

Université de Montréal

**Informal Citizen Recollections of Historic National Trauma: Personalizing  
Institutional Memory of Belgian World War II Civil Resistance in Flanders**

*Par*

Nina De Winter

Département de communication  
Faculté des arts et des sciences

Mémoire présenté en vue de l'obtention du grade de Maîtrise ès Sciences (M. Sc.) en Sciences  
de la communication, option Études du journalisme

Octobre 2025

© Nina De Winter, 2025

Université de Montréal

Département de communication, Faculté des arts et des sciences

*Ce mémoire intitulé*

**Informal Citizen Recollections of Historic National Trauma: Personalizing  
Institutional Memory of Belgian World War II Civil Resistance in Flanders**

*Présenté par*

**Nina De Winter**

*A été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes*

**Mirjam Gollmitzer**

Directrice de recherche

**Lorna Heaton**

Présidente-rapporteure

**Stephanie Fox**

Membre du jury

## RÉSUMÉ

L'historiographie belge a longtemps souligné l'absence de la résistance civile au régime nazi pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale dans la mémoire collective nationale (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). Étant donné que la mémoire est étroitement liée aux intérêts politiques et reflète les relations de pouvoir hégémoniques (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007), ce mémoire s'interroge sur la manière dont les citoyens flamands abordent la mémoire de la résistance, et sur la manière dont leurs pratiques mémorielles personnelles s'inscrivent dans les modes de commémoration institutionnels dominants. À ma connaissance, peu d'informations sont actuellement disponibles à ce sujet. Cette étude s'appuie sur les théories de Stuart Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) de la représentation et d'encodage-décodage, qui soulignent la pluralité des façons dont la mémoire peut être appropriée, ainsi que sur la conception de Maurice Halbwachs (1992) selon laquelle la mémoire est construite socialement. Treize entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés afin de répondre aux questions de recherche suivantes : Comment les citoyens flamands s'engagent-ils dans la commémoration de la résistance civile belge au régime nazi pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale ? Dans quelle mesure leurs pratiques mémorielles reproduisent-elles ou rejettent-elles la mémoire officielle ? Les résultats révèlent que la mémoire des citoyens prend principalement la forme d'une négociation avec la mémoire hégémonique. La mémoire de la résistance est fortement liée à la proximité émotionnelle avec des proches et des figures locales importantes de la résistance, et s'articule autour de discours héroïques ancrés dans les faiblesses humaines, de récits centrés sur les hommes et d'une reconnaissance des formes diverses et idéologiquement contestées de la résistance. Les citoyens flamands personnalisent la mémoire institutionnelle en affirmant leur agentivité dans le choix de qui, de quoi et de comment se souvenir, en adaptant les cadres officiels à leurs propres besoins et préférences, et en ne reconnaissant la mémoire hégémonique que lorsqu'elle sert leur propre souvenir. Cependant, cette négociation ne se traduit pas nécessairement par un contrôle accru des citoyens et peut paradoxalement renforcer la mémoire officielle dominante. Pour tous, se souvenir de la résistance relève moins d'une histoire abstraite et lointaine que de la préservation de l'héritage d'individus qui ont eu une importance personnelle. Ces approches personnalisées soulignent la valeur et la pertinence durables de la mémoire de la résistance civile dans la vie quotidienne, ainsi que le rôle central de l'agentivité citoyenne dans la formation d'une mémoire collective personnalisée.

**Mots-clés** : résistance civile, Seconde Guerre mondiale, mémoire collective, mémoire hégémonique, postmemory, théorie de la représentation, mémoire personnelle

## ABSTRACT

Belgian historiography has long noted the absence of the civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II within national collective memory (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). Since remembrance is interconnected with political interests and reflects hegemonic power relations (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007), this Master's thesis questions how ordinary Flemish citizens engage with the memory of the civil resistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how their informal, personal memory practices relate to dominant institutional ways of remembering. Little or nothing appears to be known about this in academic literature. This study draws on Stuart Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) representation and encoding-decoding theories, which highlight the plurality of ways memory can be appropriated, and on Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) conception of memory as socially constructed. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted to answer the following research questions: How do Flemish citizens engage in the remembrance of the Belgian civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II? To what extent do their memory practices reproduce or refuse official remembrance? Findings reveal that citizen remembrance predominantly takes the form of negotiation with hegemonic memory. Resistance memory is strongly tied to emotional nearness to relatives and significant local resistance figures and is articulated through discourses of heroism rooted in human flaws, male-centered narratives, and a recognition of diverse, ideologically contested forms of resistance. Flemish citizens personalize institutional remembrance by asserting agency in deciding who, what, and how to remember, adapting official frameworks to their own needs and preferences, and recognizing hegemonic memory only when it serves their own remembrance. However, such negotiation does not necessarily translate into greater citizen control and can paradoxically reinforce dominant official remembrance. For all, remembering the resistance is less about engaging with abstract distant history than about preserving the legacies of personally significant individuals. These personalized approaches underline the enduring worth and relevance of civil resistance memory in everyday lives and the central role of citizen agency in shaping personalized collective memory.

**Keywords:** civil resistance, World War II, collective memory, hegemonic memory, postmemory, representation theory, personal memory

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mirjam Gollmitzer, my research supervisor, for her mentorship, boundless patience, and invaluable guidance throughout this journey.

To my parents, who have always placed their trust in me and encouraged me to seize opportunities that allow me to bring out the best in myself. The love, time, and effort you invest in me every day, especially during life's most difficult moments, mean the world to me.

To my dear grandfather, *opa*, who sadly passed away during the preparation of my mémoire. Thank you for being my greatest hero. I dedicate this work to you, grateful for the strength you have given me to turn grief into a fruitful undertaking. Your optimism and perseverance continue to inspire me every day, both in and beyond this work. *Vriend voor altijd.*

To *Antoine De Winter*, my great-uncle, who was a member of the civil resistance during World War II in Rumst, Flanders.

To the Flemish citizens that participated in this research project. Thank you for your trust and openness in sharing your personal memory practices with me. It was a privilege to hear your perspectives on remembrance and to learn from you. I hope I have conveyed them as accurately and faithfully as you intended.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the Université de Montréal and the Department of Communication for the incredible support from all its dedicated professors throughout my Master's degree.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>1. LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>15</b>
1.1. Understanding Remembrance .....	15
1.1.1. The Concept of Memory .....	15
1.1.2. Memory Studies as an Interdisciplinary Field .....	17
1.1.3. Different Forms of Remembrance .....	19
1.1.3.1. Formal Remembrance .....	20
1.1.3.2. Informal Remembrance .....	21
1.1.4. The Role of Cultural Artefacts in Remembrance .....	22
1.1.5. Motivations Underlying Remembrance .....	24
1.2. The Politics of Memory .....	25
1.3. Remembering Traumatic Historical Events .....	30
1.3.1. Sites of Memory .....	30
1.3.2. Generational Differences in Remembrance .....	32
1.4. Remembrance in the Digital Age: Mediated Memory .....	35
1.5. Remembrance of the Civil Resistance in Belgium .....	37
1.5.1. Understanding the Civil Resistance during World War II .....	37
1.5.1.1. Overview of the Civil Resistance in Belgium .....	38
1.5.2. Understanding the Collaboration during World War II .....	40
1.5.3. Remembrance of the World Wars in Belgium .....	41
1.5.4. Contemporary Remembrance of the Civil Resistance .....	45
1.5.5. Representations of History in Remembrance .....	46
<b>2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .....</b>	<b>49</b>
2.1. Theory of Collective Memory .....	49
2.2. Representation Theory .....	51
2.2.1. Comparing Epistemological Perspectives: Halbwachs versus Hall .....	53
2.3. Encoding and Decoding Model .....	55
2.4. Additional Concepts of Memory .....	56

2.4.1. Collective and Public Memory versus Private Memory .....	56
2.4.2. Postmemory .....	58
<b>3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>4. METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1. Data Collection .....	62
4.1.1. Participant Recruitment and Selection .....	63
4.1.2. Interview Process .....	65
4.1.3. Researcher Positionality .....	66
4.2. Data Analysis .....	67
4.2.1. Structuring the Findings .....	69
<b>5. FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>71</b>
5.1. Participant Overview .....	71
5.2. Origins of Participant Engagement .....	72
5.3. Personal Expressions of Civil Resistance Memory .....	75
5.3.1. Memory Practices in Public Settings .....	75
5.3.1.1. Local War Remembrance Associations .....	75
5.3.1.2. Participation in Collective Initiatives .....	77
5.3.2. Personal Memory Practices in Public Settings .....	80
5.3.2.1. Creative and Artistic Memory Practices .....	80
5.3.2.2. Sharing Personal Testimonies Publicly .....	85
5.3.2.3. Digital Memory Practices .....	86
5.3.3. Personal Memory Practices in Private Settings .....	90
5.3.3.1. Collective Private Remembrance .....	90
5.3.3.2. Individual Private Remembrance .....	96
5.4. Spatial, Material, and Temporal Factors in Shaping Personal Engagement .....	97
5.4.1. The Role of Place .....	97
5.4.1.1. Official Sites of Memory .....	97
5.4.1.2. Informal Sites of Memory .....	101
5.4.1.3. Local Sites of Memory .....	102
5.4.2. The Role of Cultural Artefacts .....	109
5.4.2.1. Peripheral Material Contributions .....	109

5.4.2.2.	Material Artefacts as Active Agents of Memory .....	110
5.4.3.	The Role of Events .....	116
5.4.3.1.	Official Events .....	116
5.4.3.2.	Informal Events .....	119
<b>6.</b>	<b>DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>121</b>
6.1.	Negotiated Citizen Remembrance as Reappropriation of Resistance Memory .....	121
6.1.1.	Forms of Personalized Resistance Memory .....	123
6.1.1.1.	Nearness to People and Place: The “Person” in Personalization .....	123
6.1.1.2.	Collective and Intergenerational Memory in Trusted Environments .....	124
6.1.1.3.	Emotional Remembrance in the Postmemory Era .....	125
6.1.1.4.	Blending Strategies: Enhancing Personal Agency or Hegemony? .....	127
6.1.2.	Key Themes in Representations and Discourse .....	128
6.1.2.1.	The Heroism of Flawed Human Beings .....	128
6.1.2.2.	Gender and the Civil Resistance .....	129
6.1.2.3.	Categories of Civil Resistance .....	130
6.2.	Limits of the Research .....	131
6.3.	Avenues for Future Research .....	132
<b>7.</b>	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>134</b>
	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>136</b>
	<b>ANNEXES .....</b>	<b>153</b>
Annex 1:	Recruitment Poster .....	153
Annex 2:	Examples of Coding and the Identification of Themes .....	154
Annex 3:	Declaration on the Use of Generative AI .....	156

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Profile of selected participants .....	72
Table 2: Involvement in remembering the resistance .....	73
Table 3: Decoding strategies identified in the study following Hall (1977, 1980, 1997).....	122

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Newsletter and magazine published by war remembrance organizations (Respondents 5 and 11).....	76
Figure 2: Mural of the local neighborhood project (Respondent 9).....	78
Figure 3: Screenshots of personal Facebook posts (Respondent 13).....	90
Figure 4: Screenshots of podcasts about the resistance in Flanders (Respondent 7).....	97
Figure 5: Obituary cards of local resistance fighters (Respondent 13).....	101
Figure 6: Remembrance trees (Respondent 12).....	102
Figure 7: Mural of Hortense Daman (Respondent 7).....	104
Figure 8: Local photo display (Respondent 5).....	105
Figure 9: Canteen cup in its place of safekeeping (Respondent 3).....	111
Figure 10: Box full of personal family objects (Respondent 6).....	113
Figure 11: Prison uniform of Respondent 8's parent (Respondent 8).....	114
Figure 12: Personal remembrance ring in memory of great-uncle (Respondent 13).....	115

Note: All the photos included in this thesis were personally provided by the participants and were either taken by them or by me, the researcher. I obtained participants' explicit permission to include these images in the final publication of the thesis.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2025, we commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II. While these historical events occurred nearly a century ago, their memory remains vivid to this day. In the context of the so-called memory boom (Winter & Prost, 2005), a wide range of actors – including activists, politicians, and artists (A. Assmann, 2008) – are increasingly engaged in the process of reconstructing and recalling the past. The act of remembering, which may be defined as “to hold a special ceremony to honor a past event or someone who has died” (Cambridge, n.d.), has existed for much longer than we may assume. However, it can manifest in forms beyond ceremonies and it is inherently tied to the present, shaped by motivations that are oriented towards the future (Frijda, 2007). In this way, remembering past events and people turns into a personal endeavor. Indeed, we may recall the past for our own reasons, such as cherishing memories or nostalgia, or to learn from past mistakes, adapting it to meet our current needs or objectives (Paez & Liu, 2010). Additionally, remembrance contributes to our sense of identity, both individually and within our communities (J. Assmann, 2008), helping us define our role within society. Within this framework, remembrance has evolved into a public arena of contestation where various state and non-state actors, including activists and the media (A. Assmann, 2008), engage in debates over competing interpretations of the past (Ferrara, 2022).

It is evident that there is great diversity in the ways nations preserve the memory of those who perished in past armed conflicts. Remembrance initiatives related to major collective events are typically organized by institutional bodies, such as governments, municipal councils, or citizen committees (Frijda, 2007). These activities often involve large-scale public happenings designed to attract significant attention, amplified through media coverage, live broadcasts, or the participation of prominent political figures. From an international perspective, notable examples include Armistice Day (November 11) and Holocaust Remembrance Day (January 27). Remembrance resonates at the national level and simultaneously affects the families of those directly involved. This dual impact results in memory practices not only occurring in public spaces, as is the case with official ceremonies. Instead, they extend to the private sphere, where remembrance may take on intimate forms, such as intergenerational storytelling. Despite their varying scales, both forms of remembrance share a common characteristic: they are anchored in specific selected days, attributing a conventional, ritualized dimension to memory (Frijda, 2007).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by technological advancements that have profoundly altered the ways we live, both in our personal lives as well as professionally. These developments enable individuals to share messages at unprecedented speeds and reach audiences far beyond what was previously possible, enabling local memory initiatives to attain global visibility almost instantaneously (Adams & Kopelman, 2022). Moreover, in the digital age, the traditional boundaries between public and private forms of remembrance have faded (Arthur, 2009). The extensive accessibility of the Internet and its various platforms enables individuals to disseminate personal narratives, encompassing both one's recollections of past occurrences as well as real-time testimonials of ongoing events, such as wars or conflicts elsewhere. Consequently, digital audiences can engage with historical events as they unfold through witnessing *in* the media, *by* the media or *through* the media (Kyriakidou, 2015), highlighting the global and mediated dimensions of contemporary collective memory.

Since projects involving remembrance are often contentious and involve a large range of participants, conflict frequently arises (Ferrara, 2022). In some cases, this may result in competing claims among different stakeholders, striving to establish the legitimacy of their own interpretations of the past (Gutman & Wüstenberg, 2022). The contested character of memory, then, highlights the relevance of memory studies as a disciplinary field in today's world, as they teach us that historical representations are “negotiated, selective, present-oriented, and relative, while insisting that the experiences they reflect cannot be manipulated at will” (Kansteiner, 2002). This finds strong expression in the concept of the politics of memory, which holds that memory emerges from the subjective experiences of a social group embedded in power relations (Confino, 1997), providing a framework for examining how representations of historical events articulate and reinforce hegemonic power structures (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). Within the context of this thesis, World War II offers a historic example of such contestation, where debates over which narratives and actors should dominate collective memory have persisted since the postwar era (Aerts & De Wever, 2012).

In the case of the Second World War, the first generation of survivors is increasingly passing away, and the second generation is gradually growing older (Kook, 2021). This shift not only signifies that the duty to remember (Ricoeur, 1999) is now in the hands of subsequent generations but also emphasizes the critical importance of identifying effective ways to transmit the memory of the past into the present and the future.

This is essential to preserve the legacies of those who perished in World War II, including members of our own communities and families. The present thesis seeks to contribute to this endeavor by studying the remembrance of the civil resistance against the Nazi regime during the Second World War in Flanders, Belgium. This subject prompts key questions, such as how the resistance has been remembered over time and why it continues to be a significant area of scholarly inquiry today.

Opinions on these questions may vary, but one fact is clear: in the aftermath of World War II, building a culture of remembrance around the civil resistance was challenging. Challenges stemmed from the lack of governmental involvement in shaping collective war memory, as well as from internal divisions within the resistance itself, where conflicting views and group rivalries complicated a unified remembrance. Due to this difficult integration of the resistance into Belgium's collective memory (Aerts & De Wever, 2012), it is often said that the members of the civil resistance to Nazi Germany won the war, but lost the battle of memory (Steffens, 2023). Nevertheless, there is currently a renewed interest among Belgian authors, television producers, newspaper journalists, and politicians (Corthals & Weyns, n.d.) in remembering the resistance, reflecting a growing engagement with this aspect of Belgium's wartime history. From a personal view, genealogical research into my own family history and a personal interest in World War II history introduced me to the memory of the civil resistance, which in turn motivated me to explore this topic further. As an insider in the study (Holmes, 2020), my positionality influenced the research, presenting challenges such as the risk of over-identifying with participants. I managed this by visualizing the research questions and maintaining focus on participants' memory practices.

