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**SOVIET FIELD OF HONOUR, LEUSDEN,
THE NETHERLANDS: THEN AND NOW**

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Sovjet Ereveld — Soviet Field of Honour or the Soviet/Russian War Cemetery in Leusden/Amersfoort in the Netherlands are various names of the cemetery where Soviet soldiers are buried. The Soviet Army never stepped on Dutch territory and all the men lying there were prisoners of war. The story told here is about 101 soldiers, Soviet Uzbeks, of whom 24 were martyred in the Amersfoort concentration camp and the remaining 77 were executed by the Nazis in the Koedriest forest on 9 April 1942. Together with other Soviet warriors, totaling 865, they are buried in Leusden under similar grey tomb plates, with illegible Cyrillic names that are often misspelt. These soldiers were forgotten until 1999 when a young journalist Remco Reiding started his investigations and attracted public attention to the fate of the soldiers. Now the Dutch people visit the graves, bring flowers and light candles, adopt the graves, contact the next of kin, and make it possible for them to come to the Netherlands and learn that their grandfathers were not lost in action, but rather they have found peace and remembrance in a strange land. Who are the people carrying out these activities, what makes them act this way, and what do they themselves think about it? These and other questions were included in a questionnaire conducted by the authors; the results are partly presented in the article. The responses demonstrate deep compassion, gratitude to the Soviet army for fighting the Nazis, emotional involvement, human and political wisdom, and a degree of openness that is emotionally powerful.

Keywords: Soviet Field of Honour, Soviet prisoners of war, Cemetery, Leusden, the Netherlands, Remco Reiding, survey responses, volunteers and adopters, memory of the buried.

For the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War

1. THE WAR-TIME STORY

At the very beginning of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in September 1941, the Germans brought one hundred and one prisoner of war from the Soviet Union to the detention Camp Amersfoort intending with their miserable look to kindle antipathy to the Russians and attract the Dutch to their side. They were called Russians, which at the time was a synonym for Soviet, though actually, they were mainly from Uzbekistan. The Nazis meant to demonstrate them to the local population as Untermenschen (sub-humans) and treated them accordingly, brutally abusing and insulting them. Twenty four of the soldiers were starved and beaten to death already in the camp. When the fascists realized that their plan had failed and the local citizens had shown sympathy for the desolate, hungry and sick people, they had no need of them and on 9 April 1942, the remaining 77 were shot. A monument, known as the 'De Koedriest' Monument (or the Russian Monument) was erected on the spot where, after the war, a mass grave with the bodies of 77 Russian prisoners of war was uncovered. This is where the execution had taken place, in the Koedriest wood. The inscription on the monument reads, *'To the glorious sons of the Soviet people that fell in the struggle against the German occupying power in 1941–1945. From the grateful motherland'*¹. The bodies of all 101 Soviet soldier were buried in a specially designated part of a big city cemetery Rusthof in Leusden.

After the War, a few more Soviet military burials from different parts of the Netherlands were moved to Leusden; the remains of 865 Soviet soldiers (Russians, Ukrainians, Byelorussians, Uzbeks, Armenians, and Georgians) found peace at Leusden, where, on 18 November 1948, the Soviet War Cemetery was founded. For a very long while, that was a "forgotten place". Rows of grey stones with unreadable names in Cyrillic on them, no information, no flowers, no visitors. The graveyard was only looked after by the state *Oorlogsgravenstichting* (War Graves Foun-

¹ Available at: <http://sovjet-ereveld.nl/2820-2/?lang=en> (accessed: 07.05.2020).

dation) — it is still in charge of the cemeteries and no alterations can be done without its permission.

