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Nuance Is Difficult When It Involves Nazis, a Museum Finds

The exhibit at the Resistance Museum in Amsterdam was designed to be a more nuanced look at Dutch wartime experiences, but it has been accused of downplaying the heroism of some and the sins of others.

By Nina Siegal

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AMSTERDAM — Since 1985, the Resistance Museum here has presented a view of life in Holland during World War II, with displays that focused on the perseverance of a resistance movement in the face of Nazi terror and the daily struggles for food and safety.

In recent weeks, though, the museum has unveiled a new display designed to be more inclusive and to illustrate the nuance and complexity of history.

The exhibit portrays the lives of victims and perpetrators, bystanders and resisters, "and everything in between," said Liesbeth van der Horst, the museum's director, in an interview. "We wanted to tell the story of all the Dutch people."

So in addition to describing the life of Janny Brilleslijper, a Jewish woman who refused the Nazi command to register her "race," the displays also focus attention on Gerard Mooyman, a Dutch teenager "so impressed" by German military propaganda that he signed up to serve with its army at the front.

They are two of roughly 100 new, short vignettes at the museum, including one that focuses on Wim Henneicke, who led a "Jew hunting" brigade of citizens who were paid for each person they delivered to the Nazis.

To the surprise of officials at the museum, known in Dutch as the Verzetsmuseum, their effort to reframe perspectives has touched a sensitive nerve among many Dutch people. Some feel the exhibit doesn't adequately promote the heroism of the resistance. Others argue that it fails to adequately distinguish between good and bad behavior, presenting each as the possible outcome of the horrible pressures of war.

Some visitors to the museum are upset to see the experiences of Dutch Nazis alongside those of Dutch Jews who had been deported to death camps. Dutch Resistance Museum/Verzetsmuseum

The upset has been detailed in letters of protest to the museum and in debates in news forums and on social media that began even before the exhibit opened on Dec. 1.

In November, van der Horst told a Dutch newspaper that although the term "resistance hero" was having a resurgence, that "didn't sit well" with her. A few days later, in a radio interview broadcast nationally, curator Karlien Metz said she preferred to avoid using the phrase "resistance heroes," favoring a more neutral term, "resisters."

Some people thought the museum was devaluing the sacrifice of Dutch resistance fighters. Soon an incorrect notion — that the term "hero" had been banished from the museum — spread like wildfire through social media.

"The wokies have come up with something new that has to be canceled: the term resistance heroes," one news website reported.

Some visitors, including survivors of the Holocaust and descendants of resisters, were upset that the experiences of Dutch Nazis were explored alongside those of Dutch Jews who had been deported and murdered in death camps.

One juxtaposition presents a short profile of Hannie Schaft, a resister, next to one of Emil Rühl, a Nazi agent. Schaft, a law student with red hair, joined an armed resistance unit that sabotaged German military operations and shot Nazis. Rühl, an agent with the intelligence and surveillance arm of the Reich, spent months hunting down the “girl with the red hair” and finally caught Schaft, who was sentenced to death and shot.

Jalda Rebling, whose aunt was the Jewish resister Janny Brilleslijper and whose mother, Rebekka, was also a resistance member — the two women were among the last people to see Anne Frank alive — described the exhibition as a “scandal.”

In a letter to the museum, Rebling said its “leveling” of narratives left visitors with the impression that “the Jewish and non-Jewish resistance fighters were ordinary people, just like the Jew hunters and murderers.” By treating every individual as a fallible human, she wrote, “the whole wartime disappears into a grayish state.”

Hebe Kohlbrugge, left, helped to smuggle information to the Dutch government in exile in England. Jo Karelse, right, was a police officer told by the Germans to round up Jews, an order he regretted following. Dutch Resistance Museum/Verzetsmuseum

A visitor examines a profile of Benno Samel, a German Nazi who was involved in the persecution of Dutch Jews, but became opposed to their deportation. Dutch Resistance Museum/Verzetsmuseum

An opinion piece in the NRC newspaper called the juxtapositions “downright questionable.”

Museum officials said that, actually, very few of the vignettes focused on Nazis. Their intent, they said, had been to dispense with rigid, black-and-white thinking about the way individuals responded to life under occupation.

“We don’t have just monsters and heroes,” said van der Horst, the director, on a national radio program. “Not at all. People are people and you have many shades between good and bad, possibilities and impossibilities.”

“We show pictures of some Nazis, especially Dutch Nazis,” she said in a later interview, “because they are also part of our history. The bad sides of history also have to be included.”