Acknowledging the contested and mediated nature of memory, along with the increasing public interest in remembering the civil resistance during the Second World War in Belgium, this study explores how Flemish citizens are involved in the remembrance process of the resistance, including privately or through the media, and what drives them to do so. It further examines how these personal memory practices are shaped by existing power relationships, focusing on how citizens' discourse and personal ways of remembering the resistance position themselves in relation to dominant, prescribed ways of remembering.

The central research questions of the present thesis are: How do Flemish citizens engage in the remembrance of the Belgian civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II? To what extent do their memory practices reproduce or refuse official remembrance? These are complemented by the following sub-questions: What are the memory practices of Flemish citizens, both their mediated memory practices as well as their private memory practices? What motivates their particular ways of remembering?

To address our research questions, the literature review outlines existing scholarship on memory, while offering a concise overview of World War II resistance history and its remembrance in Belgium. Secondly, the theoretical conceptual framework of the study is explained, applying Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) theory of collective memory. This theoretical approach provides a valuable lens to examine how memory is socially constructed within communities and transmitted across generations, highlighting the dynamic interactions between collective and personal forms of remembrance. We also draw on critical research by applying Stuart Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) representation theory and encoding and decoding model to assess how personal memory practices relate to ideology and official remembrance. That is, the thesis explores if and how contemporary Flemish citizens' memory practices align with, reappropriate, or contest hegemonic ways of remembering and representing the civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II. The methodology section details the use of individual semi-structured interviews to explore the subjective memory practices of citizens, followed by a presentation of the research findings. We continue with a discussion, enabling us to link our results to the literature review. Finally, the conclusion synthesizes key insights and provides answers to our research questions.

# 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1. Understanding Remembrance

### 1.1.1. The Concept of Memory

In delving into the extensive field of memory studies, an excellent point of departure is to understand the theoretical concept of memory. Despite their frequent interchangeable use, the terms “memory,” “remembrance,” and “commemoration” are conceptually distinguished in scholarly literature. For instance, Frost and Laing (2013) explain that memory is “something we have (or have lost or never had)” (p. 1), while remembrance refers to the act that “includes the construction and retention of that memory” (p. 1). Commemorations, in turn, are said to be “typically planned with intentions of affirming and reinforcing memories that provide a sense of heritage and identity” (Frost & Laing, 2013, p. 1). The latter can take various forms, including public gatherings, symbolic rituals, the creation of collective monuments, and religious memorials (Frost & Laing, 2013). Additionally, memory can be represented through cultural objects, photographs, prints, and other mediated forms (Lohmeier & Böhling, 2017).

The construction and passing on of memory are inherently discursive processes, since memory is communicated through some form of language, whether visual, verbal, or a combination thereof, or through a mutually understood code (Velte, 2022). Additionally, Vinitzky-Seroussi (2002) proposes that the type of memory practiced in a nation is significantly influenced by the relative power of the actors involved in remembrance – whether they are official or grassroots actors. Consequently, certain ways of remembering resonate more strongly in a given society than others, depending on the prominence or status of the groups and individuals who initiate them. As the power relationships that shape remembrance evolve, so do memories, influenced by the vast array of information that we receive through media sources, including books, films, newspapers, and so on (Hunt & McHale, 2007).

For the purposes of this study, remembrance is understood as the “act that arises from an intention to keep the memory of a person or a thing alive” (Bomba, 2016, p. 7). Additionally, we consider memory practices as “a complex phenomenon which involves many (human, discursive, material, entangled) agencies; which emerges through small, everyday interactions; yet, which also develops, shifts, reproduces, sticks or unsettles major political configurations” (Macgilchrist et al., 2015, p. 2-3). Consistent with these definitions and those outlined earlier by Frost and Laing (2013), the terms memory, remembrance, and their variants (such as “memory practices” and “remembrance practices”) will be used interchangeably to refer to participants’ personal ways of preserving the memory of the Belgian civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II.

Over the past few decades, interest in memory has grown so significantly that scholars speak of a *memory boom* (Winter & Prost, 2005). This surge in interest has coincided with an extraordinary increase in publications on recent historical events, such as the World Wars. Many of these works are authored by descendants reflecting on their family memories and personal connections to these conflicts (Ziino, 2010). According to Ziino (2010), demographic factors play a crucial role in this phenomenon, as longer lifespans have enabled different generations to engage more deeply with their pasts than ever before. Winter (2016) has observed that the growing emphasis on remembrance is reflected in the increasing number of people visiting so-called *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), such as battlefields and memorials. These visits are often inspired by a desire to connect with family history; trips to former concentration camps where relatives were imprisoned during World War II serve as one such example. Additionally, this form of travel, commonly referred to as war-related tourism, is driven by identity formation, remembrance, curiosity, and the pursuit of knowledge (Bigley et al., 2010). It also highlights another fundamental function of remembrance: its role in sustaining the sense that those who have passed away remain present among us, with emotional bonds continuing to exist (Frijda, 2007). Indeed, remembrance fosters a profound sense of closeness to those who are being remembered:

In commemoration, one imagines the fate and feelings of the lost persons, and what they had to go through, or the strengths of past heroes. It is a means both to integrate what has happened, and to decrease the distance to the lost individuals. One adds the events to one’s store of experience, and also appropriates something that belonged to the past and the remembered person. The memories and the knowledge of the past become more one’s possessions. (Frijda, 2007, p. 290)

### **1.1.2. Memory Studies as an Interdisciplinary Field**

Memory is a widely studied subject across various disciplines. Some academics define memory studies as “an umbrella term hovering up a diverse set of disciplinary vantage points, methodological approaches, and theoretical perspectives on how we collectively and corporately remember and commemorate the past” (Conway, 2010, p. 442). Others view it as “a general rubric for inquiry into the varieties of forms through which we are shaped by the past, conscious and unconscious, public and private, material and communicative, consensual and challenged” (Olick & Robbins, 1998, p. 112).

In an era where memory has become a focal point of academic and public interest, it is considered “an expansive label that seems to migrate into different places” (Berliner, 2005, p. 201). Memory studies are the subject of examination in a wide range of academic fields, including history, sociology, the arts, literary and media studies, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and the neurosciences (Sierp, 2021). The social sciences and humanities, for instance, have become increasingly engaged with how the past is materially reflected in public settings, art, and popular media (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). Also, memory studies have become closely intertwined with communication studies, particularly as scholars in journalism and mass communication have contributed significantly to the study of collective memory since the 1990s (Hume, 2010). While growing attention is currently being paid to memory in the digital age, media and communication scholars also investigate how historical events are represented or distorted in media narratives, and how public reputations are preserved posthumously (Hume, 2010). Additionally, memory extends into disciplines that may not seem related at first sight, such as architecture, law, business, and political sciences (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). As a result, memory studies are inherently transdisciplinary (Olick & Robbins, 1998), allowing researchers to engage with memory from various perspectives.

Scientific literature has largely centered on the political aspects of remembrance, examining how representations of the past are used to assert or reinforce hegemonic authority (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). For instance, Foote and Azaryahu (2007) highlight the diverse range of actors involved in shaping war memory, including veterans, their families, political institutions, and community organizations. These authors note that while citizen-led or unofficial remembrance initiatives may eventually receive official recognition, this process is often slow, unfolding over decades or even generations. In contrast, in authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, memory may be imposed from above, with official narratives embedded directly into the memorial landscape (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). This illustrates how, in any given society, remembrance can function as a tool to legitimize political authority and influence collective understandings of the past.

While the versatile nature of memory has been advantageous in stimulating research and expanding the field, it presents certain challenges. First, the vast body of literature, though valuable, risks leading to conceptual errors, where the term memory is applied inconsistently or in ways that exceed the intended scope of memory studies (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Furthermore, critics argue that there is a lack of communication between researchers from different areas of study (Sierp, 2021), potentially resulting in methodological inconsistencies and practical difficulties. This fragmentation contributes to a shortage of theoretical frameworks and analytical vocabulary, as well as to frequent scholarly disagreements (Sierp, 2021). Berliner (2005) extends this critique into the field of anthropology, where the “current usage of the notion... can be a source of confusion” (p. 198), and “the concept of memory has become a scientific commonsense... constantly and unthinkingly deployed” (p. 206). Similarly, Conway (2010) highlights that within sociology, the concept of remembrance remains underdeveloped theoretically. In short, these concerns recall Rosenfeld’s (2009) warning that the rapid expansion of memory studies could lead to a “crisis of overproduction” (p. 156). From a more optimistic viewpoint, Fogu and Kansteiner (2006) attribute both the widespread interest in memory and its inefficiency to its ability to transcend multiple disciplines. Erll (2011) equally emphasizes the importance of memory studies, as “we cannot afford the luxury of *not* studying memory” (p. 5).

### 1.1.3. Different Forms of Remembrance

The different parties involved in remembrance are referred to as “agents of memory” (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002), “memory activists” (Ferrara, 2022), or even “moral entrepreneurs” (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). New memory actors and initiatives arise when historical events become more distant in time, as the survivor generation fades away and their descendants age, such as with the Holocaust (Winter, 2016). Under those circumstances, “as one group succeeds another, it brings with it new memories which build on or replace the old” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 375). Remembrance takes place in diverse contexts, ranging from the public sphere to more personal settings (Kansteiner, 2002). Accordingly, the literature distinguishes between official and unofficial remembrance (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007), also referred to as formal and informal approaches to memory. Whereas monuments and official historical narratives in textbooks represent formal remembrance, informal forms include personal conversations, letters, and diaries (Paez & Liu, 2010).

Regardless of the type of memory practiced, academics suggest that remembrance is characterized by the recognition of a specific event or individual on designated days of the year, typically at intervals of one, five, ten, or even one hundred years (Frijda, 2007). While this pattern is particularly evident in formal remembrance rituals, which are frequently conducted at sacred sites (Winter, 2016), private remembrance also tends to follow selected time patterns. This includes yearly acts such as “remembering the day a close one died, remembering one’s wedding day even after one’s partner died, birthdays of lost ones, and putting flowers next to their portraits” (Frijda, 2007, p. 288). It is essential to recognize that remembrance is an “active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information” (Schwartz, 1982, p. 374). In some respects, it is the process of bringing the past to life in the present moment. Foote and Azaryahu (2007) explain this intertemporal connection as follows:

At the most general level, memory pertains to the actualization of the past in some form of contemporary experience – a tourist’s visit to a battle site, a community’s celebration of its centennial, the dedication of a new memorial, the release of a new historical film or book, historical re-enactments, and many other types of event.  
(p. 126)

Recalling the past is not a uniform act. Rather, it may be shaped and interpreted differently. This way, memory is “called up and passed on by individuals and groups through commemorative gatherings, speeches, rituals, and a variety of performances” (Marschall, 2013, p. 83). Memory practices not only vary among individuals and communities but also across political systems and geographic contexts, including at local and regional levels (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007), highlighting the spatial diversity in how remembrance is enacted. The following section provides a concise overview of some of these forms, focusing on the factors that influence their development. Remembrance “stems from many different motives and usually involves many different groups” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007, p. 129). One certainty, however, is that the emotions associated with remembrance are ambivalent: both sought after and avoided (Frijda, 2007).

#### **1.1.3.1. Formal Remembrance**

Formal occasions of remembrance typically involve large public gatherings, with additional efforts being made to reach even broader audiences, such as through television broadcasts. They are often initiated by state actors. As an example, many nations hold official ceremonies to preserve their ties to the past and reinforce their national identities (Coopmans et al., 2017). This is especially common in countries affected by recent, large-scale historical events, such as the World Wars. In the Netherlands, the annual Remembrance Day on May 4 features a national ceremony in Amsterdam, attended by the Royals, to honor the Dutch war dead from World War II (Royal House of the Netherlands, n.d.).

Official remembrance not only provides a platform for expressing grief, but also tends to have a profound emotional impact, which is largely shaped by the feelings of those directly affected by the remembered events (Frijda, 2007). Even when these events took place a long time ago, their emotional resonance can remain deeply felt, particularly when they represent what Frijda (2007) calls “unfinished business” (p. 291) for those who experienced them firsthand. Frijda illustrates this with Stephen Trombley’s 1994 documentary on the former Paris concentration camp of Drancy, which follows an ex-prisoner returning to the site for the first time in 50 years, a site now maintained and preserved by government authorities. As the survivor steps out of the taxi that brought him and looks up at the camp entrance, Frijda describes how “he lets air escape from his pointed lips in the way you do upon sudden pain” (p. 284), capturing the enduring emotional charge of personally lived trauma. Indeed, as Cordonnier et al. (2020) argue, “with a personal

connection, a historical event can become alive, give personal relevance, and as a result, have a greater impact on how one views the event and its consequences” (p. 302). Coopmans et al. (2017) have outlined three types of experiences that could stimulate participation in formal memory practices: communication with relatives about war, exchanges with others outside the family, and parental exemplary behavior.

Marschall (2013) studies the differences between official and vernacular modes of recalling the past, describing the former as “officially sanctioned markers and spaces of memory, mostly government-endorsed” (p. 79). Vernacular memory practices, on the other hand, are defined as “collective ... often highly localized, informal, spontaneous, ephemeral, community-based, or rooted in tradition, local custom, or popular culture” (Marschall, 2013, p. 79). Marschall further highlights how formal acts of remembrance, such as the establishment of tangible memory sites like museums, are widely studied within the international field of memory studies. She notes that these official initiatives tend to be shaped by dominant cultural narratives and national symbolism, with the installation of an official memorial discouraging or strictly regulating informal remembrance practices relating to it, such as leaving personal objects at the site (Marschall, 2013). Lim (2024) elaborates on the privileging of public memory, noting that formal declarations of memory are “typically public, and often official – in the sense of being backed by common institutions” (p. 4). Similarly, Winter (2016) underscores that public remembrance initiatives are generally highly formalized and ritualized occasions.

#### **1.1.3.2. Informal Remembrance**

From another perspective, individuals may choose to engage in informal remembrance carried out in private settings or through public memory practices that do not align with official ways of remembering. Research indicates that private acts of memory often take place alongside formal activities (Winter, 2016). One key reason for this is that large-scale public remembrance may do little to ease personal grief and trauma (Winter, 2016), particularly when relatives were involved in the historical events being remembered. In such cases, some individuals may prefer private or public memory acts that better reflect their own individual needs. Within this thesis, “informal remembrance” describes how ordinary citizens remember the resistance in their personal and everyday lives; regardless of whether they do so publicly or privately, collectively or alone.

Informal remembrance can take the form of visiting the graves of friends or relatives, honoring loved ones at meaningful memory sites such as street plaques and other relevant markers, or watching public ceremonies on television (Frijda, 2007). Participating in remembrance through the common activity of family history research can shape one's identity, providing individuals with a sense of security, stability, and continuity (Basu, 2004), depending on the findings uncovered in their genealogical inquiry. It is also possible that the decision to partake in informal remembrance stems from distinct motivations, such as feeling disconnected from traditional memory activities (Kook, 2021). At the local level, informal remembrance may include attending processions, visiting cemeteries or memorial festivals, laying flowers, and sharing personal narratives both online and offline (Purdeková, 2022). Within private homes, individuals may create memorials using objects, such as photographs (Winter, 2016).

Some may choose to travel to significant memory sites, or *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989), driven by a personal connection to these places that shapes their decision to visit (Winter, 2016). According to Marschall (2013), spontaneous and informal forms of remembrance are shaped by local traditions and spiritual practices. More broadly, the literature highlights the significance that individuals attach to a wide range of memory approaches – whether formal, informal, public, or private – rather than limiting remembrance to traditional large-scale events, museums, or monuments (Winter, 2016). Building on this, our study will demonstrate that these modes of recalling the past can be tailored to individual needs through negotiating and reinterpreting official, dominant narratives, rather than engaging in entirely separate and private memory practices.

#### **1.1.4. The Role of Cultural Artefacts in Remembrance**

As we have seen, memory can be expressed through cultural artefacts (Lohmeier & Böhling, 2017). These objects may directly represent the subject of remembrance, such as portraits of individuals, or indirectly symbolize it; they can be tangible, like memorials, or intangible, like songs (Lim, 2024). Additionally, artefacts can be deeply personal, such as a cherished teddy bear, or more universal, like a flag (Marschall, 2013). Their selection can be deliberate or subconscious (Marschall, 2013), offering insights into how individuals relate to the past and how the past continues to resonate in the present (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2006).

Saito (2010) suggests that physical remnants play a key role in memory rituals, since their contents can influence our perceptions of a shared past. Historical memories are linked to objects, both sacred and secular, that people create or experience (Mayo, 1988). On a personal level, material items serve as “memory traces that keep the past visible within a family and amongst subsequent generations” (Crooke, 2016, p. 89). More broadly, they function as tools for glorification, remembrance, or contemplation (Crooke, 2016), while also providing knowledge about the past (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2006).

