

War in Arcadia – country houses in the Dutch-German border area, 1940-1945

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In the Dutch province of Gelderland, at the border with Germany, over 500 country houses and landed estates exist. Particularly the area around the provincial capital Arnhem had been popular amongst the landed elite since the late Middle Ages. Medieval castles and country houses adorned the province. The undulating landscape of the ice-pushed ridges, the brooks and waterfalls proved to be ideal for the making of the desired landscape parks. The picturesque landscape, created by noblemen, regents and other country house owners, was soon viewed as Arcadia, as Paradise on earth. But from May 1940 to the liberation in 1945 this picturesque landscape, this Arcadia, was the background of the Second World War. For the Netherlands at least,

little is known about the impact for country houses and their owners. In what way were “arcadian” landscapes and country houses affected by the war? Were country houses confiscated, and to what purposes?

Confiscations

The German occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940 led to great changes. For example, the so-called *Verordnungsblatt für die besetzten niederländischen Gebiete* was installed. This policy, amongst others, allowed the occupier to confiscate buildings and terrains they needed for both military and civil purposes. Castles and country houses proved to be of great interest, as it concerned large buildings in wide landscapes, with good infrastructure and valuable sources (as arable land and forests) close by. As such, country houses and estate landscapes played a remarkable role during the course of World War II.

The early confiscations of May 1940 included the royal Palace of Het Loo, near Apeldoorn. The country house was built for stadtholder king William III (1650-1702) at the end of the seventeenth century and was one the favourite homes of the royal family well into the twentieth century. At the time of the confiscation,

British soldiers at the medieval castle of Doorwerth near Arnhem. Heavy fighting took place during Operation Market Garden, 17th to 26th September 1944, where the 1st British Airborne Division and the 1st Polish Independent Parachute Brigade Group sought to liberate Arnhem and the surrounding villages of Doorwerth, Oosterbeek and Renkum. During this “Battle for Arnhem” many castles and country houses were heavily damaged or completely destroyed. Source: Gelders Archief, Arnhem.



Many German confiscations of country houses in Gelderland are known. The country house of Avegoor, pictured on the left, was transformed into a school for the Dutch division of the SS. Enghuizen Castle was used as a home for orphanages from The Hague, pictured on the right. Hartenstein was the military headquarter for German troops near Arnhem (later to be conquered by the British Airborne Division and used as their headquarters). De Wiersse was used as a hunting lodge for high officers. Ulenpas Castle served as a military hospital. The Schaffelaar was confiscated for the internment of Dutch Jews. The country house of Den Bosch was used from 1943 onwards as a school for "anständige Mädchen". Source: Gelders Archief, Arnhem.



two days after the German occupation of the Netherlands, Queen Wilhelmina (1880-1962) had already fled to England and most of the personal properties and valuables had been transported to a safe location. Approximately 600 kilos of copper and bronze objects, too heavy to move far away, were hidden underneath the palace floors. In the spring of 1941 troops of the

German *Wehrmacht* quartered in the palace, that was to be used for the recovery of 600 soldiers. Later it was transformed into a hospital: on the roof of *Kriegs-lazarett Schloss Loo* large white crosses were painted to prevent bombing. At that time the SS started using parts of the palace. It became a country house for several high SS officers, such as Hanns Albin Rauter

(1895-1949) and Arthur Seyss-Inquart (1892-1946), particularly used for hunting parties. After the Battle for Arnhem (September 1944) English troops took over the palace for the use of a hospital until the Liberation in May 1945.

In the first year of World War II other country houses were also confiscated. Whereas the confiscation of Het Loo was obviously based on political reasons, others were more of a military nature. Thus, near the city of Arnhem several country house owners received an official letter of confiscation. For the estate buildings, often including inventory, and the non-agricultural lands a rent of 2/3 of the rental value was given. In theory at least. Further research needs to be done to investigate, whether owners were truly paid for the use of their house and lands. The country houses of *Kemperberg*, *Heuvelink* and *Vrijland* were such early confiscations between May and the beginning of 1941. All three were located close to the small civil airport Deelen, which became of great importance for the German army. The airport, now named *Fliegerhorst Deelen*, was enlarged with three landing strips, hangars, ammunition depots, a railroad for the transport of building materials, fuel and ammunition, and staff barracks. Most remarkable were the buildings camouflaged as local farms. Country houses in the neighbourhood served as a home for airport personnel, whereas on the estate lands the new buildings and anti-aircraft guns were constructed. Around Arnhem a large number of country houses were used by the Luftwaffe, including *Zypendaal*, *Angerenstein* and *Warnsborn*.

Damage and destruction

Country houses were thus used as barracks, schools, strategic and military headquarters, homes for officers, hospitals, orphanages, depot for archives and collections, refuge for evacuees, and various other functions. The confiscations and warfare in the early war years brought relatively little damage. After all, it was Hitler's plan to assimilate the Netherlands into his Third Reich. Nonetheless, as the war continued, things got worse. Later confiscations (1944/1945) occurred in the heat of the battle and no official documents of confiscation were drawn up. In those instances, they served as quarters for military troops on both sides. The use by military troops was particularly damaging for the houses and the landscapes. British historian John Martin Robinson stated that: "it was generally agreed that soldiers were the worst possible occupants of fragile historic buildings".¹ For the area around Arnhem, which became a warzone, it was even worse: it also meant that these castles and country houses became military targets.