2. “ONE PERSON IS NEEDED TO MAKE A CHANGE”: REMCO REIDING

In 1999, a young journalist Remco Reiding got an assignment from the newspaper he worked for to write about the forgotten place. His task was to try tracing the relatives of at least one soldier. Since then he has been dedicated to this cause with his soul and time and determination. By now, due to Remco’s effort, much has been written and said about the tragedy and the Soviet War Cemetery, both in the Netherlands and in Russia as well as in other countries. In 2019, the Russian First TV Channel had an ample heart-felt presentation², [Blagoy, 2018]; Russian newspaper articles appeared [Strokan, 2015; Filatova, 2017]. BBC spoke about the history of the concentration camp [Qobil, 2017] and the Field of Honour³. The Dutch press publishes articles whenever May Days are approaching [Tempelman, 2012; Engbers, 2013; Ververs, 2019; Heerde, 2019; Jong, 2020; Koch, 2020]. Remco Reiding himself published an intense and dramatically captivating book, “*Kind van het Ereveld* [Child of the War Cemetery]” [Reiding, 2012] translated into Russian as “*Ditya Polya Slavy*” [Reiding, 2015], which had a wide acclaim in Russian press [Mesnyankina, 2015; Smirnov, 2015; Suvorova, 2020]. The Russian language version is completely sold out.

Remco Reiding conducted his investigations in archives, attracted public attention to the fate of the Soldiers. He also managed to find the families of several soldiers. At this moment, 205 families have been informed about the last place of burial of their beloved father, grandfather or brother or uncle. However, the most important endeavor is that he has attracted the local population to participate in various activities. Now the Dutch people visit the graves, bring flowers and lit candles, adopt the graves, contact the next of kin and make it possible for them to come to the Netherlands. By the end of 2019, already 450 people participate in the programme of adoption, and out of the 865 Soviet graves

² Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpYdHZEjGf8> (accessed: 07.05.2020).

³ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJemA8U_roU (accessed: 07.05.2020).

more than 530 are now adopted. Due to these people, the War Cemetery in Leusden cannot be called a forgotten place anymore. Every year, on April 9, there is a memorial meeting by Koedrist Monument; on May 3, there come around 50-60 adopters to put flowers on the graves as well as the photos of the found soldiers, on the Christmas Eve there are candles lit by all the graves on December 24.

As often, one person is needed to make a change. Remco has fulfilled this role here bringing this place to the attention of people and in this way to increasing the understanding of the enormous sacrifices made by the soldiers of various former Soviet republics during WWII.

3. THE PEOPLE

In 1999 Remco Reiding was alone. 10 years later, they were three: Remco, his wife and his newspaper boss Alex Engbers, whose idea had been to find a relative and write about the *Sovjet Ereveld*. In 2010, the Foundation “*Stichting Sovjet Ereveld*” was formed to support the activities of searching the families and keeping the memory of the soldiers alive. Now, after the ten years of the Foundation in action, merely the core of the volunteers, the group of the most active participants, grows in numbers, while the May Day march and the Koedriest memorial procession amount to hundreds of people.

The aim of the present research is to find out who the participants are, what motivates them in their activity in relation to the cemetery, what they feel and think about this cause and in this way to come to a new understanding of cultural values of the Dutch society.

Obviously, the adopters and volunteers are those who feel most deeply committed to the dead soldiers and their next of kin. People from many different backgrounds are there helping; they think that doing the work at the cemetery together represents an honorable act. A woman of 80+ says that she takes part as her health allows her. The participants realize that in a way they are becoming a team, they are glad to have an opportunity to meet and socialize. One of them, a woman, a historian of 42 years of age, told us, “It is good to meet other people and learn about why others take an interest in this (which is mostly during the adopters’ day). But mostly I think it is important to pay respect to the men and women who lost their lives so that we can live in freedom”.

Who are these adopters, and what is their story?

The method used to achieve our aim was an internet survey enquiry targeted at the Foundation participants. With our objective in mind, we compiled a short Questionnaire and distributed it among the people at random. More than thirty responses came from men and women (equally) between 38 and 82 years of age (one student of 20), seven of them retired. We know their age, sex and occupation — in a way they represent a cross section of the Dutch society, a diversity and unity. The Survey is anonymous, the participants volunteered to disclose their names; nevertheless, the authors can assist in contacting the respondents if necessary.