In recent years, war-related artefacts have grown in popularity due to their commercial value. Increasingly, individuals engage in the collection, trade, and display of war memorabilia – including uniforms and ammunition – for personal interest and profit (Mayo, 1988). As these historical artefacts acquire new meanings, they become integrated into rituals and acts of remembrance, mediating the connection between the living and the dead (Crooke, 2016).

Some scholars adopt a broader view of war relics, extending the concept beyond individual objects to encompass war monuments. Within this expanded framework, Ferenc (2019) acknowledges a proliferation and diversification of war memorials in contemporary times, emphasizing that, regardless of public perception, such relics serve to honor the sacrifices of soldiers, and implicitly, to glorify war. Shifting attention to everyday objects used by eyewitnesses to historic events, such as those from the 1992-1995 siege of Sarajevo, Mannergren Simovic (2022) highlights how the display of artefacts in contemporary museums can foster inclusive discourses of peace and counter divisive narratives of the past. In this way, objects are understood to “serve transformations from war to peace” (Mannergren Simovic, 2022, p. 234). Complementing these perspectives, Balcells and Voytas (2025) investigate how museums contribute to healing and recovery in post-conflict societies. Their study of a transnational justice exhibit in Northern Ireland found that museum visitors often experience intense emotional engagement with conflict-related objects. However, these emotional responses do not necessarily lead to changes in attitudes towards past violence, possibly because museums tend to present multiple perspectives rather than promoting a singular historical narrative (Balcells & Voytas, 2025). These studies reveal how war-related objects can embody conflicting ideological interpretations of historical events, shaped by the ways in which they are presented to the public by official agents of memory, such as museums.

Objects are believed to possess an agency of their own, shaping the experiences and perceptions of their owners (Rochberg-Halton, 1984). They are deeply embedded in daily life and personal identity (Crooke, 2016), embodying the very process by which memory is transmitted across generations and passed from one possessor to the next (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2006). As such, artefacts contribute to the processes of meaning-making, to the point where they can even help to “create the ultimate goals of one’s existence” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. xi). Testimonial objects hold a rich array of stories and memories, gaining fresh meaning and value through those who encounter and use them. These items are “closely bound with our life history and are a means through which identity is both forged and expressed” (Crooke, 2016, p. 89). Hirsch and Spitzer (2006) capture the reflective nature of cultural artefacts with their concept *points of memory*, referring to objects that can “produce *piercing insights* that traverse temporal, spatial, and experiential divides,” “give information about the past,” or “prick and wound and grab and puncture” (p. 358). Collective memory is, therefore, not a fixed, static concept, but is actively formed, maintained, and negotiated through memory practices and the artefacts that accompany them (Marschall, 2013). Remembrance thus remains fluid, even in the face of hegemonic forms of memory that tend to marginalize alternative ways of remembering within any given society.

### **1.1.5. Motivations Underlying Remembrance**

People engage in remembrance for reasons related to their connections with the historical events or groups being recalled, as well as their personal objectives. Shackel (2001) categorizes these motivations into three main types: erasing an alternative past, fostering or strengthening patriotism, and cultivating nostalgia to legitimize a particular cultural legacy. He emphasizes that these categories are not mutually exclusive, highlighting how historical events can hold different meanings for different individuals or groups at different times (Shackel, 2001). Beyond these broader motivations, remembrance may occur to honor individuals for their significant achievements, recognize their contributions to a community, or acknowledge the harm they may have caused (Lim, 2024). Local remembrance initiatives are likely to receive substantial support, particularly in regional areas, due to easier access and a stronger personal connection to family and the local community (Winter, 2016), reflecting a motivation rooted in supporting local groups.

Norton and Gino (2014) note that participation in memory rituals can serve as “a compensatory mechanism designed to restore feelings of control after losses and that this increased feeling of control contributes to reduced grief” (p. 266), providing another reason for engaging in remembrance. Their experiments examined individual responses to different types of losses, including the death of a loved one, and identified a range of personal memory rituals that help alleviate grief, such as listening to the deceased’s favorite songs, repeating their habits or those shared with them, and engaging in religious prayers (Norton & Gino, 2014). In summary, research indicates that the expansion of memory culture could be a sign of the need to be part of a collective memory, shaped by our common history of trauma and the responsibility we feel towards national tragedies such as World War II, a concept that the French describe as *le devoir de mémoire* (Ricoeur, 1999) or the duty to remember.

However, Frijda (2007) argues that, particularly in the context of war and similar tragedies, the primary driving force behind memorialization lies in the lasting emotional impact of these events on survivors, their relatives and friends, and others indirectly affected. In this sense, remembrance serves as a way for those impacted to “make one’s past one’s own and form part of one group” and to “express sympathy with those who suffered, or with the cause that a commemoration may stand for, or to derive pride from former fate” (Frijda, 2007, p. 291). Finally, it is crucial to recognize that remembrance, particularly in relation to conflicts, is not always solely tied to grief or loss. For some, these memories may evoke feelings of “comradeship, personal closeness and instances of personal self-sacrifice that fill many survivors with lifelong nostalgic memory or shining examples of what humans are also capable” (Frijda, 2007, p. 286).

## **1.2. The Politics of Memory**

The act of remembering historical events and groups is intertwined with political interests, giving rise to the concept of the *politics of memory* as a significant theme in academic discourse (Confino, 1997). Researchers in this field primarily explore “how the past is represented to express hegemonic relations of power and authority” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007, p. 129). In this view, memory is understood as “a subjective experience of a social group that essentially sustains a relationship of power,” centered on the question of “who wants whom to remember what, and why” (Confino, 1997, p. 1393). As a result, memory studies examine the factors and reasoning

that shape people's biased and distorted perceptions of history (Roudometof, 2003). In recent decades, the scope of memory politics has expanded beyond national borders due to the global reach of human rights discourse and media networks (Saito, 2018). This has led to memory debates occurring on both local and international levels, with power struggles playing out between political elites, grassroots organizations, and competing narratives from central and peripheral perspectives (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

Academic literature widely acknowledges the contested character of remembrance. Some scholars highlight how "both state and non-state actors are disputing the different meanings and interpretations of a traumatic past in the public space" (Ferrara, 2022, p. 108), and how "actors compete to legitimate their own commemorative positions by deploying different strategies and mobilizing different amounts of resources at their disposal" (Saito, 2018, p. 651). Others focus on specific conflicts, emphasizing disputes between differing interpretations of the same events, and between institutional and personal recollections (Paez & Liu, 2010). These differences become particularly problematic "in those instances where different political parties, groups, or nations advocate radically different interpretations of the past, thereby placing third parties into a difficult situation" (Roudometof, 2003, p. 162). However, Shackel (2001) emphasizes the agency of these so-called "third parties," particularly in their capacity to challenge hegemonic memory narratives:

In the public arena they can be embedded in power to serve the dominant culture by supporting existing social inequalities. It is common for subordinate groups explicitly or implicitly to challenge the dominant meanings of public memories and create new ones that suit their needs. (p. 655)

The initial control over the meaning of historical events lies with those directly involved (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). However, over time, other parties, including state actors, intervene to shape the representations of history. It is then that memory makers enter the game to selectively adopt and manipulate memory (Kansteiner, 2002) to construct an official version of events, reinforcing the notion that "neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer" (Burke, 1989, p. 98).

When memory agents succeed in forcing their own perspectives on memory on others, hegemony comes about:

Hegemony is the ability of a dominant group or class to impose their interpretations of reality – or the interpretations that support their interests – as the only thinkable way to view the world ... Hegemony thus establishes one particular narrative as a quasi-natural universality and delegitimizes alternative forms of reasoning. (Molden, 2016, p. 126)

This study adopts Molden's (2016) notion of hegemony as the construction and promotion of particular perceptions of World War II and its civil resistance by the Belgian government and its institutional partners, such as official museums, in their remembrance initiatives. Molden's (2016) understanding of hegemony aligns with Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) theories and the broader field of cultural studies. From this perspective, official ways of remembering are considered hegemonic because they are shaped by government institutions, positioning such actors as more powerful than ordinary citizens. In this case, the Belgian state's preferred interpretations of World War II history are disseminated through institutional frameworks, such as official memorials that convey these narratives to the public. Simultaneously, our study acknowledges and proposes that citizens have the capacity to challenge such official remembrance, thereby illustrating the inherent fragility and contestability of hegemony.

As we will see, this is evident in how the Belgian government shaped collective memory after World War II, navigating tensions between opposing groups of resistance fighters and collaborators. Rosoux and Van Ypersele (2012) define this official narrative as “an authorized version of the past, conveyed by the legitimate spokesperson of a particular group,” and as “a way of presenting events to the world, of showcasing the country for a domestic and external audience” (p. 46). Furthermore, politicians may use such historical framing to advance their own agendas and establish their interpretation of the past as the dominant narrative (Banjeglav, 2012). Shackel (2001) argues that state-led remembrance efforts have patriotic undertones, aiding “cultural leaders and authorities to develop social unity and maintain social inequalities in society” (p. 660). Explained from the perspective of Nancy Wood:

If particular representations of the past have permeated the public domain, it is because they embody an intentionality – social, political, institutional and so on – that promotes or authorizes their entry. (Wood, 1999, p. 2)

Officials shape national narratives of historical events in public spaces, notably through the construction of memorials that serve the broader interests of a nation (Arthur, 2009). Monuments not only convey information, but also “serve the more important function of conjuring the history that society wants to remember” (Mayo, 1988, p. 72). Typically commissioned by governments with minimal public involvement, their meaning needs to be negotiated within a context influenced by contrasting traditions of collective remembrance (Marschall, 2013). It is no surprise, then, that public memorials often clash with the personal accounts of those who survived (Arthur, 2009). Such public sites can be contentious, as they may be perceived as advancing the interests of officials rather than those being remembered or the matters they represent (Frijda, 2007).

Moreover, the construction of social memory through official narratives may lead to certain events or individuals being marginalized or forgotten, making the construction of memorials a politically charged process that can provoke strong public debate (Inglis, 2005). Winter (1995) adds that in the case of traumatic or hurtful past events, memory comes with certain risks, including distortions that arise over time. He argues that “when survivors remember, they provide evidence about the present as much as the past; they represent their truth, not the truth” (Winter, 1995, p. 10). Disputes over memory frequently revolve around such distortions, as societies rarely reach a consensus on how the past should be remembered (Zerubavel, 1996). Consequently, memory becomes “a selectively embellished or mythologized version of events, people, and places that serves social or political ends” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007, p. 126), despite its presumed connection to historical objectivity. In other words, the literature underscores that there is no single “correct” interpretation of history; rather, different actors construct narratives shaped by their personal experiences, social contexts, and the political interests of the societies to which they belong.

While much of the existing research focuses on the selective nature of remembrance by official institutions, it is important to recognize that individuals also engage in this process, each contributing their own interpretation of the past, believing it to be rightful. It is precisely these individual perceptions within personalized remembrance that our study is concerned with. Indeed, on a personal level, memory is intrinsically subjective, with individuals selectively recalling, emphasizing, or even omitting certain aspects of the past to create coherence in their lives (Hunt & McHale, 2007).

At the same time, remembrance is shaped by external social factors (Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006). As Bell (2003) notes, “a representation of the past will very much depend on a variety of factors, among which the most important are ethnicity, class, gender, and age” (p. 73). Zerubavel (1996) further emphasizes the connection between memory and our social environment:

The extent to which our social environment affects the way we remember the past becomes even clearer when we realize that much of what we “remember” is actually filtered (and therefore inevitably distorted) through a process of interpretation that usually takes place within particular social surroundings. (p. 285)

Hirsch (2008) echoes this idea by stating that individuals’ recollections are shaped within social groups that provide common belief systems, molding them into structured accounts of the past. Additionally, Zerubavel (1996) clarifies that the “past is not only commonly shared but also *jointly* remembered (that is, ‘co-memorated’)” (p. 294). As will be explored in the following section, the theoretical framework of this thesis is grounded in these notions. This perspective is further supported by Thelen’s (1989) finding that “the struggle for possession and interpretation of memory is rooted in the conflict and interplay among social, political, and cultural interests and values in the present” (p. 1127). This becomes evident when examining how historical events are attributed meaning within society: For an event to be considered memorable and its participants acknowledged, someone must first deem them worthy of remembrance and then have the power to persuade others of their significance (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991).

A key theoretical challenge in the field of memory studies lies in the distinction between history and memory (Kansteiner, 2002). Many scholars differentiate between objective facts and subjective interpretations of historical events and figures, or “the actual historical record of their deeds, as understood by professional historians” and “their popular celebration or their socially constructed image” (Roudometof, 2003, p. 162). Given the diverse range of perceptions within society, disagreements or gaps in knowledge are inevitable, complicating the process of remembrance (Mayo, 1988). Olick and Robbins (1998) argue that history is shaped by present-day objectives, meaning that the selection of sources is never entirely neutral. Frijda (2007) builds on that, proposing that remembrance may be influenced by future-oriented objectives.

With the growing prominence of remembrance in contemporary society, more individuals than ever are actively engaged in keeping the memory alive of those who perished in the past. As a result, historians have lost “the monopoly over defining and presenting the past” (A. Assmann, 2008, p. 53). Put differently in the words of Nora (1989), “the task of remembering makes everyone his own historian” (p. 15). However, while memory has become deeply embedded in our personal lives and society, history continues to hold greater authority in shaping collective perceptions. Indeed, “memory complements history, history corrects memory” (A. Assmann, 2008, p. 63), and it is evident that they are closely linked.

A significant portion of scholarly literature focuses on the remembrance of conflicts, such as wars. Researchers argue that any attempt to honor war is inherently political (Mayo, 1988). This is largely due to the selective nature of remembrance, which can create “blind spots for one’s own war crimes or for negligence that caused a disaster to have been as severe as it was” (Frijda, 2007, p. 287). This tendency extends to so-called objective national histories (Hunt & McHale, 2007). For instance, in the aftermath of World War II, discussions heavily emphasized German atrocities and faults, while little attention was given to the wrongdoing committed by the British (Hunt & McHale, 2007). Through heritage, nations construct collective memory by selectively recalling an idealized past, omitting unfavorable aspects to uphold reassuring, yet often inaccurate, national narratives (Shackel, 2001). However, as we will see, the glorification of traumatic historical events does not necessarily result in the imposition of the state’s preferred version of history on the entire nation. Instead, the literature highlights that citizens’ views of a traumatic past also depend on family involvement in the historical events in question and their intergenerational transmission.

### **1.3. Remembering Traumatic Historical Events**

#### **1.3.1. Sites of Memory**

Scholars generally agree that memory narratives of painful pasts typically encompass three main components: the individuals being remembered, the event itself, and the context in which it occurred (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002). Some researchers further assert that “negative events are moral traumas: They not only result in loss or failure but also evoke disagreement and inspire censure” (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 384). Similarly, the act of recalling historic memories can take place through both private practices and institutional efforts (Mayo, 1988).

A common way of preserving the memory of those that perished or were affected by traumatic historical events is through the creation of memorials. Whether public or private, these memory sites typically blend individual experiences with collective sentiments (Winter, 2016). In the context of war, a memorial is defined as “a social and physical arrangement of space and artefacts to keep alive the memories of persons who participated in a war” (Mayo, 1988, p. 62). Memorials can take the form of monuments, re-enactments, storytelling, or ceremonies (Winter, 2016), and sometimes they are physical places like battlefields that bear the memory of significant historical events (Gough, 2004).

Sites of remembrance may serve various purposes, such as influencing the behaviors of visitors, or being repurposed for practical uses, like enhancing business profitability (Mayo, 1988). Specifically, Mayo (1988) argues that landscapes associated with significant national conflicts frequently become abandoned or neglected once peace is restored. It is then that these sites may be reimagined as what Mayo calls “nonsacred memorials” (p. 64), where war memorabilia are curated and war memories commodified. The Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, Belgium, situated within a UNESCO World Heritage site, exemplifies this dynamic. It preserves the memory of World War I in Flanders, presenting itself as “one of the last tangible witnesses of the war history” (In Flanders Fields Museum, n.d., “The Cloth Hall”). Beyond its paid curated exhibitions, the site includes a café and gift shop, where visitors can purchase refreshments and souvenirs. This illustrates Mayo’s observation regarding the commercialization of former conflict sites.

Psychologically, memorial sites play an important role in helping people process difficult pasts by providing points of recognition, reflection, dialogue, and material spaces that convey historical narratives (Purdeková, 2022). Memorials frequently advance the broader strategic interests of the state and, as a result, serve to unify the population of a nation through their integration into the larger narrative of national identity (Arthur, 2009). However, it should be noted that merely recalling traumatic events through visiting memorials, or discussing and writing about them, does not always aid in processing their emotional effects or healing (Frijda, 2007).