The flare-up around the museum display reflects a larger, longstanding debate over the Dutch response to the occupation by the Nazis, who stayed five years.

In the immediate aftermath of the conflict, Dutch narratives often focused on the country’s wartime resolve against the Nazi invaders. But some historians have revisited the country’s reputation as a “nation of resisters” in light of the facts of the Dutch Holocaust.

The Netherlands lost a higher percentage of its Jewish population than any other country in Western Europe. Nearly 75 percent of Dutch Jews — a total of 102,200 — were deported and murdered during the war, while in neighboring Belgium the number was closer to 40 percent, and in France 25 percent.

“If you look at our attitude toward our own history, there has always been this dispute between two sides,” said Roxane van Iperen, author of the book, “The Sisters of Auschwitz,” the story of Janny and Rebekka (Lien) Brilleslijper, who helped to hide dozens of Jews in a rented home.

“One side says we cannot pass moral judgment in hindsight and you have to look at the past in a really nuanced way,” van Iperen said. “On the other side are people who say, you just have to present the public with facts. In this case, it’s the destruction of a whole community.”

By not identifying victims and perpetrators as such, she added, “you’re making history gray, so nobody is a victim and nobody is a perpetrator.”

Historian Ben Braber, an honorary research fellow at the University of Glasgow, said he supports the museum’s approach of putting forth information that “allows people to judge for themselves.” He noted it would be a challenge for any museum to present a unified narrative of Dutch resistance in part because there was no such thing as “the” resistance.

“There was not one united movement, a single membership organization or a common strategy,” he said. “Instead, there were many different individuals, groups and networks who conducted many different forms of resistance, and not all of this can be presented in a single exhibition.”

Van der Horst agreed that the Dutch resistance was diffuse, “but some people may be surprised that there was more resistance than they realized.” However, she said, the museum sought to show that resisting the Nazis was difficult. “In the face of a threatening dictatorial regime, it’s not easy to just act,” she said.

“Sometimes people judge too easily, in hindsight,” she added. “They say, ‘More people should have been involved in the resistance,’ and ‘They didn’t do enough.’ Of course, it’s true, they didn’t do enough, but it was not that easy to do enough. You had to be prepared to die if you wanted to go into the resistance.”

Mari Varsányi, a member of a Jewish social justice activist group, Oy Vey Acts, said the museum may have provided too many justifications for failures to resist persecution, deportations and murder.

“I do see the attempt at complexity but it comes at a cost,” said Varsányi, who created an app-based historical walking tour on the theme of Jewish resistance in Amsterdam. “Eventually, it’s hard to know what they’re saying, or if they are saying anything.”

A room in the exhibition focuses on the Nazi requirement, known as the Aryan Declaration, that Dutch citizens register their "race." Dutch Resistance Museum/Verzetsmuseum

Kees Ribbens, a researcher at the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies, in Amsterdam, who focuses on popular memory culture of World War II, said he did not feel that the museum had given the Nazi perspectives too much emphasis.

"I doubt someone would come away from it saying, 'I really see the point of view of the Nazis,'" he said in an interview. "In spite of the overload of perspectives, it's quite clear that the war was a very bad experience, an assault on democracy and plurality."

Jaïr Stranders, artistic director of a performance program that commemorates World War II, said he appreciated the museum's method of presenting information that challenges people to think about how they might have responded to the fear the Nazis instilled.

Stranders, who works with young people every year in the theater project, said the museum's approach encourages autonomous thinking.

"It helps young people to think through these decisions for themselves," he said. "I've worked with kids for 10 years, and I know that this is how you reach them. It's better than saying: this is right, and this is wrong."

Van der Horst said she was surprised by the vehemence of the criticism she and the museum have received.

One person, she said, had projected that, in the immediate aftermath of the war, she would have been branded a collaborator and executed.

"It's upsetting and I wasn't prepared for it," she said.

On the other hand, she said the negative publicity had propelled many people to visit and judge for themselves. "Overall, the positive feedback is much greater than the criticism," she said.

Van der Horst said it is not the museum's job to present a simple story about right and wrong, but to provide the public with the full range of information, and let them draw their own conclusions.

The underlying message of the display may not be explicitly stated, she said, but people can find it if they look.

"You cannot expect resistance from everybody," she said. "That's what we show. That's why we have to prevent totalitarianism from happening in the first place. We have to defend our democracy and our rule of law."