We did not expect very much of the feedback, anticipating rather brief and formal responses. What we have got in answers is astounding, expressing amazing openness, compassion, emotional and human wisdom, heart-felt sympathy and a lot more. For that reason, we will only comment on things that are in common in several answers and otherwise quote the responses. In addition, we are able to include some statistics about the distribution of the responses in thematic groups.

4. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

4.1 How did you learn about the Soviet War Cemetery and when did you start supporting the Foundation?

With very few exceptions, all adopters and volunteers who took part in our questionnaire have learnt about the Soviet War Cemetery within the last 10–20 years, after Remco Reiding started his activities and there came more publicity about the place and his investigation. About half of the people (45 %) heard about the cemetery for the first time through mass media: local and national TV, local and national newspapers and internet. About 15 % of the recipients met Remco while visiting the National Monument [Detention] Kamp Amersfoort, where he is giving regular tours, or read his book “The Child of the War Cemetery”. The activities of the Foundation in the past 10 years brought the story of the Field of Honour to the central channels of Russia and BBC, as well as Georgia, Ukraine⁴, Uzbekistan⁵, etc. In all these cases, people were

⁴ Available at: https://34.ua/razyskivayutsya-rodstvenniki-voennoplennyh-pogibshih-naterritorii-niderlandov-v-konce-velikoj-otechestvennoj-vojnny_n2552 (accessed: 07.05.2020).

⁵ Available at: <https://alif.tv/101-uzbek-protiv-gebbelsa-znaete-li-vy/> (accessed: 07.05.2020).

inspired by the story of the graveyard, the fate of the soldiers who are buried there and the personal story of Remco.

“I was highly impressed by the story Remco told that day. It had a great impact and made me think about sacrifices in life. That is something Remco did by starting his search. In my opinion Remco is a great example of doing thing for someone else without expecting something in return” (Willem Goes, 38, Learning & Development advisor).

Around 22 % heard about this place through personal contacts: from Remco, from other people already supporting the Foundation or through a Russian relative (wife, daughter-in-law, mother, girl friend) or a friend living in the Netherlands, etc. “Via a Russian friend in St. Petersburg who had seen a news item about the Field of Honor on Russian television”. (Father Johannes, 51, priest).

There are people who knew about the cemetery for a longer time. We were impressed to hear the story of a man, who used to visit the War Cemetery back in the 1950s when it was yet a forgotten place.

“I got to know the Soviet Field of Honor as a child at the hands of my parents. Every year on May 9, the *Association of Russian women in the Netherlands (Nederland vereniging van Russische vrouwen)*, rented a coach to go to the Field of Honor in Leusden or to the Field of Honor on Texel. There, together with members of the Soviet embassy, we spoke of the enormous sacrifices made by the Soviet Union during the Second World War” (Peter Arends, 71, retired, son of Anastasia Guranda from Krasnodar, Russia).

A small number of people specifically searched for a military grave to be adopted, which is quite a usual thing to do in the Netherlands. “I was looking for an adoption of a grave of a soldier. After a search on the internet I came to the site of the Soviet Field of Honor in Leusden” (Ron Klunder, 56, independent advisor).

Out of the whole number of the adopters, there are 20 % living in Leusden and Amersfoort, a small town and a bigger city on the border of which the cemetery is situated. People get to know about the Cemetery through local mass media, clubs, and organizations. Here is a touching story of a woman learning about the Field of Honour while organizing her son's funeral.

“In 2018 my son died and I wanted to give him a beautiful ceremony in order to celebrate his life — with speeches, ritual and music. One of the songs (next to the modern ones) I chose was the Russian orthodox ‘Vechnaya Pamyat’, by

the Don Cossack Choir. The lady who helped me organizing the funeral was a little surprised by my choice. ‘Are you aware there is a Soviet War Cemetery, next to this crematorium?’ she said. I wasn’t aware of that fact. We visited the site and I was deeply moved. My thoughts were with all those mothers — who, unlike me, never had the chance to say goodbye to their beloved children. All those young boys who died in a country far, far away. After my son’s funeral I visited the Field of Honor with friends (his and mine) — and we prayed” (Annelize Raateland, 64, teacher).