When a location triggers memory, individuals are reminded of the conflict associated with it as presented by the memorial, regardless of its location or the nature of the event being remembered (Mayo, 1988). In the aftermath of the World Wars, memorials played a crucial role in constructing a unified national narrative, helping nations justify the sacrifices of those who died, maintain social unity, offer solace to the bereaved, and create an atmosphere in which those most affected could rebuild their lives and move forward (Arthur, 2009). War memorials generally gain their perceived meaning through the functions and emotions ascribed to them by those who constructed them. In this context, remembering involves “the wide range of behaviors that have been assigned to encourage the recall of specific memories relating to war” (Winter, 2016, p. 592).

Museums serve as spaces where a nation’s history is shared with the public through the display of cultural objects. In many ways, these *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) are “assigned the duty of remembrance for a whole society” (Sherman, 1995, p. 50-51). Yet, as with other forms of war remembrance, museums face the challenge described by Mayo (1988): the tendency to deem certain events less significant. When historical events are forgotten, the meaning tied to their memorials, including those housed within museums, may also fade. The scholar points out the subjective nature of memory:

Personal bias affects the perception of what actual history is and what should be remembered and commemorated. War memorials unavoidably present multiple messages, because a range of clientele interprets differently. Such pluralism may seem democratic, but it can create barriers to authentic remembrance. (Mayo, 1988, p. 73)

### **1.3.2. Generational Differences in Remembrance**

Memory is “susceptible to different and possible contradictory interpretations” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007, p. 131). Studies have shown that when examining how young people in Eastern and Western societies view major historical events, war is overwhelmingly remembered, with World War II being the most important (Pennebaker et al., 2006; Schuman & Scott, 1989). The Vietnam War follows as the second most frequently recalled event from the past five decades (Schuman & Scott, 1989).

Material artefacts play a key role in sparking the interest of younger generations, as “material culture becomes a touchstone” (Crooke, 2016, p. 88) for later generations. Indeed, artefacts contribute to family continuity (Woodham et al., 2017). However, Winter (1995) observes that while younger individuals may have an intellectual interest in the educational aspects of heritage, monumental memorials often resonate less with them. Their interest does not always translate into active participation in remembrance activities (Winter, 1995). In contrast, older generations with firsthand experiences of historical events often feel a stronger, more personal connection to their remembrance, as such direct involvement fosters a deeper commitment to preserving these memories (Winter, 2016).

Traumatic historical events, such as wars, massacres, and other conflicts, possess a unique ability to forge connections across generations. They become “experiences of shared grief and shared inability to understand the import of what has happened” (Frow, 2000, p. 1). Descendants of individuals involved in events like the World Wars, for example, may feel a profound connection to the experiences and memories of the previous generations. This bond is referred to as memory, with some scholars arguing that memory can be transmitted to those who were not directly present during the event (Hirsch, 2008). Hirsch (2008) conceptualizes the transmission of traumatic knowledge across generations as *postmemory*, a notion that guides the present study.

Coopmans et al. (2017) highlight that one significant way of passing on memories of war within families is through discussions about the experiences of older relatives. Moreover, individuals who did not directly experience the war but frequently communicate with their parents or grandparents about their wartime past tend to be more inclined to participate in memorial events (Coopmans et al., 2017). Olick (1999) further supports the idea of experiencing memories indirectly, stating that “groups can even produce memories of events that they never ‘experienced’ in any direct sense” (p. 335). However, this viewpoint is contested by other academics who advocate for a distinction between directly witnessing events and being emotionally affected by their memory. Saito (2010) argues that individuals must have personally experienced certain events to have memory of them. He suggests that learning about an event secondhand constitutes knowledge, but not memory, explaining that:

When commemorative rituals succeed in providing people with vicarious experience of a past event, secondhand knowledge begins to be felt as living memory among those who lack firsthand experience. (Saito, 2010, p. 630)

Research indicates that generational differences exist not only in the motivations for participating in remembrance, but also in how these events are interpreted. For example, when Welzer (2005) studied how three generations in Germany viewed family stories related to wartime events, he discovered that events with negative connotations were often remembered more positively by later generations. He identified a phenomenon that he termed *cumulative heroization*, which “reflects the natural tendency to associate positive elements and block out negative ones for the people we love” (Welzer, 2005, p. v). He further elaborates:

Cumulative heroization occurs rapidly and simply. A generalized image of a respected grandmother or grandfather provides a framework in which any point of reference suggested by family stories can be expanded into a “good story.” (...) The tendency to heroize the grandparents’ generation shows the never-to-be-underestimated strong effects of ties of loyalty to loved ones on historical awareness and the respective reconstruction of the past. (Welzer, 2005, p. 11)

The literature suggests that younger generations within families are likely to represent historical events and memories in a more positive light (Welzer, 2005). Studies have shown that when young individuals lack direct knowledge of their grandparents’ war experiences, they may draw on knowledge gathered through cultural sources to fill in the gaps (Stone et al., 2014). Similarly, those who did not personally experience a historical event attribute broader political meanings to it than direct eyewitnesses (Schuman & Scott, 1989). For example, the Vietnam War generation was more inclined to characterize the Second World War as a “good” and “victorious” war than members of the WWII generation itself (Schuman & Scott, 1989, p. 378).

Individuals who directly participated in World War II and are still alive frequently prefer to share personal anecdotes to convey the significance of this historical event, with their lived experience being the primary reason for its remembrance (Schuman & Scott, 1989). This aligns with Cordonnier et al.’s (2020) study on the intergenerational transmission of World War II family memories related to the resistance. Their research suggests that the transmission of family histories fades after one or two generations, even when participants expressed a desire to preserve and pass on these stories. Finally, scholarship reveals that while conversation can link younger generations to the memory of historical events they did not experience, such as the Holocaust (Kook, 2021), artefacts also help preserve the past for future generations (Crooke, 2016).

## 1.4. Remembrance in the Digital Age: Mediated Memory

Memory can be transmitted between individuals without direct contact through intermediaries like language (Zerubavel, 1996), and similarly, through digital and social media (Adams & Kopelman, 2022). Media technologies, by transcending borders, become vehicles for memory preservation (Erll, 2011). This process is termed the *mediatization of memory*. Hoskins (2014) defines it as “the process of shifting interconnected, individual, social, and cultural dependency on media, for maintenance, survival, and growth” (p. 662). Another perspective is offered by van Dijck (2004), who perceives mediated memories as “privately recorded personal events and individual collections recorded cultural content,” involving “individuals carving out their place in history, defining personal remembrance in the face of larger cultural frameworks” (p. 275).

Media and memory are not only interconnected in their role of representing the past, but they are also intertwined fields of study, with memory traditionally shaped by objects, photographs, words, and signs (Lohmeier & Böhling, 2017). The Internet has become a central tool for memorialization now used more than ever to remember the past. This growing reliance on the web has converted it into a space where various forms of remembrance converge in a transformative way, including personal and collective memory, private and public remembrance, and memory and postmemory (De Bruyn, 2010).

The mediated nature of remembrance presents both advantages and drawbacks. The accessibility of the Internet facilitates family research, networking, and the creation of online memorials (Fabiansson, 2004). Consequently, due to their participatory nature, digital platforms not only engage those directly affected by historical events, but also those who are indirectly impacted (De Bruyn, 2010). Arthur (2009) underscores this inclusivity of mediated platforms in memory practices:

It is this ability to easily accommodate varied and discordant voices and positions, and to be endlessly open to addition and revision, which makes online memorialization potentially a very powerful form for encouraging, collecting, and preserving testimony, retaining all its uniqueness, so that it is not lost to history. (p. 67)

Critical voices regarding the mediated nature of memory focus on the authenticity of using digital media to honor and preserve the memory of the deceased. Hoskins (2001) labels the era of *new memory* as controversial, identifying three primary axes of conflict: individual versus collective, history versus memory, and authentic versus artificial memory (p. 334). However, Olick and Robbins (1998) make the nuance that while new technologies for capturing the past are often considered artificial, they gradually integrate into the established cultural framework of mediated memory and become embedded in collective remembrance.

Today, the growth of digital and social media creates new opportunities for individuals to share memories of painful historical events, such as World War II (De Bruyn, 2010). Consequently, these platforms enable informal, user-initiated remembrance initiatives that contribute to vernacular forms of memory. The growing popularity of vernacular memory may be attributed to its tendency to attract more media attention than formal efforts (Marschall, 2013). For individuals using the digital space to remember and honor loved ones, it serves as a powerful medium for sharing stories, listening, and sharing – all key elements in healing, remembrance, and community development after a crisis (Arthur, 2009). The recent ability to share stories and photos online has altered trauma remembrance: Unlike stone memorials, these new online forms of remembrance are dynamic and interactive, constantly evolving in space (Arthur, 2009). This ongoing transformation has brought a level of informality to memory practices, including public expressions of personal sorrow, that would have been unthinkable for previous generations (Kiszely, 2011).

With the growing accessibility of digital networks, new methods for engaging with remnants of the past on social media are emerging, shifting from mere display to fostering meaningful interaction (Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020). A clear example of this is the Instagram initiative *Eva Stories*, created by Israeli entrepreneur Mati Kochavi and his daughter Maya. This project tells the life experiences of 13-year-old Eva Heyman, a Jewish girl in Hungary, just before she was deported to Auschwitz. What makes this initiative innovative is its use of Instagram, where users are encouraged to participate in polls, create their own online content, and leave comments. This strategy enables online users to “take an active part in the co-creation of a mediated experience and become witnesses to it” (Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020, p. 217).

By providing Instagram users with an interactive space for remembrance, this social media initiative thus intertwines past stories and memories with contemporary social media consumption (Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020), blending old traditions with new ones (Frew & White, 2015). In this way, digital networks help preserve the impact of historical events, allowing them to be recalled long after they have occurred, with their effects still being felt today (Finney, 2017).

## **1.5. Remembrance of the Civil Resistance in Belgium**

### **1.5.1. Understanding the Civil Resistance during World War II**

Examining the remembrance of the Belgian civil resistance during World War II requires clarity on what the resistance movement involved. Following the definition of political authorities in postwar Belgium, civil resistance to the Nazi regime can be defined as “all possible forms of insubordination to the occupier” (Lagrou, 2003, p. 542) during the Second World War. The resistance movement began with civilians who refused to surrender to the Nazi forces, acting alone through small-scale, symbolic acts of opposition in the early years of World War II (Lagrou, 2003). As the occupation intensified, resistance grew, eventually involving an estimated total number of 150,000 Belgians at its peak – which is approximately 2.5% of the population aged 16-65 (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). About 40,000 resistance members were arrested during the war and around 15,000 died during the conflict (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). However, there are no exact official statistics available on Belgian resistance activity due to unreliable postwar recognition procedures. Many actual resistance members did not seek official recognition through medal distribution, while, conversely, a significant number of individuals did so unjustly (Lagrou, 2003). Additionally, resistance fighters often combined multiple resistance forms or groups.

Demographically, the Belgian civil resistance was predominantly concentrated in Wallonia (42.5%), followed by Brussels (31.5%), and Flanders (25.5%). This regional disparity is attributed to several factors, including lower levels of Belgian patriotism and anti-fascist sentiment in Flanders (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Belgian civil resistance was pluralistic and fragmented, comprising numerous small groups by 1942, without a central leadership or unified overarching resistance organization (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Resistance activities ranged from armed struggle to peaceful opposition, overlapping among individuals and groups. The following section outlines key resistance organizations and forms to illustrate the broad spectrum of civil resistance.

### 1.5.1.1. Overview of the Civil Resistance in Belgium

De Wever and Wouters (2020) provide a comprehensive overview of the Belgian civil resistance, emphasizing how it emerged as a bottom-up movement rooted in pre-war social and professional structures. This resulted in hundreds of small resistance groups at its peak, formed around local institutions, such as youth movements and sports clubs. Their analysis firstly describes the organized underground resistance, which had precedents in World War I, particularly among French-speaking middle classes (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). This clandestine resistance was responsible for the production of around 700 underground newspapers: the highest density of its kind in occupied Europe. Approximately 12,000 Belgians – mainly in Wallonia – are estimated to have been part of the underground resistance, which generally produced center-right, French-language clandestine publications (De Wever & Wouters, 2020).

A significant non-armed resistance group was the left-wing Communist Party of Belgium, which became active following the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union. In 1942, it founded the Independent Front, a widely supported resistance organization that aided those in hiding from the Nazis by providing false documents and ration cards, offering material and financial assistance, and printing about 150 clandestine newspapers (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Similarly, the White Brigade *Fidelio*, founded in 1940 by Flemish teacher Marcel Louette, initially engaged in non-violent resistance, including distributing clandestine press and facilitating escape routes for Allied pilots, Jewish citizens, and forced labor evaders. It later shifted to small-scale sabotage and attacks on collaborators (CegeSoma, n.d.-b; De Wever & Wouters, 2020).

The Belgian Legion, a right-wing group formed in 1940, initially recruited soldiers with the aim of restoring royal power in Belgium. It later founded the Secret Army, which was one of the largest armed resistance organizations with approximately 54,000 members by June 1944, focusing on providing military support during the Allied liberation of Belgium (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Alongside the Secret Army, the Armed Partisans, established in 1942 by the Communist Party of Belgium, carried out armed sabotage and targeted collaborators, with an estimated total of 850 attacks on individuals (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Although the Armed Partisans lacked widespread public support due to their violent actions, including bombings, their impact was nonetheless significant. In total, approximately 140,000 individuals are estimated to have participated in the armed resistance during World War II (De Wever & Wouters, 2020).

The armed resistance escalated over time, with 100 to 250 sabotage acts per month in 1943, doubling by June of 1944 (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). However, despite its efforts, the armed resistance only provided operational support to the Allies during the liberation of the Port of Antwerp, with limited broader military impact (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Nonetheless, Lagrou (2003) considers the armed resistance as the most significant form of civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II.

Other key organizations include the Committee for the Defense of the Jews, linked to the Independent Front, which rescued Jewish citizens from deportation, and Socrates – an initiative by the Belgian government-in-exile that supported workers refusing forced labor (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). Furthermore, the Syndicale Strijdcमितés resistance groups, founded in 1942, combined their resistance efforts with labor activism, competing with socialist trade unions, while Groupe G, arising from the anti-fascist Université Libre de Bruxelles environment, specialized in sabotage targeting transportation and energy infrastructure (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). De Wever and Wouters (2020) also note institutional resistance, such as police officers in Deurne, Flanders, who joined the White Brigade after refusing Nazi orders to conduct razzias. Intelligence networks formed another vital component of the civil resistance, with 37 recognized networks comprising approximately 19,000 members. Also, numerous escape routes facilitated the flight of Jewish citizens, Allied pilots, and Belgians to Britain (De Wever & Wouters, 2020).

Some forms of civil resistance have received greater recognition in academic literature than others. Corthals (2025) critiques Belgian resistance historiography for its predominant focus on professionalized resistance groups around the time of the liberation, overlooking more amateur and experimental resistance activity. Her study of female civil resistance highlights the role of women, noting at least 142 women’s demonstrations and lootings organized by the communist women’s movement across 81 different locations in Belgium during World War II (Corthals, 2025). She finds that working-class women are largely missing from existing history, despite their agency rooted in their identities as women and mothers. Corthals (2025) also emphasizes the challenge of defining resistance, noting that actions viewed as resistance by the clandestine communist press were later questioned by military-structured organizations that shaped postwar memory. Rather than merely adding women to existing resistance historiography, this author argues that approaches like hers “allow us to write a history of female resistance” (Corthals, 2025, p. 21), which has a rightful place in collective resistance memory in Belgium.

### **1.5.2. Understanding the Collaboration during World War II**

To provide a comprehensive background, this section examines those who stood on the opposite side of the civil resistance; that is to say, civilians who collaborated with the occupying forces during World War II. Bouchat et al. (2020) define collaboration as “working voluntarily to achieve German policy and objectives” (p. 1406). The literature distinguishes several forms of collaboration, including political, military, repressive, economic, artistic, and intellectual – though Bouchat et al. emphasize the relevance of political and armed collaboration on the national level. Among existing collaboration organizations was Rex, which was known for its military and repressive support to the Nazis in pursuit of a new world order (Bouchat et al., 2020).

As with the resistance in Belgium during World War II, the collaboration movement exhibited clear geographic divides. Although the overall participation in collaboration was limited to a small minority of the Belgian population, it was most prevalent in the predominantly conservative Flanders of the 1940s, where collaboration was intertwined with Flemish nationalism and the Catholic movement (Bouchat et al., 2020). In turn, in left-leaning Wallonia, collaboration activity was weaker, and civil resistance more widespread. Postwar statistics reflect this disparity, with 0.73% of Flemish citizens and 0.56% of Francophones having been convicted of collaboration, which equals an average of 0.64% of the entire Belgian population (Bouchat et al., 2020).

The act of collaborating with the Nazis did not go unpunished after the liberation of Belgium and the end of the war. According to Huyse (2006), around 80,000 Belgians were prosecuted by official judicial authorities, including 48,000 who received prison sentences. Penalties usually involved multiple sanctions, ranging from extrajudicial executions and purges in the private sphere to criminal court trials. Or, alternatively, punishment was symbolic or administrative, such as fines, property confiscation, police supervision following imprisonment, civic disqualifications, and prohibitions on certain professions – the latter imposed on approximately 22,000 collaborating citizens (Huyse, 2006).

