

## The Cost of Freedom: Liberating the Netherlands

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It's a brisk May morning at the Netherlands American Cemetery, not far from the city of Maastricht. The early rays of sunlight silhouette thousands of crosses standing in the new spring grass, haloing the white stone against the pale blue sky. This part feels right: the halos, sacrifices reflecting light forward in new directions. Yet, the orderly rows of crosses stand in stark contrast to the chaos and conflict that put them there. For it was during another May, eighty three years before this one, that the peace of this nation was shattered.

On May 10th, 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands. Remaining neutral, the Dutch had hoped to survive the second world war as they had the first: by not getting involved. However, this strategy ultimately failed; Hitler saw invading the Netherlands and Belgium as a necessary step to gaining a foothold over France and England. Within five days, the queen and government had been forced to flee, and the German terror bombing in Rotterdam had forced the country into submission, taking approximately 900, and leaving some 85,000 people homeless. The Germans installed a government headed by Austrian Nazis, taking complete control of the country. Jews and political dissidents who had fled Germany to the relative safety of the Netherlands prior to the invasion suddenly found themselves a lot less safe.

Initially, the Nazis attempted to present themselves as a somewhat benign occupation force, in an attempt to secure the cooperation of the local people and lull them into a false sense of security. However, this 'velvet glove' tactic ended quickly, and by September of 1940, the Germans were already beginning to implement anti-semitic policies. Jewish voices in the press were stifled and Jewish people were barred from schools and government. The Nazi regime began mandating the registration of businesses, and creating a registry of Jewish people themselves, in preparation for the mass deportations to concentration camps that would eventually follow. By 1942, Jewish people were required to wear the infamous gold

Star of David, meant to visibly mark them as lesser. With the help of Dutch society, Germans would transport around 107,000 to death camps, thus resulting in the Netherlands having the largest number of Jewish deaths in Western Europe. In fact, it was in the Netherlands that Anne Frank and her family went into hiding. Secretly residing in their famous annex. Anne died at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, leaving behind her legacy in the form of her diary, which details her life in hiding. Her fate was all too common; three quarters of Dutch Jews died in the Holocaust.

Some non-Jewish citizens stood up for their neighbors. The first mass arrests of Jews in the Netherlands in February of 1941 sparked outrage. In what was known as the February strike, workers in the Amsterdam area took a stand against these atrocities. However, the resistance was crushed violently by the Nazis, who saw it as a threat to their power. After the February strike, the Nazi regime was more covert in its anti-semitism, aiming to create social separation of Jews from the rest of society, which dampened public outrage when the time came to send them to death camps. Organized protests like the February strike were harder to pull off when the public was less aware of the violent acts being committed.

Air battles were fought over the Netherlands by the Allies (England, the United States and the Soviet Union) as part of an effort to damage the German war industry and morale, often targeting factories. About 4,000 Americans died in this part of the conflict alone. Yet, this pales in comparison to the quantity of lives lost when the liberation of Europe began with D-day invasions on June 6, 1944. The amphibious assault on Normandy paved the way for the liberation of France, and eventually all of Western Europe. However, the death toll was enormous: about 2,000 American soldiers, and 4,000 allied soldiers in total are confirmed to have been killed that day alone, with many more injured or missing. This part of the war was costly in terms of resources too; in the wake of the Normandy invasion, the Allies had landed roughly 850,000 men and 150,000 vehicles in Normandy by the end of the month.

After liberating France, the Allies, including the United States, gained momentum, continuing to make their way across Europe, with US soldiers setting foot on Dutch soil in September of 1944. The liberation was neither quick nor easy however, one example being the failure of a British and American operation, known as 'Market Garden,' to capture key bridges between the cities of Eindhoven and Nijmegen in the southern part of the country. The operation resulted in weeks of fighting. By the end of 1944, progress was all but halted, with the South liberated, but little progress being made in the North, which still suffered greatly under German control. With sustenance cut off by a German blockade, Dutch citizens, especially those in cities, endured a terrible famine in what was known as the 'Hongerwinter,' or, the hunger winter. The US and British air forces delivered tons of food that spring, supported by Canadian, New Zealand and Polish forces. The Netherlands were fully liberated on May 5th that same spring. The liberation effort in the Netherlands cost the lives of 13,000 allied troops, including 1,135 American soldiers, some of whom are buried at the Netherlands American Cemetery.

The liberation of the Netherlands with the help of American forces made possible the flourishing relationship the United States has with the country to this day. In the wake of World War II, the Netherlands was one of the twelve original NATO countries, and they are still an important military ally to the United States today. The United States' contribution to their liberation helped them to become a flourishing democracy, with which we partner to advocate for democracy and human rights as global interests. The country has returned the aid we lent them, supporting the United States in both the Korean and the Gulf War. The relationship forged with the Netherlands is especially important considering Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Because of the sacrifices of Americans to help liberate the Dutch, they are now able to help our country maintain a secure Europe and counter Russia's aggressive behavior towards its neighbors. As the child of a servicemember who spent time stationed in Europe,

this affects my life very directly; had Nazi Germany not been defeated, and the countries it invaded liberated, my father likely wouldn't have been in Europe collaborating with those countries. I would never have gotten to experience Western Europe as I did: a culturally diverse place, and more significantly, a safe place for freedom-loving citizens.

The liberation of the Netherlands was also extremely important in giving the United States a chance to show its support for the democratic ideals enshrined in its Constitution beyond its own borders. As a country that champions religious freedom, human rights, and government by the people, the United States was faced with a regime that valued none of these things-- a regime that committed religious and ethnic genocide, and showed no regard for the sovereignty of other nations. It was important in that moment to step up and let our actions speak louder than words. By opposing Hitler the United States championed those values on a global stage, something it further demonstrated via the Truman doctrine, and its assistance in rebuilding Europe after the war. This is an important lesson to take into the future; the United States, as a country, has enormous power to uplift other countries and to truly embody its democratic ideals by championing them abroad as well. Oppressive regimes that infringe on the sovereignty of other nations can and should be challenged. Doing so creates a safer world for all peace-loving nations.

Another lesson learned is the power of perseverance. Even though the Allies' push northward in the Netherlands was difficult, costly, and even temporarily brought to a standstill, American and British soldiers showed the strength of will to keep fighting until the objective was complete. The delivery of food to starving citizens is also an important reminder that war cannot and should not be discussed or thought of in terms of mere military objectives. War cannot be divorced from the humanity within it; of both soldiers and civilians. It is crucial to not merely think of tactics and land, but also of the lives at stake. A relief effort can be just as important as a territorial gain.

Often, wars are seen simply as the material in history books: distant, faded, and dull. However, a look at the human beings involved reveals a different story. The German occupation of the Netherlands was a harrowing time for both the country's residents, and those who risked and sacrificed their lives to liberate the country. The significance of the human lives at stake cannot be understated and certainly must not be forgotten. Remembering this history is how we ensure the same suffering is not repeated; it gives us a chance to learn from the past instead of reliving it. Memorials like the Netherlands American Cemetery are crucial for this reason. They provide a visual testament to our history, bringing it up close and personal, allowing us to connect to the heroes of our past, and providing a constant reminder to ensure that their sacrifices were not in vain. Reading a phrase like "thousands of casualties" can be an act of numb meaninglessness, something abstract and hard to conceptualize. Memorials serve the essential role of physically representing the passages in our history books. For the loved ones the fallen liberators of the Netherlands left behind, and for those citizens whose suffering they relieved, the cemetery serves as a space to connect to those that touched their lives in such a powerful way. They provide a thread to anchor us to the past that brought us to the brighter future we now inhabit.

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