Thus, we see that the public awareness of the Cemetery is growing, embracing more and more people, those who are not indifferent, who are open for a social function and/or emotional involvement.

4.2. Why did you decide to support the Foundation (as an adopter or as a volunteer)? Why has it become important for your life?

The response to these questions is so profound; you can hear real voices and feel authentic human sincerity in every reply, so the answers need little commentary. We could identify five major reasons for people to become a part of the Foundation.

4.2.1. *“Engaged in a horrible war, badly treated, far from family and home”*

A quarter of the recipients in their answers mention the soldiers being “...without reason, driven by the Nazi Germans back to this place of disaster here in Europe. They couldn’t go anywhere and only spoke Russian. There they were starved or shot. Those soldiers also had a family!” (anonymous, female, 74, retired).

We were impressed how much gratitude people show to the soldiers for their fight against the Nazi.

“The feeling that these brave boys have given their lives for the freedom of many and are buried in a foreign country... These guys should never be forgotten”. (Ron Klunder, 56, independent advisor) “Due to him [the adoptee] and millions of others my family and I can live in freedom” (Sasha Grond, 20, Teachers’ Training College student).

You also see a lot of empathy and compassion shown for the soldiers and their families:

“I am someone who has always said, a person should never die alone. These people died alone and under degrading conditions. Terribly, sure, if you realize that the world was completely strange to them. In the distant Netherlands. They deserve care and attention after their death, so that history remains alive” (Sjoerd Bleeker, 58, a shoemaker).

“Because these dead have no one, they are far away from home, all alone, abroad. Because they were treated very badly: tortured and abused by the Germans. ... Because they are people!” (Mick Kurtz, 61, retired).

People taking care of a stranger’s grave often find ways to become somehow connected with the soldier, paying as much respect as to a family member.

“I have decided to support the Foundation so that we can hopefully name the “men” and relatives. I have become the adopter of grave nr. 832, Ignati Fedotovitch Dementev. A young man who was sent into the war and rested in the Netherlands at the end. Heartbreaking. On the photo by his stone he is depicted with a balalaika” (Joke, 70, retired).

4.2.2. “... *The struggles and sacrifices of the Red Army*”

In the world with so many war conflicts people keep saying that it is very important that the story of the World War II be passed on to the future generations. “So that we can try to prevent something as terrible as a war happening again” (Gerard Threels, 65, finance controller). We have been observing lately a rising interest in the Netherlands to the role the Soviet Union had played in the fight against the Nazi. A number of the recipients accept the fact that for a long while the role of the Soviet Union has not been highlighted in the West.

“I have never realized that so many Soviet soldiers had died for our freedom. I think I owe them my gratitude” (W.H. de Boom, 75, retired).

The effort of the Soviet Union and especially the price in human lives paid for the victory is still shocking to many people in the West.

“For most of people it is an eye opener when I tell them that the SU sacrificed as many people as there are Dutch citizens right now. I tell them, “Just imagine waking up alone in Holland tomorrow, that’s how many are dead” (Arjan van Willigenburg, 46, flight planning officer).

The role of the Soviet Union is seen at this moment as important, indispensable, and essential and sometimes even decisive: “The So-

viet Union freed Europe from the German enemy” (Mick Kurtz, 61, retired).

“For me it is important to keep the story alive, to never forget what happened in those years. And especially over here in the West, the stories of WWII were coloured from an American-British-Canadian point of view. We hardly ever heard about the struggles and sacrifices of the Red Army. I think maybe nowadays this is changing a bit. But still, most documentaries are about the British/American/Canadian battles. They were the ones that actually liberated the Netherlands (even the Polish soldiers are often forgotten, although they played an important role as well), and after WWII the Soviet Union was ‘the enemy’, so that part of the war got too little attention” (Kathelijne Jongeling, 42, Historian at municipal archives).