### **1.5.3. Remembrance of the World Wars in Belgium**

Now that we have an overview of the civil resistance and collaboration during World War II, it is helpful to direct our focus towards World War I, as it serves as a key historical reference and a “template for memory conflicts in Belgium,” informing “the memory of other tragedies such as the Second World War” (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012, p. 45). In their study of World War I memorialization, Rosoux and Van Ypersele (2012) observed that early remembrance practices prominently featured narratives of heroism and martyrdom, particularly celebrating those who resisted oppression. These portrayals aimed to instill patriotism and encourage retribution against considered traitors, such as wartime activists, individuals engaged in espionage on behalf of the occupying forces, and citizens who had capitalized on wartime conditions for personal financial gain (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012).

Regarding Belgium’s official efforts to preserve the memory of those who had perished in the Great War, authorities, alongside the broader public and the families of those directly involved, were committed to ensuring appropriate remembrance. Consequently, in postwar Belgium, “official and personal memories coincided and reinforced each other” (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012, p. 47) during a period of national mourning. This was reflected in people from all segments of society – including national officials, former soldiers, and ordinary citizens – coming together at collective gatherings, such as the national funeral of the Unknown Soldier (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). Representing all unidentified Belgian soldiers who died during World War I, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier contains the remains of an unidentified serviceman and serves as a national symbol of remembrance. It was symbolically honored during a funeral held on Armistice Day in 1922 at the Congress Column in Brussels (VRT NWS, 2022).

Despite its role in crafting an official narrative of the Great War, the Belgian government initially struggled to solidify a collective national memory. This was largely because “national authorities found it difficult to impose their versions of the past” (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012, p. 47). Disagreements arose over the national Remembrance Day: The Parliament had initially designated August 4 to recall wartime patriotism, but later reversed this decision in 1922, as this date had become associated with poverty and mourning among the Belgian population (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). In consequence, November 11 was adopted, aligning with the Allies’ choice and public preference.

Additionally, authorities were reluctant to endorse a single national memorial honoring the soldiers, civilians, and Allied forces who had lost their lives. Only under pressure from French and British practices, war veterans, and public demand did they organize the previously mentioned funeral of the Unknown Soldier in 1922 (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). Over time, however, the state managed to consolidate a more unified official remembrance, centered on celebrating the bravery of soldiers and civilians, with an emphasis on glorifying the Belgian Nation.

However, World War I remembrance in Belgium was contested, reflecting the country's diverse local and regional identities. Although a shared national memory initially prevailed, political tensions and conflicting interpretations of war between Flanders and Wallonia gradually fractured the remembrance landscape (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). The postwar punishment of former pro-Flemish activists came to be viewed by Flemish nationalists as an unjust prosecution rather than justified retribution, sparking a sense of victimization among members of the Flemish Movement. Meanwhile, the Francophone press reinforced stereotypes by portraying the Flemish as pro-German, using this narrative to resist calls for amnesty (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). These opposing perspectives deepened during the interwar period, further polarizing national collective memory of World War I. As Rosoux and Van Ypersele (2012) conclude, "Flemish and French-speaking historical versions began to diverge," and "the official version of history no longer corresponded exactly with local versions" (p. 49).

The divided remembrance of World War I left a lasting and ambiguous impact on people's behaviors during World War II (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). Many individuals involved in the Second World War invoked the memory of their predecessors to justify their own actions. Indeed, both Nazi collaborators and those who resisted National Socialism in Belgium claimed to be carrying forward the legacy of those who had fought in World War I (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). Many former activists from the First World War aligned themselves with the Nazi regime during the Second, while resistance members frequently considered themselves as the successors of earlier wartime patriots. This sense of continuity is particularly evident in the clandestine press, where memories of the 1914-1918 years were often invoked in underground resistance publications during World War II (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012). This demonstrates how the divided memory of World War I enabled groups in World War II to interpret the past in ways that validated their own positions. It is also in line with memory politics, given that "history can never be completely objective, and the final account can never be written" (Sørensen, 2017, p. 99).

Returning to the central issue of this study, while civilians who had defended Belgium during World War I had been widely celebrated as heroes and had received widespread recognition, the same acknowledgement was not granted to members of the civil resistance during World War II, particularly in Flanders. For a considerable period, historical accounts emphasized Flemish collaboration with the Nazi regime (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012), while largely overlooking the contributions of the civil resistance. As a result, “the importance of the resistance during World War II does not form part of the Belgian collective memory” (De Wever & Wouters, 2020, para. 1). Flemish historians Aerts and De Wever (2012), who specialize in national and regional history, have examined the reasons behind the resistance’s failure to gain recognition in Belgium’s postwar memory. They identify several contributing factors, including the resistance’s low political impact due to disputes between various resistance organizations, its negative reputation from violent street repressions against collaborators and claims that it provoked Nazi terror on civilians, the absence of authentic footage and imagery, and the lack of official support from the government (Aerts & De Wever, 2012).

Much like the government’s approach following World War I, its response in post-World War II Belgium provides an interesting case for analysis. Generally, “the Belgian state played a passive role in the field of war remembrance for a long time” (Aerts & De Wever, 2012, p. 85). At the federal level, officials allowed different memory actors to remember in their own ways, offering empty promises to the resistance while simultaneously working to reduce penalties for Nazi collaborators (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). Additionally, Lagrou (1997) observes that political actors “nationalized” the civil resistance, expanding its definition to include society as a whole. This transformation resulted in a proliferation of resistance definitions, turned into a measure of wartime attitudes and a “yardstick by which political legitimacy was measured” (Lagrou, 1997, p. 195) for those seeking a political role in postwar Belgium. Locally, municipal officials preferred to avoid disputes between former resistance members and collaborators, leading them to reject requests to create memorials dedicated to specific resistance groups (Aerts & De Wever, 2012).

Lagrou (2003) draws a parallel between the fragmented local and regional recollections that followed World War I and the memory conflicts that emerged after World War II. Lagrou argues that postwar disagreements over the monarchy’s role, regional divisions between Walloons and Flemish, and the ideological divide between politically left and right resistance groups fractured national unity. Bouchat et al. (2020) explain that, whereas residents of Wallonia linked

their regional identity to resistance memory, Flemish counter-memory tied itself to the perception of unjust repression of collaboration, integrating this sense of grief and victimization into Flemish identity. These regional divisions in public opinion, amplified by the state's conflict avoidance in remembering World War II, hindered the formation of a unified national narrative around the civil resistance and its remembrance, causing the subject to recede into the background (Lagrou, 2003). In some instances, this even resulted in a greater willingness to rehabilitate former Nazi collaborators.

As time passed, the way World War II was remembered in Flanders evolved, gradually bringing more attention to the role of the civil resistance. The 1990s saw the growing influence of the far-right political party Vlaams Blok (now known as Vlaams Belang), which led to the history of the occupation being mobilized to point out the dangers of right-wing extremism (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). To this day, no national amnesty has been granted to former collaborators, and politicians from both Flanders and Wallonia continue to draw on these issues to serve their political aims (Bouchat et al., 2020).

A pivotal moment occurred in 1995 with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war's end, after which Belgium saw a surge in government initiatives related to remembrance, including educational programs aimed at reinforcing democratic values (Wouters, n.d.). However, this also meant that the Belgian government in power at that time played a role in shaping collective memory by endorsing specific representations of history in order to fight right-wing extremism, thereby constructing "authorized versions of the past" (Rosoux & Van Ypersele, 2012, p. 46). The remembrance of the civil resistance, as well as the broader historical narrative of World War II, has remained a deeply contested political matter from the postwar years up until the present day (Lagrou, 2003).

#### 1.5.4. Contemporary Remembrance of the Civil Resistance

In contemporary Flanders, one could say that the remembrance of the civil resistance has grown into a commercial “industry” (Wouters, n.d.), with its memory gaining increasing visibility in popular media. For instance, in August of 2025, a TV series featuring actor Koen De Bouw and focusing on the Flemish resistance is in production. Another example is *WIL*, a film portraying the resistance in Antwerp, which was released on Netflix in 2024. However, challenges related to the remembrance of the civil resistance persist. One major issue is the scarcity of authentic footage of the resistance, which presents difficulties for documentary or television producers (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). Additionally, from an academic standpoint, research on this aspect of recent Belgian history is still in its infancy and requires further development (Aerts & De Wever, 2012), hence the relevance and importance of this study.

To provide context and illustrate how the memory of the civil resistance is actively preserved today, it is fundamental to highlight some of the key players involved in memory efforts in Flanders. In addition to individual citizens and scientists, two organizations stand out for their role in organizing initiatives related to the remembrance of World War II, and particularly the civil resistance: the National State Archives of Belgium, which include the Study and Documentation Centre for War and Contemporary Society (*CegeSoma*), and the non-profit organization *Helden van het verzet* (Heroes of the resistance).

The former functions as the “fourth operational direction of the State Archives and the Belgian centre of expertise for the history of 20th century conflicts” (*CegeSoma*, n.d.-a). Beyond its role in preserving significant historical documents and aiding individuals in genealogical research, this institution regularly publishes works on relevant historical topics and manages several notable projects, including the Resistance in Belgium database, Belgium WWII, and the Journal of Belgian History (*CegeSoma*, n.d.-a). Additionally, researchers affiliated with the *CegeSoma* organize various events to further engage the public in historical discourse, including book launch celebrations. On the other hand, non-profit association *Helden van het verzet* was founded in 2022 by two Flemish citizens, proposing that contributions of World War II resistance fighters have largely been forgotten, while the names of collaborators are still widely known today. It contends that “local stories that encompass the full emotional spectrum” (Neudt & Van Steendam, 2024, para. 4) deserve greater attention in contemporary Flanders.

To address this, the non-profit association aims to “tell these stories in a different way” as an “addition to the significant academic and historical reference works” (*Helden van het verzet*, n.d., para. 4). Its efforts include hosting resistance cafés, sharing daily biographies of resistance fighters on social media, organizing remembrance-themed gatherings, and publishing novels about this theme. Overall, *Helden van het verzet* adopts a remembrance strategy that focuses on an informal and personal approach, aiming to recognize and honor the individual contributions of those involved in the Belgian resistance during World War II. With 25,000 followers on Facebook in August of 2025, *Helden van het verzet* enjoys considerable popularity among the Flemish public. While neither *CegeSoma* nor *Helden van het verzet* is the focus of this thesis – which centers on individual Flemish citizens – it is significant to observe how their efforts resonate with the public, as evidenced by media coverage and substantial social media engagement. This connects once again to the mediated character of memory. However, most importantly, in relation to the research questions and findings, is the contrast and tension between formal and informal modes of remembrance embodied by these two organizations.

### **1.5.5. Representations of History in Remembrance**

Considering the profound impact of World War II, many nations affected by the war have adopted official remembrance practices (Liu et al., 2005). As we have seen, the past can be strategically used by political leaders to justify their own perspectives or interpretations, highlighting specific representations of groups involved in historical events while eclipsing others. For example, some politicians might depict the civil resistance as heroes, portraying them as courageous martyrs who fought for the freedom of their country, and by extension, for the freedom we enjoy today. Indeed, “the heroization of resistance fighters and soldiers” is “an important part of traditional master narratives about the Second World War” (Gorbahn, 2015, p. 327).

Nationalistic themes are prevalent in war remembrance, with fallen soldiers being glorified as eternal heroes, while their treatment of outsiders is overshadowed (Saito, 2018). Such outsiders are referred to by Saito (2018) as “foreign others” (p. 653) and may include civilians, soldiers, and war prisoners. The nation is thus elevated above all else, and similar heroization can occur when referring to civil resistance members, regardless of the personal motivations behind such depictions.

However, the recognition of individuals from the civil resistance during World War II as heroes also happens in informal remembrance, both in the years following the war and today. Those who participated in the resistance, as well as the nation itself, take great pride in their opposition to the Nazi occupation during World War II (Conway, 2012). In the aftermath of the war, this led to a united narrative celebrating the collective identity of all Belgians: “Fiercely individualist and localist, the Belgians had nevertheless united during the German occupation ... to reject the alien influence of a foreign invader” (Conway, 2012, p. 183).

After the war ended, many individuals who had been directly involved in the civil resistance chose to remain silent due to the deep trauma and emotional toll caused by the horrific events they had lived through. The continued silence of many resistance members is especially notable, as in some cases, their stories were never shared and went to the grave with them, leaving descendants with little knowledge of what had truly happened. Yet, in other instances, individuals began speaking out many years after World War II had ended. This gave rise, among other things, to the publication of personal memoirs or biographies written by former resistance members. While these personal accounts may vary in tone, they are regularly the subject of scholarly analysis, especially when they connect to heroic representations of the past. For instance, Suleiman (2004) explores the yearning for heroic glorification of resistance fighters in the discourses of former members of the civil resistance in France. She articulates this perspective as follows:

Narratives of heroism are deeply satisfying, like fantasies of wish-fulfillment; they are also, generally speaking, morally unambiguous, the characters drawn in broad brushstrokes, the plots linear and schematic: confrontation, apparent defeat, ultimate triumph. (Suleiman, 2004, p. 58)

Paez and Liu (2010) argue that “in all types of cultures, people have mythologized their own war dead and forgotten their out-group victims” (p. 118), pointing to the patriotic nature of heroic representations of the past. Through this lens, nations construct a heroic narrative of remembrance, following “a kind of pleasure principle that produces a unified, positive image of the past” (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991, p. 379).

Leebaw (2019) suggests that remembering heroic resistance against a common adversary may serve as a mechanism to reinforce state legitimacy, revealing the problematic nature of such heroic representations. In her analysis, she refers to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which "emphasized the victim-perpetrator distinction as a strategy for setting aside divisive questions regarding collaboration and complicity," and for "conceptualizing reconciliation as a process of state legitimation" (Leebaw, 2019, p. 458). The TRC thus applied the victim-perpetrator narrative to strengthen the state's authority by avoiding controversial debates. In a similar vein, "false notions of the past may be upheld in order to create and sustain national mythology" (Shackel, 2001, p. 662). Leebaw concludes by highlighting several other problematic aspects of heroic representations, including the risk that it can lead to an overly glorified and celebratory version of history, the tendency to obscure unresolved injustices, and the marginalization of those not involved in the resistance or whose resistance was not considered heroic.

Suleiman's (2004) examination of the Aubrac affair (*l'affaire Aubrac*) in France provides valuable insights into the potential tensions between different memory makers. She examines the personal memoirs of Lucie and Raymond Aubrac, former members of the civil resistance during World War II in France, who portrayed their experiences as distinctly heroic. Their recollections often highlighted specific moments when they narrowly escaped capture by the Nazis. Between the 1980s and the 1990s, this pair gained widespread popularity in France for their wartime experiences, becoming media stars who shared their stories through various platforms, from classroom appearances to television interviews (Suleiman, 2004). In contrast, a group of historians found inconsistencies in the couple's testimonies and claimed that the Aubracs were mistakenly granted the reputation of "the country's favorite resistance heroes" (Suleiman, 2004, p. 59). This case underscores the contradictions that can arise in the interactions between scientists and other stakeholders, such as citizens.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Having reviewed some of the existing scholarship on memory, its inherently political nature, and the historical context of the civil resistance during World War II, we now turn to the theoretical framework of the present study. Building on this, we adopt a constructivist theoretical approach with Halbwachs (1992) as well as a critical approach with Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) to explore how contested representations of the past, particularly regarding the civil resistance in Belgium during World War II, are constructed and communicated by individuals.

### 2.1. Theory of Collective Memory

Despite the broad use of the concept of memory within scholarly discourse, Maurice Halbwachs remains a seminal figure in the field. As a French sociologist and student of the renowned Émile Durkheim, Halbwachs is primarily recognized for his groundbreaking work in 1925, in which he examined how collective memory and acts of remembrance contribute to group solidarity and identity (Saito, 2018). His accomplishments were particularly innovative for his time, as he was among the first to have “formally introduced the concept of memory in the creation of history” (Shackel, 2001, p. 655). In his pioneering work *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs (1992) develops and expands upon his theory of collective memory. While he acknowledges that it is ultimately individuals who engage in remembrance, he asserts that they cannot do so in isolation (Halbwachs, 1992). Rather, he contends that “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories,” and “it is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 38). In this regard, memory is fundamentally shaped by the communication and interactions that individuals have with other members of their social groups or communities – what Halbwachs (1992) terms the “social frameworks” for memory (p. 38) or *les cadres sociaux*. These social groups range from the family to broader societal constructs, such as schools, cities, and nations (Saito, 2010; Suleiman, 2004). As part of the social entities to which they belong, individuals come to adopt a collective sense of “we,” along with the corresponding social contexts that influence their identities (A. Assmann, 2008). One could argue that this framework “results in the formation of social groups constructed for the purpose of remembrance” (Bell, 2003, p. 72).