As part of Operation Market Garden, the allied troops started the now-famous Battle for Arnhem in September and October 1944. For two months in and around the city of Arnhem heavy battles took place. The impact on the arcadian landscape and on the country houses was immense. The diary of Theo Driessen, owner of the small country house *Het Jagerhuis* near Doorwerth, is a remarkable document that gives us insight into a dramatic period of the war:

"I rethink on the circumstances as they were for us. That we got to keep our house, throughout the war.

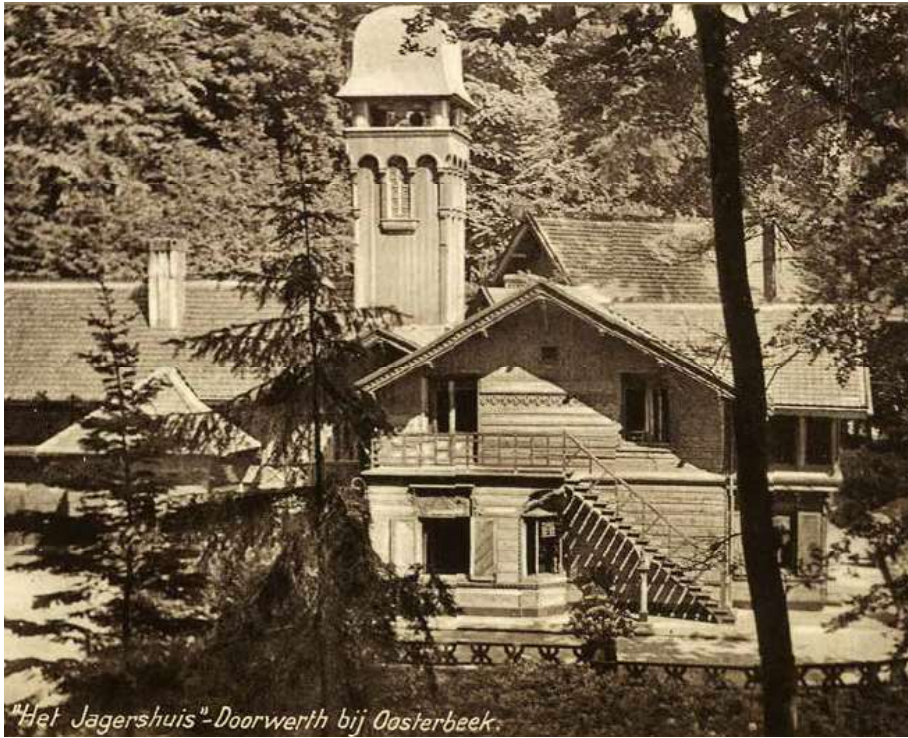


War in Arcadia: Map of the battlefield in Arnhem, drawn by the American army, 21st of March 1945. The parks and woodlands of the country houses are mapped in bright green. Remarkable are the crosses, lines and arrows that mark the German defence line. Source: Leiden University Libraries.

That, unlike so many others, we were not evicted, or worse, saw our home disappear by demolition or military violence. A feeling of gratitude wells within me, because violence to this house, our home... I couldn't have coped with it. And surely the liberation of our country is eminent now. In high spirits I enter the house, sit down at piano and organ and fail to notice the noise accumulating in the air outside"²

During the German confiscation the family stayed in the house as long as possible. Only when the battle intensity increased, did Driessen decide to move into a house of a friend. As often as possible he would go back

to see for himself if his precious house was still in one piece. "What is there to salvage? Blankets and linen? The blankets are all used by the soldiers, even the silk bed linen. To the kitchen... full of eating soldiers; they are emptying our cupboards. Disappointed to see that my only bottle of Champagne, that I had hidden to celebrate the liberation of our country, has vanished".³ Eventually it was no longer safe to check up on the house. The area had become the centre of heavy fighting between German and Allied troops. At the beginning of October Driessen is finally allowed to return, only to find his nightmare: "All hope is lost. I have