4.2.3. “Adoption felt logic and important”

The research has shown that for a quarter of the recipients participation in the cause has a special personal meaning: being a Russian or Uzbek, having a grandfather who never came home after that war; a Russian wife, girlfriend, mother, future daughter-in-law; experience of working or living in Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Uzbekistan; military background, participation in the War operations of the modern world, learning Russian, interest in Russian culture, etc.

“Both of my grandfathers were reported missing; our attempts to find anything about them were futile. I think that we, Russian people, compatriots of these deceased here, should remember of them and do whatever possible” (Irina Ouzkikh, 56, assistant teacher).

“My father was a prisoner in the detention Camp Amersfoort, we wanted to adopt a grave of one of the Russians from Camp Amersfoort” (Anja van der Starre, 53, Hospice Coordinator).

Sometimes the adopters are asking to choose a grave of a soldier from a specific country, region or city, or a certain age or religion to get any possible individual connection with the soldier. The adoption of a grave can become a gesture of gratitude not only for the soldiers themselves but also for the whole people of the country.

“My twin brother and his family (wife and daughter) died in the MH17 plane crash that took place on the 17th of July 2014. From the moment that disaster took place I was impressed by the help that the local population gave in or-

der to take care of the bodies and human remains. As they took care of the remains of my family, I urgently felt the need to do something in return. The least I could do was to adopt a grave of a Soviet soldier who came from the area of where the disaster happened. It is a silent “thank you” to the Ukrainian population” (Willem Goes, 38, Learning& Development advisor).

There is so much of human wisdom, emotional sophistication and caring in the words. In this last case, one might expect an opposite reaction, that of finding an enemy. Instead, spiritual subtleness and deep understanding are manifested.

4.2.4. “A good cause”

The importance of the efforts to learn as much as possible about the nameless graves, to find the next of kin, to let the families know that their dear relative is not missing, that he has his burial place, that the graves are taken care of and the memory of the perished soldiers is kept alive is considered to be an important matter and that is why is worth being supported (15%).

“I have learnt that it is possible to adopt a grave and pay money that will go to a good cause: remembrance and respect to the perished so that they are not forgotten. This is the least that the living may do for those who gave their lives in the slaughter machine and carnage of the war” (Galina Pudovkina, 56).

4.2.5. “Global brotherhood, symbolism”

By the means of adoption, people in some cases are making a statement, express their hope for a better world without war conflicts, the world where mercy knows no country borders, or separation into friend or foe.

“We are aware of the fact that many youngsters from around the globe have given up their lives for the freedom of others. There people deserve our respect. As they are buried far and away, their own families cannot take care of their graves. It is a sign of global brotherhood to take care of that for them” (Judith Bartel, 46, Museum Curator/Exhibition maker).

Russians in the Netherlands remember of their former country showing, in a way, their link with it.

“When I was thinking of adopting a grave, it was a turbulent time. The USSR did not exist anymore; the former Soviet republics had chosen their own path

of development. Some interstate friction began to appear. At the same time, after all, they had fought with fascism shoulder to shoulder — Uzbeks, Georgians, Russians, Ukrainians, and others. I am f Russian. I have adopted the graves of Georgian, Russian and Ukrainian soldiers. As a symbol of friendship and reconciliation between different countries” (Galina Pudovkina, 56).

Sjoerd Bleeker, a shoemaker, 58 years of age shows an even deeper sense of the symbolism of the cause:

“This cemetery might have even more significance if you think of the symbolism. These brave men are buried in a strange ground far away from home. They most likely never visited us before or knew about us. I hope their souls found rest. They are ambassadors to Soviet/Russian history. Even more importantly — to our history. Our countries have been friends. We have a history that goes centuries back. Let these brave men remind us about it. And never forget”.

In the Netherlands participation in charity, being a member of a non-profit organization is very common⁶, [Witlox, 2019]. According to the “Giving in the Netherlands” survey 88 percent of people regularly donate money to charities, “On average, every family in the Netherlands gives 216 euros per year,” says Rene Bekkers [Bekkers, 2019]. In some cases one is choosing the most appealing organization, which in our case turned out to be the Foundation.