Halbwachs's (1992) theory of collective memory, particularly its relationship with the concept of social frameworks, adopts a constructivist perspective (A. Assmann, 2008) to memory. Specifically, it posits that "memory is constructed in the individual during communication with other members of a given constellation" (Pentzold & Sommer, 2011, p. 74). An individual integrates their thoughts within established frameworks, thereby participating in the process of collective memory, which enables recollection (Pentzold & Sommer, 2011). This theory thus proposes that people never engage in the remembrance of historical events fully independently; instead, individuals' social surroundings affect how they perceive this history and its memory, resulting in the social construction of memory through the shared beliefs and values of the social groups to which they belong.

In this way, collective memory is created through the identification of individuals who have secondhand knowledge of an event with those who possess firsthand experience, defining both groups as members of a shared social collective. This membership is constituted through the act of remembrance (Saito, 2010). While collective memory occurs at the group level, it is ultimately the individual who remembers, choosing to recall events and forget others (Olick, 1999). Other individuals, therefore, are required to act as secondary references, allowing for the creation of a frame of reference within which remembrance can take place "by molding, shaping, and agreeing upon *what to remember*," although this "may not be always consciously planned" (Shackel, 2001, p. 655). According to Halbwachs (1992), memory is simultaneously multifaceted and specific, encompassing both collective and plural, as well as individual dimensions (Nora, 1989). Halbwachs (1992) elaborates on this complex nature of memory:

To be sure, everyone has a capacity for memory (*mémoire*) that is unlike that of anyone else, given the variety of temperaments and life circumstances. But individual memory is nevertheless a part or an aspect of group memory, since each impression and each fact, even if it apparently concerns a particular person exclusively, leaves a lasting memory only to the extent that one has thought it over.  
(p. 53)

Halbwachs's (1992) theorization may be connected to the politics of memory, as the sociologist observed that the past is shaped by concerns of the present. He argued that memory can serve as a selective interpretation of historical events – or a series of events, such as wars – by groups of like-minded individuals (Halbwachs, 1992; Winter, 2016).

In his work on collective memory, Durkheim's student expresses how "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 51), and that collective frameworks are used to "reconstruct an image of the past, which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). Moreover, Halbwachs (1992) seems to suggest a connection between the appropriation of the past for future objectives, noting that "people of today concern us with the immediate or far away future" (p. 51). Roudometof (2003) refines this interpretation, emphasizing that Halbwachs's (1992) concept of collective memory arises from an open-ended process that is "not over-determined by the interests of a single particular party" (p. 4).

Collective memory theory provides insight into how the shared national history of World War II and its civil resistance contributes to the group identity of ordinary Flemish citizens and shapes their personalized ways of remembering. Combined with critical theory, this approach enables a deeper understanding of how the construction and expression of memory is attributed meaning today in light of individuals' societal environments, including the state actors therein.

## **2.2. Representation Theory**

Within media and cultural studies, Stuart Hall's contributions have been foundational in theorizing how meaning and identity are negotiated through discourse and representation. Hall's (1977, 1997) theory of representation offers critical insight into how individual and institutional actors in society construct and circulate meaning through cultural codes in language, such as signs and symbols. This study applies Hall's (1977, 1997) representation framework to investigate how Flemish citizens express and negotiate perceptions of the civil resistance, thereby revealing how memory is shaped through representation. Hall (1997) describes how meaning is not fixed or inherent in objects or events, but is actively produced and constructed through representational systems, such as language and mass media. Culture, he argues, functions as a system of shared structures of meanings, which enables individuals to interpret and navigate the world around them. Hall (1977) defines discourses as "ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic of practice: a cluster ... of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic or social activity" (p. 6). Together, these discourses create *discursive formations* (Hall, 1977, p. 6).

Central to Hall's (1997) theory is the idea that discourse is both a site and a mechanism of power:

The discursive approach is more concerned with the *effects* and *consequences* of representation – its 'politics'. It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conduct, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied. (p. 6)

Indeed, discursive formations not only condition what can be known and said about a particular subject, but they also determine whose voices are heard and whose are marginalized or excluded – affecting both the production and function of knowledge in society (Hall, 1997). Consequently, discourse becomes a space where ideological meanings are circulated, contested, or naturalized.

Notably, "in any culture, there is always a great diversity of meanings about any topic, and more than one way of representing it" (Hall, 1997, p. 2). This plurality of meaning informs our research proposition that Flemish narratives about the civil resistance may articulate diverse and potentially competing ideological orientations but that these are not all equally prevalent and officially sanctioned in the Flemish remembrance landscape. Traces of ideology can emerge in discourse, where participants may emphasize certain aspects or groups of historical events while excluding others, leading to selective or incomplete truths that are presented as universal and objective within memory-making narratives. In line with this study, this tendency could be exemplified by statements that glorify the civil resistance while minimizing or ignoring their controversial actions, such as acts of violence against collaborators. Additionally, ideology should be understood "not as what is hidden and concealed, but precisely as what is most open, apparent, and manifest; what 'takes place on the surface and in view of all men'" (Hall, 1977, p. 325). Within our study, this suggests that citizens' individual perceptions of remembrance and their corresponding ideological perspectives become visible in participants' everyday discourse on their memory practices and in the taken-for-granted assumptions that individuals voice about the world, and specifically, the remembrance of the resistance.

Hall (1977) rejects the notion that ideology originates purely and solely from the individual. Instead, he stresses its socially constructed nature, arguing that ideology as a social practice “consists of the ‘subject’ positioning himself in the specific complex, the objectivated field of discourses and codes which are available to him in language and culture at a particular historical conjuncture” (Hall, 1977, p. 330). Our research sample includes Flemish citizens from a range of backgrounds and connections to the civil resistance. These individuals may frame themselves as relatively neutral in contrast to political actors, while their narratives necessarily remain socially and ideologically embedded. In this context, we follow Hall’s (1977) insight that “in the interplay of opinions, freely given and exchanged, to which the idea of consensus always makes its ritual bow, some voices and opinions exhibit greater weight, resonance, defining and limiting power” (p. 342). This view informs our proposition of how certain representations of the civil resistance may carry greater discursive weight, influencing collective remembrance in ideologically loaded ways.

### **2.2.1. Comparing Epistemological Perspectives: Halbwachs versus Hall**

We also draw on Halbwachs’s (1992) theory of collective memory, which focuses on how memory is shaped by group membership and social context. Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) and Halbwachs (1992) generally adopt constructivist perspectives in their respective theoretical frameworks for this study, grounded in the epistemological stance that “there is no single reality or any objective entity that can be described in any objective way; rather, the real world is a product of the mind that constructs that world” (Jonassen, 1991, p. 10). However, Halbwachs (1992) also integrates objectivist elements into his approach through the notion of “social frameworks,” which he presents as existing independently of the individual; these frameworks guide what is remembered and how memory is structured. As Jonassen (1991) explains, objectivism views reality as external to the knower, structured by observable phenomena and relational patterns that can be objectively modelled. In this sense, Halbwachs (1992) maintains a Rankean commitment to historical accuracy, seeking to reconstruct the past “as it actually was” (Schuster, 2017, p. 41). This is something that Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) considers impossible, as he believes there is no truly neutral individual or collective or institutional player, but everyone has their own personal interests.

Although Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) and Halbwachs (1992) differ in disciplinary focus – cultural and media studies versus sociology – both scholars recognize that meaning is socially constructed. Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) foregrounds the symbolic and ideological dimensions of cultural representation in discourse, while Halbwachs (1992) emphasizes the collective frameworks that underpin individual memory. Hall (1977, 1980, 1997) views representation not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a process that constructs meaning and mediates ideology through discourse; one in which meaning is created, but in which not all meanings are equally likely, valid, or legitimate, instead depending on the power relationships in place that shape discourse. Thus, “physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become objects of knowledge within discourse” (Hall, 1997, p. 45). Additionally, Hall’s (1977, 1980, 1997) contributions revolve around the analysis and understanding of power relations within society, aimed at ultimately supporting the emancipation of marginalized or excluded groups. In contrast, Halbwachs (1992) approaches his work from a more traditional scientific perspective, without a comparable emancipatory intent.

These differing angles illustrate how meaning is socially constructed in diverse ways and is inherently shaped by hegemonic power structures. Our study draws on both theories to examine how Flemish citizens, situated in specific cultural and historical contexts, are involved in acts of remembrance that reflect broader social and ideological structures. While Hall’s (1977, 1980, 1997) focus on discourse helps shed light on the ideological dimensions within informal discourse on remembrance, Halbwachs’s (1992) insights provide a foundation for understanding how collective frameworks shape the contemporary memory of the civil resistance during World War II. Building on the tensions and overlaps outlined earlier in this section – specifically, Halbwachs’s (1992) partial objectivism and emphasis on the existence of external social frameworks in relation to Hall’s (1977, 1980, 1997) constructivist and emancipatory focus on ideology and discourse – this study offers a nuanced analysis of remembrance, representation, and identity in the context of the civil resistance during World War II.

### 2.3. Encoding and Decoding Model

In addition to Hall's (1977, 1997) representation theory, we also utilize his encoding and decoding model (1980). This framework holds that a message contains a specific narrative that the sender aims to communicate to the receiver. To facilitate this, the source "encodes" the intention by "selecting the codes which assign meanings to events, placing events in a referential context which attribute meaning to them" (Hall, 1977, p. 343). The audience then engages in the process of "decoding" the message in its reception, which can occur in three ways. First, the receptor may perceive the narrative "in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded" (Hall, 1980, p. 126), accepting the dominant-hegemonic code and thereby interpreting the message as intended by the sender. This scenario assumes a consensus between the sender and receiver and exemplifies "perfectly transparent communication" (Hall, 1980, p. 126) or the preferred reading. In the second place, the public partially grasps the privileged representation but incorporates its own opinions and beliefs into the narrative. One then operates at the level of the negotiated code or reading (Hall, 1980). Finally, it is possible for the public to completely disagree with the communicated storyline and "decode the message in a globally contrary way" (Hall, 1980, p. 127), thereby engaging with the oppositional code or reading.

In the context of this study, the encoding-decoding model is used to explore how Flemish citizens receive and respond to societal narratives of civil resistance fighters, especially those embedded in official memory practices, such as traditional ceremonies. These formal forms of remembrance, then, act as encoded messages about the meaning and the legacy of the resistance in Flanders. By examining the personal memory practices of the participants in this study, we can access the extent to which Flemish citizens reproduce these official messages and practices (preferred reading), reinterpret and adapt them for personal purposes (negotiated reading), or distance themselves from official remembrance practices (oppositional reading). Hall's (1980) framework thus highlights that there is not one "right way" of remembering the civil resistance during World War II. Instead, many ways of representing the social world – here, the resistance – are possible, but some are perceived as more common, likely, or legitimate than others. By identifying dominant and marginalized ways of remembering, and how Flemish citizens may resist official ways of doing so, Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) theories illuminate how power dynamics and struggles shape the remembrance of the resistance in Flanders today.

The following examples illustrate the previously mentioned decoding strategies based on the data generated during the research interviews with participants:

- Preferred reading: Attending annual state-organized remembrance ceremonies on government-designated remembrance days, reading books on the general history of the civil resistance authored by certified historians, and visiting concentration camps in Poland or Germany.
- Negotiated reading: Filing a request within one's municipality to have stumbling stones laid in front of the former homes of local resistance fighters and advocating for their installation, while awaiting approval from the town hall or mayor.
- Oppositional reading: Participating exclusively in citizen-initiated remembrance events, focusing on the memory of one single resistance fighter and centering one's memory practices around this specific individual.

## **2.4. Additional Concepts of Memory**

The literature review indicated that memory is not only an interdisciplinary theoretical concept but also a term whose use has proliferated. As a comprehensive study of all its uses exceeds the scope of this thesis, we will focus on four meanings of memory that are particularly relevant to understanding our research subject and will be conceptually distinguished below.

### **2.4.1. Collective and Public Memory versus Private Memory**

This study requires an overview of *collective* and *public memory*, two principal forms of memory relevant to the present analysis. Following Halbwachs (1992), *collective memory* consists of “collectively shared representations of the past” (Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006, p. 287) within a particular social group. It arises from “shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective” (Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006, p. 291).

While scholarly interest in collective memory has grown since the 1960s, there remains no consensus on its definition or appropriate methods for its study (Verovšek, 2016). The present thesis adopts the definitions outlined above, following Halbwachs (1992) in understanding *collective memory* as the shared perceptions and memories of the Belgian civil resistance to the Nazis during World War II among Flemish citizens.

Olick and Robbins (1998) note that critics of the term collective memory frequently prefer “a proliferation of more specific terms to capture the ongoing contest over images of the past” (p. 112), one of which is public memory. *Public memory* refers to “the ongoing choices made when a group of people (typically, a nation) remembers a particular part of its history, highlights that part of history within a container available for everyone to experience, and locates that container within a social, cultural, and political context” (Aden, 2017, p. 3). Such *containers* include museums, memorials, place names, and the dissemination of iconic stories (Aden, 2017). Public memory typically presents a unified narrative affirming the nation’s preferred vision of its past (Aden, 2017; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991), and is, therefore, “more a reflection of present political and social relations than a true reconstruction of the past” (Shackel, 2001, p. 656). Yet, sites and practices of public memory are subject to differing and even conflicting interpretations by multiple stakeholders, including individual citizens (Ferrara, 2022; Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). As a result, public memory is subject to selection, interpretation, and continuous revision over time (Aden, 2017).

The literature also highlights the significance of *private memory*. Haugbolle (2005) notes that private memory, while overshadowed by public memory, “rarely speaks with a voice of its own” due to “social, political, or emotional constraints and censure” (p. 199). Her study of the Lebanese Civil War shows how state-sanctioned narratives are unevenly received and transformed within local communities, emphasizing that collective memory can emerge through private spheres and informal networks tied by kinship or religion. She concludes that private memories may persist independently of elite-imposed narratives (Haugbolle, 2005), underscoring their potential to challenge official remembrance. Similarly, Rolston (2020) argues that formal collective memory often diminishes individual agency, advocating for the concept of *counter-memory* to challenge “the official collective memory as promulgated by the state in order to allow for the collective memory of other underrepresented or silenced groups to have their public say” (p. 328).

Drawing on Halbwachs's (1992) emphasis on social frameworks and Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) focus on engagement with hegemonic forms of remembering, this study treats *collective* and *public memory* as a single phenomenon to refer to the shared ways in which Flemish citizens remember the resistance during World War II, and with particular attention to how they reproduce, adapt, or transform state-sanctioned remembrance. By incorporating the concepts of *private* and *counter-memory*, the study further foregrounds the agency of these individual citizens, recognizing their often-marginalized but vital role in shaping contemporary Flemish collective and public memory of the resistance.

#### **2.4.2. Postmemory**

A final concept pertinent to our study concerns the historical turning point that we have reached. With the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, those who have personally experienced the historical events are increasingly passing away. As their numbers continue to diminish, the second generation is growing older and will soon face the same fate. This growing absence has led to the emergence of new generations and groups who are involved in the remembrance of historical events, despite lacking first-hand experience of those events, and at times, even a close connection to someone who does.

Consequently, individuals who directly experienced the war are being replaced by others who have learned about the events indirectly, often through stories shared by relatives (Coopmans et al., 2017). Whether motivated by a sense of duty to remember or distinct reasons, “at stake is precisely the guardianship of a traumatic personal and generational past with which some of us have a ‘living connection’ and that past’s passing into history” (Hirsch, 2008, p. 104). As a result, new actors and remembrance initiatives are reshaping the memorialization landscape, particularly regarding the civil resistance and Holocaust remembrance (Kook, 2021). Hirsch (2008) discusses the ever-changing nature of World War II memory through the concept of *postmemory*, which “describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they ‘remember’ only by means of stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (p. 106).

This concept is particularly relevant in an era where autobiographical memories increasingly transform into historical memories (Halbwachs, 1992), requiring alternative and innovative ways of memory preservation. By incorporating it, the present thesis emphasizes the significance of studying the remembrance activities of both individuals with secondhand recollections of World War II and younger generations, underscoring the evolving nature of memory over time. Postmemory's relation to the past is not solely mediated by recall, but also by imaginative investment, projection, and creation (Hirsch, 2008). This idea resonates with the concept of mediated memory, since a common strategy in the postmemory era involves conveying past events through fictitious accounts, which are more effective in communicating memories of war and genocide to new generations (De Bruyn, 2010).

Some scholars suggest that eyewitnesses of traumatic historical events may transmit their memories to those with secondhand knowledge, such as their descendants. Hirsch (2008) characterizes the experience of growing up alongside such overwhelming inherited memories as *postmemory*, describing it both as a process of memory transmission and its subsequent generation. She also notes that such an experience carries inherent risks, one of which is the potential for the traumatic memories of relatives from a previous generation to replace one's own (Hirsch, 2008). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the aftermath of the Holocaust, where the scale and intensity of the trauma may exceed the individual's ability to fully comprehend, even long after the events have passed.

### **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES**

The literature review has deepened our understanding of memory as a contested and socially constructed notion that stems from personal motivations. Crucially, not all ways of remembering the past within a given society are equally recognized or legitimized. Rather, particular narratives of the past and expressions of memory are amplified, while others are silenced, reflecting unequal power relationships among memory agents.