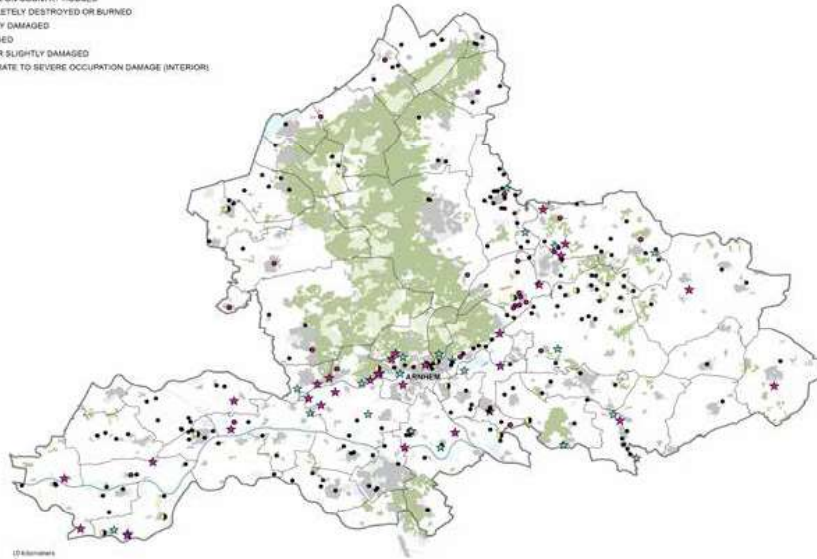


Het Jagerhuis before 1940 and after the destruction in October 1944. The house was filled with valuables such as antiques, art, silver, Persian carpets, a gramophone, a piano and an organ. Owner Theo Driessen was so proud of his house and his collections, his perfect combination of "beauty and comfort". He could not imagine that someone would think of damaging it. However, in the heat of the war nearly everything was either plundered by German troops stationed in the house, or destroyed as the house and surroundings were shot by allied troops. Source: Gelders Archief, Arnhem.



QUESTIONNAIRE C 1947-1948 IN GELDERLAND
 IMPACT WWII ON COUNTRY HOUSES

- ★ COMPLETELY DESTROYED OR BURNED
- ☆ HEAVILY DAMAGED
- DAMAGED
- NOT OR SLIGHTLY DAMAGED
- MODERATE TO SEVERE OCCUPATION DAMAGE (INTERIOR)



Mapping the registered destroyed and damaged castles and country houses in the province of Gelderland reveals particular geographical patterns, that are clearly connected to the military campaigns, such as Market Garden around the city of Arnhem. Based on the 1946 questionnaire of the Foundation Friends of Gelderland Castles. Mapped by author.

been there myself. Nothing is left, nothing. I have also ascertained that our estate and woodlands have deeply suffered and country house De Duno is completely vanished. Everything is much worse than anticipated. Also, the Castle [Doorwerth] is a ruin".⁴

Overall more than 30 castles and country houses in Gelderland were destroyed during the war, or were so heavily damaged that they were torn down shortly after 1945. As most country houses had been confiscated by the German army, they became victims in the liber-

ation of the country. Overall numbers for the Netherlands, collected by the Dutch Castle Foundation, show that some 38 percent of destroyed castles and country houses were the result of gunfights and bombardments by allied troops. The occupational damage is the highest by German troops (40 percent). Almost 44 percent of the total war damage to Dutch country houses occurred in the final year of the war.

A few years after the Liberation the *Foundation Friends of Gelderland Castles* send a questionnaire to all the municipalities, asking them to write down the war damage. Based on their answers I have mapped the war damage to country houses and castles. Apart from the area around Arnhem and Nijmegen (the area of heavy fighting during Market Garden), we see that along the river IJssel much war damage was registered. Should we draw this map across the German border, more cases of destroyed or heavily damaged country houses would appear, such as *Anholt* and *Moyland*.

Conclusions

The period 1940-1945 has had a great impact on the country houses and castles of the Dutch province of Gelderland. As large parts of the province became war zones, the arcadian landscapes changed dramatically. Country houses were confiscated. Particularly when a country house (or its adjoining estate buildings) harboured a military function, it often led to direct or indirect damage or destruction. Over 30 were destroyed completely. The adjoining landscapes became battle fields with trenches and battlements. It is a period in

country house history that has not received much academic interest, in the Netherlands at least. With this article I like to stimulate further research, as I myself intend to do.

Notes:

- 1 John Martin Robinson: *The Country House at War*, 1989, p. 159.
- 2 Theo Driessen, *Diary 17th September to 6th October 1944*.
- 3 *Ibidem*.
- 4 *Ibidem*.

Further reading:

- Robert Ellenkamp: *Oorlog op De Wiersse*, 2017.
- Jorien Jas, Frank Keverling Buisman, Elyze Storms-Smeets, Annemiek te Stroete & Marc Wingers: *Kastelen in Gelderland*, 2013.
- John Martin Robinson: *The Country House at War*, 1989.
- John Martin Robinson: *Requisitioned. The British country house in the Second World War*, 2014.
- Elyze Storms-Smeets: *Gelders Arcadië. Atlas van een buitenplaatsenlandschap*, 2011.
- Elyze Storms-Smeets: "From elite to public landscapes. The case of the Klarenbeek estate in Arnhem, 1880-1950", in: *Virtus. Journal for Nobility Studies* 23, 2016, pp. 136-155.
- Elyze Storms-Smeets: "Verloren erfgoed. De destructie van landhuizen, buitenplaatsen en landgoederen in de twintigste eeuw", in: Conrad Gietman et al: *Huis en habitus. Over kastelen, buitenplaatsen en notabele levensvormen*, 2017, pp. 408-421.