“I had money to spend, and I have some ties with Russia. I like to make a small contribution to intensify the relationship between the Dutch and the Russians. I think there is more that unites us, and the Second World War is a good example. By the way, I am also a friend of the Hermitage” (Ton van der Hoeven, 60, civil servant in Amsterdam).

Or like one of the very first supporters of the Foundation Bert and Ina are saying,

“From our Christian outlook on life, we are diaconally involved. The work that Remco does supports a human being in need. This applies to both foreigners and people of a different religion”. The syncretism, polyphony and emotional register of the responses analyzed above show the relevance the theme of war and war sacrifices for the Dutch.

Other questions of the survey, not included here, are: 1) If you have children/grandchildren, do you take them to the War Cemetery? Do

⁶ <https://www.gevenin nederland.nl/gevenin nederland/> (accessed: 07.05.2020).

you tell them the stories about the soldiers and the world war? If yes, why do you find it important? 2) Why was the Soviet War Cemetery for half a century a forgotten place? Why did it change in the last 25 years? 3) Do you have any additional information or remarks? The answers to these are so insightful, sincere and enlightening that they require a separate study.

5. FOR CONCLUSION

This year, the whole world is marking the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, which for the people of the Soviet Union is the Great Patriotic War. The war was different for different countries, peoples and people. Some want to forget it, some contemplate on its nature and impact, others cannot forget the tragedy as it has entered almost every family or household. The Dutch people, whose opinion we have been asking in this project, do not want to forget it and they remember the role of the Soviet Army in the liberation of Europe. Most of all, though, they feel that they must not forget the human sacrifice, they feel sincere compassion for the prisoners, who perished in Nazi camps and are buried in a strange land, for the families of the victims; they think that history should stay alive. All this has become part of their cultural identity, culture becoming a link between the two countries.

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СОВЕТСКОЕ ПОЛЕ СЛАВЫ В ЛЕЙСДЕНЕ, НИДЕРЛАНДЫ: РАНЬШЕ И СЕЙЧАС

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Советское поле Славы в Нидерландах находится в местечке Лейсден, рядом с военными кладбищами воинов-союзников в Амерсфорте. Мы рассказываем о месте захоронения 101 пленного воина-узбека, из которых 24 были замучены в лагере, а 77 расстреляны нацистами 9 апреля 1942 г. в лесу Кудрист. На Поле славы покоится 865 советских воинов различных национальностей под рядами одинаковых надгробий, на которых сразу после войны были лишь имена, написанные по-русски, часто с ошибками, или вовсе безымянные, и родственников определить было невозможно. После 50 лет забвения появился молодой голландский журналист Ремко Рейдинг и стал писать про это место. С тех пор Поле славы стало делом всей его жизни: в архивах он отыскивал имена погибших, писал о кладбище в самых разных СМИ, написал пронзительную книгу, переведенную на русский язык. организовал Фонд Поля Славы. Но самое главное, он привлек местных жителей, которые теперь ежегодно возлагают цветы и зажигают свечи по памятным датам; берут шефство над могилами, внося определенную сумму. На деньги Фонда приглашаются родственники погибших, которых удалось разыскать, и которые только сейчас узнали, что их деды и прадеды не пропали без вести, что об их могилах заботятся и их помнят. Кто же эти люди, и что заставляет их чтить память солдат, им неизвестных и с ними не связанных? Мы составили анкету и предложили заполнить ее активистам Фонда. Результаты опроса (частично) представлены в настоящей публикации. В ответах — удивительное сочувствие погибшим и их родственникам, благодарность Советской армии за победу над фашизмом, глубокое понимание роли Советского Союза, восхищение деятельностью Ремко Рейдинга и еще много трогательного и ранее неизвестного. Поразительна та открытость и человеческая мудрость, которая наполняет все тексты ответов.

Ключевые слова: Советское поле Славы, советские пленные солдаты, военное кладбище, Нидерланды, Лейсден, Ремко Рейдинг, анкетный опрос, волонтеры и опекуны, память о павших воинах.

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