In the Belgian context, the review highlights how memory actors approach World War II memory in conflicting ways, resulting in a fragmented memory landscape, especially when comparing remembrance in Flanders and Wallonia. It also reveals how some voices, such as that of the civil resistance during World War II, have been overshadowed in official efforts to forge a unified collective memory, underscoring the uneven representation of competing memory claims. Despite this academic attention, to my knowledge, there remains a notable gap in knowledge concerning how ordinary citizens in the Flemish Region of Belgium currently engage with the memory of the civil resistance. Specifically, little is known about how this legacy is preserved in everyday life and what personal significance remembrance holds for individuals in Flanders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The study seeks to address that gap by exploring the personalized ways in which Flemish citizens engage with and interpret the memory of the historical civil resistance; whether these memory practices are conducted privately or publicly, online or offline, and whether they involve personal artefacts or not.

More broadly, it aims to uncover contemporary perceptions of the resistance and its remembrance and how such views are expressed in informal, everyday discourse. This exploration is conducted through semi-structured interviews of ordinary citizens. Our research project adopts an open-ended approach to memory practices, avoiding prescriptive definitions to instead capture the variety and individualized nature of memorial expressions of Flemish citizens. Nevertheless, the process is at the same time guided by various hypotheses emerging from the literature review, which will be outlined below. The core objective is to identify how and why individuals engage in remembrance – particularly how they adopt or reject formal remembrance – and what motivates their memory practices.

The central research questions guiding this inquiry are the following: How do Flemish citizens engage in the remembrance of the Belgian civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II? To what extent do their memory practices reproduce or refuse official remembrance?

This will be further explored through the following sub-questions:

- What are the memory practices of Flemish citizens, both their mediated memory practices as well as their private memory practices?
- What motivates their particular ways of remembering?

Drawing from the literature about memory, my proposition is that the remembrance of the civil resistance takes dominant and negotiated forms, being imbued with multiple meanings for individual citizens.

Dominant memory practices are expected to occur primarily among citizens with a pronounced interest in history through engagement with institutionalized forms of remembrance. These may include visiting officially maintained or preserved memory sites, consulting academic works on resistance history produced by professional historians, and attending government-organized ceremonies on designated World War II remembrance days. Formal remembrance frameworks may offer citizens a legitimized context for learning, reflection, and active participation in recalling the past.

Negotiated memory practices are anticipated among citizens with family connections to the civil resistance. These individuals may participate in official events to honor their relatives, while simultaneously rejecting official narratives that tend to generalize the history of World War II, especially in the ways of presenting the resistance and collaboration. Instead, these citizens may emphasize a heroic image of their loved ones, highlighting their relatives' suffering and underrecognized contributions as members of the civil resistance.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

Our study rests on the assumption that remembrance is socially constructed, shaped by individual perceptions and broader sociocultural contexts. Specifically, it posits that memory and memory makers are shaped by existing power relationships, meaning that not all memory practices are equally likely or legitimate in a given society. Consequently, a methodological approach grounded in constructivist epistemology is required. This is reflected in qualitative research, which is based on the idea that “reality or knowledge are socially and psychologically constructed” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 312). Indeed, a qualitative research approach has been favored to tackle the central issue of the study, which touches on how the remembrance of the civil resistance is experienced, interpreted, and communicated by Flemish citizens today.

A qualitative methodology aligns well with the study's aim to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective meanings that research participants assign to their experiences (Yilmaz, 2013). In contrast, a quantitative approach to research seems less suitable, as it prioritizes general and generalizable tendencies over an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives (Yilmaz, 2013). As Tracy (2020) points out, qualitative research provides "insight into cultural activities that might otherwise be missed in structured surveys or experiments" (p. 5), thereby allowing access to marginalized voices and opinions that could be overlooked by other methodological frameworks.

#### **4.1. Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate the phenomenon of remembrance and support the data collection process of our study. This method was selected for its capacity to elicit rich accounts of participants' experiences related to remembrance. The approach of semi-structured interviewing involves "prepared questioning guided by identified themes in a consistent and systematic manner interposed with probes designed to elicit more elaborate responses" (Qu & Dumay, 2011, p. 246). Although structured around a set of general, predetermined questions, this data collection method enabled me as a researcher to remain open to new and unexpected insights by allowing for follow-up questions.

Additionally, it aligns closely with our research objectives, as interviews facilitate the uncovering of underlying motives, meanings, and potential tensions that individuals may experience in response to particular social contexts (Becker et al., 2002). Also, it is important to recognize that qualitative research – interviewing in particular – is inherently iterative and adaptive. As Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize, methodological elements often evolve in response to the dynamics of the field settings and emerging insights. In the following sections, we briefly reflect on how the data collection process unfolded in the context of our study.

#### 4.1.1. Participant Recruitment and Selection

The prospective research participants consisted of Flemish citizens actively engaged in the remembrance of the civil resistance during World War II. Specifically, eligible individuals were Belgian citizens living in the region of Flanders, Dutch-speaking, and aged eighteen or older. The age criterion was established to ensure participants' maturity in approaching the historical subject of the Second World War with appropriate seriousness and to guarantee sufficient basic knowledge of the events under study. However, the level of historical knowledge was not a prerequisite for participation in the study: Both individuals with professional historical expertise and those with limited knowledge were deemed eligible, which aligns with the study's goal of exploring the perceptions of ordinary citizens.

Moreover, the participants were required to demonstrate a specific interest in the civil resistance and maintain active involvement in its remembrance. They regularly participate in activities of remembrance, regardless of their form of location. While the selection criteria were intentionally broad and somewhat vague, this inclusivity allowed for the participation of a wide range of individuals with diverse ages, motives, and memory practices. Additionally, this approach is in line with the recognition that individuals from all walks of life can be involved in the process of remembrance, which is particularly relevant in the current era of postmemory. Our research project thus values contributions from both firsthand witnesses and subsequent generations, highlighting the evolving nature of collective memory.

Given the specificity of the target group, recruitment efforts focused on accessing communication channels commonly used and preferred by this demographic. As outlined in the literature review, certain organizations in Flanders are dedicated to preserving the legacy of the civil resistance. Operating under the assumption that interested and engaged individuals follow or interact with these associations through both online and offline channels, recruitment was conducted through two relevant actors in this field: the non-profit organization *Helden van het verzet* and the National State Archives of the *CegeSoma*. In January 2025, I contacted both organizations by email, resulting in the diffusion of my recruitment poster (see Annex 1) via *Helden van het verzet*'s social media channels. Thanks to this recruitment strategy, my call for participation successfully reached a broad audience aligned with the study's focus.

The study employed a self-selection recruitment strategy, where participants voluntarily responded to a call for participation. The widespread sharing of the recruitment poster, combined with the substantial follower base of *Helden van het verzet*, generated approximately sixty initial expressions of interest from Flemish citizens. This volume not only illustrated the significant interest among Flemish citizens in the theme of civil resistance memory, but it also provided access to a wide variety of profiles and connections to the resistance. Due to the volume of interest being higher than expected, the recruitment process surpassed our initial target of ten participants, complicating selection decisions. Upon careful consideration, I concluded that broadening the pool to thirteen participants would be beneficial, due to the strong response and the heterogeneity of respondent profiles, which enriched the potential data. Final participants were selected based on additional criteria, such as what role the civil resistance plays in their daily lives, and which specific actions they undertake to engage in the remembrance of these historical figures.

All recruitment activities – including organizational outreach, recruitment poster dissemination, participant selection, interviews, and transcriptions – were conducted between January and April 2025. The applied recruitment method facilitated access to individuals with meaningful experiences of remembering the civil resistance. However, many of those who volunteered to participate were already publicly engaged in acts of remembrance, often assuming leadership roles such as organizing remembrance events or guiding memorial visits. This pattern reflects that the study involved not only “ordinary citizens” but also individuals who play larger, more visible roles in remembrance and are accustomed to speaking publicly about the history of the resistance and its memory. While the sample includes participants who prefer more private or informal forms of remembrance, the predominance of actively involved individuals and the impact of their particular perspectives on the research results need to be acknowledged. The study explores precisely these dynamics between official and personal remembrance as well as questions of dominance and marginality as part of its analysis.

#### 4.1.2. Interview Process

The semi-structured interviews were conducted through a combination of in-person interviews and online interviews. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, with the longest extending to 1 hour and 45 minutes and the shortest lasting 37 minutes. All interviews took place within a three-week period in March of 2025 and were conducted in Dutch (Flemish). Participants were informed that they could request the exclusion of any statement at any moment, pause the interview at any time, or withdraw entirely from the study without any consequences for them. I also clarified that the conversation would focus on participants' personal ways of remembering the resistance, and that they did not have to share intimate information. Given the sensitive and significant nature of the historical events discussed, I emphasized the importance of participants sharing only what they felt comfortable disclosing. Participants responded positively to this process. While some preferred to go through the consent form more quickly than others, all participants approached it with openness and ease – many with a smile – which indicated a sense of readiness to begin the interview.

The interview process was a significant learning experience for me as a novice researcher. Beforehand, I had developed a semi-structured interview guide to help provide structure and focus (Roberts, 2020). Each interview began with general questions about the participant's background, then transitioned to their perceptions of societal remembrance of the civil resistance, before delving into their personal memory practices, and concluding with broader reflective questions. Initially, I was overly focused on covering every prepared question. However, over time, I became more confident in adopting “a flexible on-the-spot follow-up of the subjects' answers” (Kvale, 2007, p. 66). As the process evolved, I revised or omitted obsolete interview questions, gradually developing a clearer sense of which prompts elicited meaningful insights.

Research interviews involve a co-construction of data between the interviewer and the participant (McGrath et al., 2019), highlighting the importance of researcher self-awareness. I was particularly mindful of my potential insider status and biases (Berger, 2013), given that both the participants and I live in Flanders and share an interest in the history of the civil resistance, in my case, based on a family member having participated in the resistance. I took care to avoid projecting my own views, while maintaining empathy and active listening. One strategy that helped me navigate this balance was adopting an “informant-centered” attitude (Roberts, 2020), focusing on listening more and speaking less.

Early in the process, I found myself uneasy with extended silences and felt a need to maintain control out of the fear to be an imposter – an insecurity shared by many researchers in their early career (Hoskins & White, 2013). Over time, I learned to embrace open-ended questions and allow participants the space to guide the conversation. When further details were necessary, I used follow-up questions that remained open-ended and non-directive. Above all, my goal was to “create an environment in which the participant feels accepted and thus free to disclose and reflect honestly” (Becker et al., 2002, p. 216). Throughout the interviews, I consistently prioritized participants’ comfort, particularly when discussing questions that could come across as sensitive. Each interview concluded with a debriefing in which we discussed participants’ future plans related to remembrance, offering a more relaxed close and ending the interview on a positive note (Roberts, 2020).

#### **4.1.3. Researcher Positionality**

Researcher positionality can be defined as “the position the researcher has chosen to adopt *within* a given research study” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 71), and pays “attention to the context that creates the researcher’s identity, an identity that will affect the way that the social world is seen and understood” (Bukamal, 2022, p. 328) in the study.

My personal interest in this research topic stems from my family connection to the Belgian civil resistance, since my great-uncle (my grandfather’s uncle) was a resistance fighter in Flanders during the Second World War. Learning about his story as a teenager sparked my early interest in genealogy and the remembrance of the resistance. In 2025, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II, along with the observations that resistance historiography remains underdeveloped in Belgium today (Aerts & De Wever, 2012), and that, to my knowledge, little research exists on contemporary memory practices of the resistance in Flanders, motivated me to contribute to this field by studying it in my thesis.

My family ties, prior knowledge of existing remembrance initiatives, and shared regional background positioned me close to research participants, granting me an insider status. In line with Holmes (2020), being an insider enabled me to ask insightful questions during the interviews and have a better understanding of the participants than outsiders would have had, which resulted in rich, authentic accounts. However, this identification risked leading to an overempathic stance towards participants. For instance, I sometimes struggled to balance empathy and critical distance when participants predominantly shared emotional stories about their beloved resistance-affiliated relatives in their initial expressions of interest and during the interviews. Indeed, I was aware of the risk of over-identification (Creswell & Poth, 2018) when interacting with participants and the potential biases this could introduce in subsequent stages of the research process. To navigate this, I consciously and consistently turned my attention to participants' personal memory practices. By redirecting conversations towards how remembrance is enacted and personalized by the participant in question, I sought to negotiate the tension between my personal closeness to the topic and the need to retain a measure of critical, analytical attention to the statements of my research participants.

## **4.2. Data Analysis**

After completing the interviews, the next step was to make sense of the raw data obtained. To structure the collected material, I employed thematic analysis, which is a method that facilitates the organization and interpretation of qualitative research data through the selection of codes and the development of themes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Given its clarity and accessibility, thematic analysis was particularly well suited to my position as a novice researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework using an inductive approach, which involves the "process of coding the data without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (p. 83). However, the study was also informed by deductive elements, as initial propositions derived from the literature review sharpened my attention to particular themes. As such, the present research adopted a flexible combination of inductive and deductive reasoning, allowing for both data-driven insights and theoretically informed interpretations.

The first phase of the thematic analysis involved (a) familiarizing myself with the data through the verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. This step was essential, as it offered “a valuable orientation to the raw data and is foundational for all subsequent steps” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 5). Given that the interviews were conducted in Dutch (Flemish), our interview data was in the same language. The transcription was done in Microsoft Word, which has a built-in function for this purpose. Yet, since participants had diverse and sometimes strong Flemish accents, I manually verified and corrected the suggested transcriptions to ensure that all spoken speech was accurately transcribed. I then (b) generated initial codes by taking notes on preliminary connections and highlighting points of interest in the data. I used Microsoft Word, which allowed for flexibility in refining codes as the analysis progressed. Specifically, I reviewed the initial transcriptions in Word and highlighted statements and ideas that stood out (e.g., terms participants used to describe their relationship(s) to the resistance, or how long they have been engaged in remembering the resistance).

During the third stage, the researcher interprets the relevant codes and transforms them into themes. This involved (c) the search for themes by comparing codes, identifying patterns, and exploring how codes interacted to reflect larger themes in participants’ accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was done in Microsoft Excel, where I inserted the relevant codes that I had previously identified in the interview transcriptions and used color codes to identify corresponding sub-themes and themes per participant. The fourth phase focused on (d) reviewing these themes and refining them to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions between them. I did this in Microsoft Excel by collecting all participant codes and sub-themes in one document and sorting them per theme. In the fifth step, I (e) identified and named the finalized themes. Additionally, the use of Excel enabled the easy identification of relevant quotations to be included in the findings section. At this point, I manually translated relevant citations or quotes from participants into English in a separate Word document. The final phase of the analysis consists of (f) producing the analytical report.

To provide an example of my thematic analysis, one identified memory practice consists of citizen membership in local war remembrance organizations. Respondents 5 and 13, for instance, extensively discussed their activity in their respective associations during the interviews, leading to the emergence of the codes “publications about local war history” and “standard-bearer” in their interview transcriptions during the coding process to describe membership duties in such groups. As multiple participants engage in this memory practice and the subject of remembrance organizations was hence mentioned in multiple interviews, I later defined the sub-theme of “association” (in Dutch: vereniging) and categorized it within the overarching theme of “public memory practices” (see Annex 2).

Another pattern that became evident in the coding process was participants’ tendency to make value judgments about the civil resistance in response to interview questions. These statements often reflected positive and even heroic perceptions of the resistance. For instance, Respondents 1 and 6 shared such views, enabling me to define descriptions of the resistance as “great and brave ordinary citizens” and “fighters for freedom” as initial codes. Later on, these codes were grouped under “heroic resistance” as a sub-theme of “positive view of the resistance” (see Annex 2) in discourse.

#### **4.2.1. Structuring the Findings**

As mentioned, the data analysis first took place at the level of individual participants before moving on to gather and interpret all codes at the communal or general citizen level, where broader themes were identified. This distinction enabled me to analyze the data of each participant on its own terms without immediately forming assumptions about premature connections. As the analysis progressed, however, certain patterns became visible across participants’ accounts. The most prominent trend that surfaced and guided the structure of Chapter 5 was the way remembrance occurred: in public contexts, within the private sphere, or in semi-public settings that merged elements of both. Some memory practices were limited to one category, while others combined different ways of remembering (e.g., writing a book about one’s private family resistance history, or publicly giving testimony about one’s private family history).

Semi-public acts of remembrance were often undertaken by descendants of resistance fighters but were certainly not limited to that. The findings reveal how this hybrid mode of remembering reflects a broader citizen desire to contribute something personal to contemporary resistance remembrance, with one's deeply private sentiments being expressed and shared in open and public contexts, and participants sometimes even assuming leadership roles in their remembrance. A further recurring element was the social dimension of participants' remembrance: some preferred to engage in remembrance by themselves, others with family or friends, and still others with strangers who shared their interest in the civil resistance. It is important to note that, for instance, public ways of remembering do not necessarily mean that these are also collective because one can also engage in public acts of remembrance alone, and vice versa.

