role of arbitration. Other cultural, commercial and political actors became more dominant 'gatekeepers' of the past. This was a welcome democratization of knowledge access and production but did create a somewhat existential crisis among the historians of WWII. How did they stay 'relevant'? Ironically, this existential crisis coincided with the moment that some of the large archival WWII-collections were finally, belatedly, transferred to the State Archives of Belgium.[46] Examples of some of the largest collections were the archives of the military courts (punishment of collaboration), the archives of the state department of War Victims (deportees, political prisoners, civil resistance fighters, victims) and the state department of War Damages.

The two major characteristics of Belgium's dealing with the legacy of WWII is the complete lack of any national memory consensus and the disconnection between fundamental research and archival disclosure. During the first decades, ground-breaking scholarly research preceded fundamental archival disclosure - quite a peculiar situation. The fundamental pioneering work was based on the available (smaller) parts of different archives, or on alternative sources (of 'private' provenance) or fragments of undisclosed archives. Pioneering historians were forced to do an archivist's job, but did so from the professional logic of historians and with research objectives. For decades the acquisition policy of the national centre for the study and documentation of WWII for example (that started to work in 1969) was determined by the research logic of historians who wanted to get research out, not so much by an archival acquisition logic.

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[45] Dirk Martin, "Het Studie- en Documentatiecentrum Oorlog en hedendaagse Maatschappij", in Gita Deneckere en Bruno De Wever (ed.), *Geschiedenis maken. Liber amicorum Herman Balthazar*, Gent, 2003, pp. 211-226.

[46] Pierre-Alain Tallier, 'Les archives des dommages de guerre aux biens privés, un ensemble atypique en matière d'archives concernant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale et la sortie de guerre ?', in: Nico Wouters (ed.),*75 years of Second World War history in Belgium, Journal of Belgian History*, XLIX, 2019, 2-3, pp. 119-132.
See also : Pierre-Alain Tallier (ed.), *In de nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Beschikbare bronnen en stand van het onderzoek,* Brussel, 2011.

The advantage was the creation of a strong historical research community that had (to a certain extent) a knowledge and understanding of existing archival collections, but the disadvantage was probably the continued fragmentation of archives and the fact that scholarly research itself even started to mirror the situation of archival fragmentation in Belgium. In concrete terms, there often was no clear continuity in research development based on the disclosure of large and important archival collections. Research was based on (parts of) archives that were unavailable for other researchers; research was launched and then dried out, only to be picked up again much later in another context. Despite the high quality and the importance of this pioneering work, WWII historiography was built on a fragmented foundation.

This situation was further exacerbated in the completely different context after 1995. While large archival collections were transferred to the State Archives after the 2000s, the national centre for the study and documentation of WWII (renamed Study and Documentation Centre for War and Contemporary Society – CegeSoma – in 1997) which was originally created as an 'autonomous department' within the State Archives of Belgium, further strengthened its identity and position as a research centre, collaborating and competing with Belgian universities. For several reasons, the Belgian State Archives and CegeSoma as a national research and archival centre grew further apart during the 2000s rather than developing some kind of structural collaboration. In hindsight, we probably lost essential time in terms of mutual agenda-setting of archival disclosure, research, digital humanities and public history. As the result of all of these factors, 75 years after the end of WWII in 2019-2020 the largest WWII archival collections in Belgium remain relatively underexplored for systematic historic research. This case shows therefore, that even 75 years after an event and even in a period as over-researched as WWII, a mature historical field can still have large gaps, shaky foundations, and perhaps problematic results.

In January 2016, the CegeSoma was integrated in the State Archives of Belgium as an 'operational directorate', maintaining its core mission. This means that as of 2016, a centre that forms an integral part of the National Archives of the country has fundamental historic research as one of its core missions. From an international point of view, this is probably a relatively unique situation. While some might consider this situation an 'anomaly' that should be rectified over time – as a research centre has by definition no place in a National Archive –it creates a solid basis for reflection about the issues in this paper for the moment: the potential synergies between historic research and archival policies, in our current timeframe.

During the commemorative years 2019-2020 (75 years of liberation of Belgium and the end of WWII) the abovementioned tension between 'history' and 'memory' became visible. They reflect the characteristics of the current memory regime around WWII in Belgium. Some of these characteristics are, summarized:

First, the (a) tacit assumption that we know everything about WWII and that we need to confirm and reinforce canonized messages (often perceived as didactic messages and therefore 'lessons') through cultural memory construction (such as commemorations), peace education etc. and not disrupt these lessons (e.g. through new research),

(b) second that history needs to be presented in recognizable fashion to larger audiences, that is to say we need to avoid ambiguous and morally confusing stories, but rather stress carefully selected stories of ordinary people as heroes and villains that present examples of recognizable categories with which people can identify today (and interestingly, stories and testimonies from a later date will also adapt themselves to the expectations of these master narratives)

(c) and third, that mass and active participation in historical events as the main criterion to measure the relevance of historic projects. This was further exacerbated by several other phenomena: the recurring idea in the commemorative events in 2019-2020 that there is a sense of loss for having reached the end of the 'era of the witness', meaning that we need to focus on the preservation and communication of these personal stories and testimonies.

Overall, the fight against present-day (far right) populism is an underlying legitimizing narrative of the WWII commemorations and the recurring theme in public speeches, articles and other commemorative communications in 2019 and 2020. This was supported by the equally tacit assumption that history (research) has done its job and we have arrived at the era of 'cultural memory' (or the abovementioned 'communicative history'). Investments in Belgium focussed on large public events while research or access to archives was not taken into consideration. But the problem goes much deeper than mere funding and is in fact a disregard – or disinterest – for the fact that new historic research and actual archives still matter today.

The field of WWII history in Belgium therefore in fact offers a prime example of concrete challenges to memory and history and how a coalition of archivists and historians could be formed to tackle them through a common strategy. Such a coalition within, for example, the State Archives of Belgium could lead to a mutual dialogue and involvement in each other's core tasks, debates about how to align disclosure priorities and research priorities, to discuss issues such as better hybrid project design for external funding purposes combining archival disclosure choices with research output, better digital humanities approaches[47], activation of underused archives for more innovative research agendas, common public stances on debates, on controversies or in general statements, a stronger stance against post-truth mechanisms undermining scholarship.[48] Such a renewed partnership does not need large programmes or mission statements. An agreement on the need for a revaluation of dialogue, recognition of shared scholarly values, some institutional backup and empowerment and some concrete approaches and key targets within a specific thematic historical field might be enough to launch such a coalition.

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[47] Joshua Sternfeld, "Archival Theory and Digital Historiography: Selection, Search, and Metadata as Archival Processes for Assessing Historical Contextualization", in *The American Archivist*, 74, 2011, pp. 544-575.
In recent years, there were concrete attempts within the State Archives that combined research and archival disclosure in more traditional formats such as the published source and research guides about collaboration (2017) and the resistance (2020) during WWII; or in a digital humanities format such as the "Jusinbell project" (https://jusinbell.hypotheses.org/).

[48] Alex H. Poole, Archival Divides and Foreign Countries?