These various approaches to remembrance all belong to what is defined as informal remembrance in this thesis, since they represent the ways in which ordinary citizens engage with resistance memory in their personal and everyday lives. Accordingly, the findings are structured around the distinction between public and private remembrance, which reflects further divisions within the literature and provides a clear structure for examining memory practices as mentioned in our research questions. Within each dimension, the focus is on the content of memory practices: with whom they take place, and whether the focus of remembrance is on individual fighters or the resistance more generally. Within each category of remembrance practices, I also examine how they relate to official, state-sanctioned forms of remembrance, thereby reconnecting the analysis with the theoretical framework of the thesis. This structure acknowledges the fluid nature of remembrance, which is imbued with diverse meanings for different stakeholders, and which can be expressed in contexts uniquely tailored to individual experiences.

In sum, the memory practices identified in this study can be classified based on whether they occur publicly or privately, in the presence of others (collectively) or alone (individually), and by the degree to which they align with state-sanctioned remembrance (official frameworks promoted by the government and its institutions), or instead oppose such ways of remembering in favor of participants' own personal preferences (informal remembrance). In light of our theoretical framework, what matters most is the extent to which dominant, formal remembrance is reproduced, negotiated, or resisted by the ordinary Flemish citizens in the sample.

## 5. FINDINGS

With the methodology outlined and the analysis complete, this chapter presents the findings derived from the semi-structured interviews. It begins with a brief overview of the thirteen research participants, outlining their demographic backgrounds and the circumstances through which they became involved in remembering the civil resistance to Nazi Germany during World War II. The chapter then examines the nature of their personal memory practices, drawing a distinction between those leaning closer to public forms of memory, and those situated more firmly in the private sphere; thus, simultaneously exploring the relationship between more dominant and more marginalized ways of remembering the particular period and events in Belgian history. Within these categories, particular attention is given to the role of place, material artefacts, and events in shaping personal acts of remembrance.

### 5.1. Participant Overview

The table below outlines the profiles of the selected participants, including their gender, age, province of residence, and occupation. In selecting participants, attention was given to assuring diversity in participants' backgrounds, aiming to arrive at a balanced representation of men and women, as well as including individuals from various age groups and various provinces across Flanders. Nevertheless, most participants are over the age of 40, largely reflecting the demographic profile of those who initially expressed interest. Capturing a spectrum of personalized memory practices results in a richer and more nuanced understanding of how resistance memory may be experienced and expressed across different social and geographic settings. While I do not automatically assume that different demographic characteristics will result in a corresponding number of diverse memory practices, I aimed for diversity in the participant sample because it increases the potential to gain richer insights into how individuals construct personalized meanings around civil resistance memory – and how these meanings relate to existing hegemonic ways of remembering.

Table 1: Profile of selected participants

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	7
	Female	6
<i>Age</i>	18-30 years old	2
	31-40 years old	1
	41-50 years old	3
	51-60 years old	2
	61-70 years old	2
	> 70 years old	3
<i>Province</i>	Antwerp	3
	Flemish Brabant	4
	Limburg	3
	East Flanders	3
<i>Occupation</i>	Executive	1
	Employee	6
	Unemployed	2
	Retired	4
<i>TOTAL</i>		13

## 5.2. Origins of Participant Engagement

Since this study seeks to explore the personalized ways in which Flemish citizens engage in the remembrance of the civil resistance during World War II, it was essential to recruit participants with varying degrees of connection to these historical events, but which, once more, do not necessarily align with particular demographic profiles. The selection criteria anticipated that individuals with familial ties to the resistance would be among the initial respondents expressing interest in participating. This proposition was confirmed during the recruitment and resulted in most participants reporting a family link to the resistance, as detailed in the table below.

Another distinction can be observed between participants who take on leadership roles in remembrance and those whose involvement takes place in less public-facing ways. Overall, the recruitment process resulted in a sample that reflects a range of personal connections to the resistance, as well as different lengths and forms of engagement in its remembrance.

Table 2: Involvement in remembering the resistance

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<i>Familial connection</i>	Yes	9
	No	2
	Not clear	2
<i>Duration of involvement</i>	1-2 years	4
	3-5 years	3
	6-10 years	1
	11-20 years	2
	> 20 years	3
<i>TOTAL</i>		13

Of the thirteen participants, nine reported a specific familial connection to the civil resistance during World War II, whereas two participants lacked such a link. For the purposes of this study, a family connection is defined as either having a direct relative who participated in the resistance, or a family member who was assisted or rescued by members of the resistance, manifesting in various forms of direct association. For two participants, their understanding of their family’s precise role during the war remained unclear, resulting in an indeterminate connection.

In terms of the duration of engagement in remembrance activities, a clear pattern emerged: Most participants have become involved in remembering the resistance only relatively recently, within the past one to five years. The longest continuous engagement dates back 45 years, while the most recent instances of involvement began in 2023-2024. Most participants described their involvement as having evolved over time. For many, remembrance had long remained a passive presence in their lives until a specific trigger or event prompted more active engagement. As one participant observed, the “memory had always been somewhat present, but it was dormant” (Respondent 2).

Typically, participants reported an increase in the frequency or intensity of their remembrance activities. However, they did not describe any significant changes in the content or nature of their memory practices. Moreover, there was noticeable variation in reported levels of activity. Seven of the thirteen participants identified as actively engaged, while three adopted a more passive stance, and the remaining three positioned themselves somewhere in between. Among those who self-identify as active, engagement occurs on a near-daily basis. This includes digital interactions with resistance-related content, physical proximity to sites of memory, the consumption of media (e.g., films or books), and forms of professional and amateur engagement, including conducting historical research or contributing to local museums. Those engaging on a semi-regular basis generally stay informed about new developments within this sphere of interest or visit relevant memorial sites several times per year. Despite these differences, all participants emphasized a common underlying interest in preserving the legacy of resistance members.

Engagement with civil resistance remembrance tends to be triggered by specific moments or dates, highlighting the periodic character of memory within our study. On a personal level, such instances include anniversaries related to relatives involved in the resistance (e.g., their birth or death dates), their dates of arrest by Nazi forces, the liberation of particular concentration camps, and moments of discovery through personal research. Six interviewees referenced such personal occasions, five of whom have direct familial connections to the resistance. More broadly, eight respondents identified official World War remembrance days as key moments of reflection on the legacy of the civil resistance, particularly considering remembrance ceremonies in May 2025 marking the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of the camps. In some cases, remembrance was sparked by current events. For instance, Respondent 11 stated that “you get catapulted back in time when you watch the news,” referring to contemporary global conflicts that evoke memories of past historical events.

### **5.3. Personal Expressions of Civil Resistance Memory**

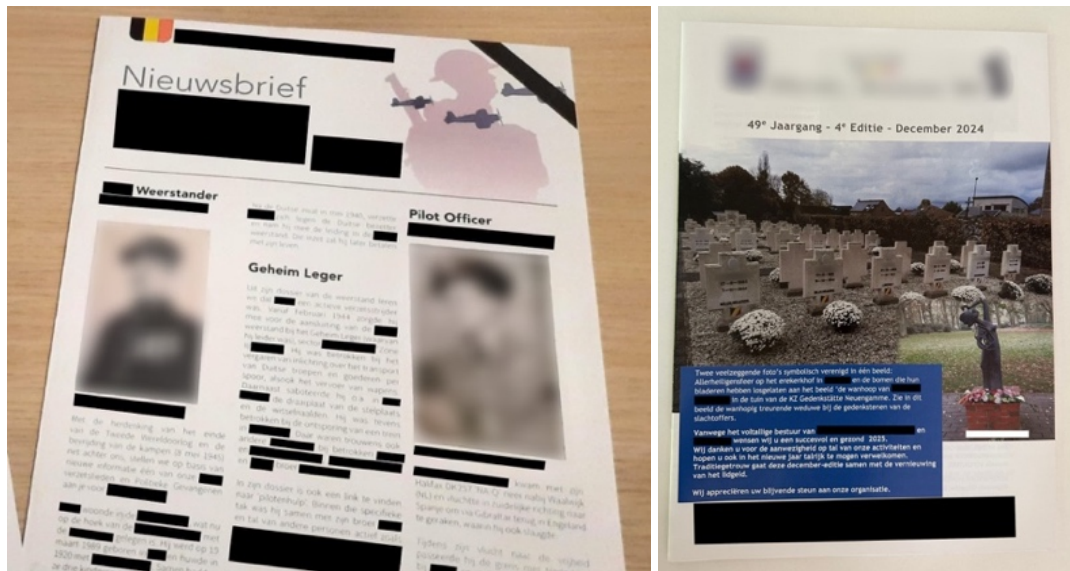
Having outlined the profiles of the research participants, we now turn to a more in-depth exploration of the central theme of this study, namely personal expressions of civil resistance memory. This presents the most prominent memory practices reported by the Flemish citizens in the sample, with the aim of illustrating how these personal acts of remembrance relate to public frameworks of memory and to more intimate, private modes of expressing engagement with civil resistance memory. As stated before, organizing the findings around the binary of public versus private remembrance corresponds with established conceptual distinctions in the literature and allows for an exploration of how memory practices remain fluid, particularly as they engage with, reinterpret, or resist hegemonic, official representations of the civil resistance, regardless of the forms these remembrance practices take.

#### **5.3.1. Memory Practices in Public Settings**

##### **5.3.1.1. Local War Remembrance Associations**

The interview findings reveal a prevailing inclination among participants to engage in public remembrance activities, where many assume active or visible leadership roles. This involvement materializes through participation in local war remembrance groups, many named after specific World War II resistance groups, such as those discussed in the literature review on the civil resistance in Belgium. Membership in such remembrance groups is not limited to individuals with family ties or war veterans, as anyone with an interest in the Second World War can join. Four respondents identified as members of such organizations, citing examples such as “Verbroedering Vaderlandslievende Groeperingen” (*Fraternity of Patriotic Groups*) and groups commonly named “Vrienden van...” (*Friends of...*). These examples are illustrative of a broader network of remembrance organizations, which operate through locally embedded branches across Flanders. Within these associations, individuals collaborate to perform a range of tasks, such as organizing and attending official ceremonies, publishing newsletters and informative materials on local remembrance efforts (see Figure 1), conducting local historical research on World War II, and promoting public engagement with remembrance in their municipality. One may also be a standard-bearer at remembrance ceremonies, like Respondent 13.

Figure 1: Newsletter and magazine published by war remembrance organizations (Respondents 5 and 11)



Respondent 11 is a board member of a remembrance association and serves as a guide at a local heritage museum. In this context, he is actively involved in organizing and volunteering at memorial events. In addition to his interest in history, his involvement stems from a sense of mediating historical understanding. He recalled a past incident from years ago in his municipality, where a prominent athlete was publicly booed during a local sports contest due to a distant familial link to wartime collaboration. One of the athlete's distant collaborating relatives had, in fact, been murdered by the civil resistance in July 1944 while walking to a local fair. This event prompted retaliatory violence a few days later in the form of a razzia by the Flemish collaborator organization *Veiligheidskorps* (Security Corps) against resistance members. Respondent 11 stressed that when he personally knows those involved in actions like booing, he will intervene to clarify the historical context and correct misinformation. His choice not to do so with strangers may reflect personal restraint, rooted in social caution or a desire to avoid confrontational encounters involving emotionally charged and contested memories. This anecdote points to Respondent 11's commitment to historical accuracy and addressing misconceptions. It highlights how personal perceptions may position the resistance as a complex history requiring an informed approach in collective memory. Following Hall (1977, 1980, 1997), Respondent 11 selectively aligns with official historical narratives as a benchmark for “correct” remembrance yet limits his public defense of these versions to private social circles, demonstrating a careful negotiation of official ways of remembering.

### 5.3.1.2. Participation in Collective Initiatives

Beyond the role of war organizations in personal remembrance, several participants reported active involvement in collective public remembrance initiatives, varying in focus and audience. For instance, Respondent 9 participated in a citizen-led local heritage project aimed at engaging residents with the historical significance of their neighborhood. The area played a key role in the British-led liberation of their city, and its historic reputation has become a catalyst for local remembrance. Respondent 9 attributed his involvement to a perceived societal neglect of local resistance history: “I often notice that people live on streets named after resistance heroes or heroines but actually know very little about who they are.” To address this, local residents developed a series of memory initiatives, including a podcast, a resistance-themed walking tour, a mural, a public event, and a vibrant online presence. While Respondent 9 was not the initiator of the neighborhood initiative, he was quick to join. The mural (see Figure 2) depicts a large hand forming a peace sign, symbolizing the civil resistance and its struggle for freedom. Respondent 9 particularly highlighted the mural’s value in fostering public and especially local engagement, as “children, passersby, and residents who encounter the mural are prompted to reflect and ask questions.” This interaction is enhanced by an adjacent QR code linking to supplementary online information about the resistance history of the neighborhood.

The local project garnered notable public interest and was supported by the municipality through financial subsidies and in-person engagement. The project’s very existence and Respondent 9’s participation in it could indicate dissatisfaction with how municipal authorities currently approach the remembrance of local history, reflecting a perceived neglect and underrecognition of resistance narratives. Since the initiative may then originate from a bottom-up citizen desire to recenter local resistance memory in a way perceived as more adequate or effective than official memory practices, it may help citizens – including Respondent 9 – address gaps in official remembrance. This collective dimension emphasizes the social construction of resistance memory (Halbwachs, 1992). However, the city’s funding and involvement in the project, along with reliance on official archives for the use historical information in the developed initiatives, suggest a negotiated relationship with hegemonic memory practices (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

Figure 2: Mural of the local neighborhood project (Respondent 9)



Another perspective is offered by Respondent 5. As part of his remembrance activities, Respondent 5 actively engages in initiatives with local schools, including guided walking and cycling tours and the development of an educational game focused on local resistance history. Respondent 5 described how his engagement elicits strong emotional responses, reinforcing his personal identification with the historical figures he remembers. In one notable instance, Respondent 5 organized a local walking tour centered on the story of a World War II glider crash that occurred in a park in his municipality. To enhance realism and engage participants more deeply, Respondent 5 narrated the event from the first-person perspective of a local resistance fighter who had been involved in the crash. At the end of the tour, he was supposed to thank the audience for their attention but found himself unable to speak because the emotions “just run so deep – all the misery that those men endured, all the courage they showed” (Respondent 5). He described this moment as emotionally overwhelming, noting that “even if you just play a role, the fact that you carry so many stories of what those local resistance fighters did... without realizing it, it has simply become a part of my life. And in part, I feel obliged to keep telling their stories” (Respondent 5). This example highlights how sustained engagement with civil resistance memory may lead to a strong emotional identification with this group, fostering a sense of personal responsibility and reinforcing a view of the civil resistance as courageous, deeply meaningful, and morally resonant with one’s own values. Conversely, for other citizens, it may be their personal identification with the civil resistance that motivates their engagement.

Furthermore, Respondent 4 is professionally involved in organizing an annual walking tour in Antwerp that highlights the city's wartime history by passing by memorial sites related to the Holocaust. This walking tour is an initiative hosted by two socio-cultural organizations. Respondent 4 participates in the tour herself and values its connective power, noting how participants comfort one another when moved by the stories. The guided walk's content currently concentrates on the 1942 police-led razzias on Jewish residents in Antwerp. Specifically, these attacks were ordered by the Nazi police and took place in collaboration with local Belgian authorities, such as the Antwerp city police. While Respondent 4 finds this focus important, she suggested expanding the initiative to include a second walking tour dedicated to the civil resistance to Nazi Germany, such as walking by the former homes of resistance fighters. She particularly reiterated the importance of including stories of Antwerp police officers who refused to participate in the 1942 police-led razzias, underscoring the diversity of resistance efforts. This aligns with official historiography (De Wever & Wouters, 2020), which recognizes that institutional actors, like the police, could also engage in resistance, and how this, too, merits recognition. Her call to broaden the existing walking tour's scope suggests a partial critique of the tendency of many city tours to focus narrowly on World War II in general and the Holocaust, advocating for greater visibility of resistance history within institutional memory practices (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

While participants' memory practices often centered on resistance activities during World War II in Flanders, some respondents reflected on remembrance in relation to more distant sites. This emerged most clearly in references to memorial trips to former concentration camps in Germany and Poland, as discussed by Respondents 2, 5, and 11. The former describes such memorial travel as "annual trips – almost like pilgrimages – to concentration camps, made by Belgian citizens whose parents or grandparents were imprisoned there, whether or not they died there" (Respondent 2). Despite his own familial connection to the resistance, Respondent 2 remarked that he does not share the same emotional bond that many participants in these trips seem to express, implicitly distancing himself from a more affective or emotional connection to the civil resistance.

Respondent 11 has actively taken part in memorial travel through his membership in a local remembrance association, which helps organize annual trips to former concentration camps, such as Buchenwald and Neuengamme. For him, these experiences served as a catalyst for his interest and engagement with civil resistance memory.

He highlighted the emotionally charged nature of remembrance trips, stating: “When you experience it live, it really hits you, it stays with you. . . . This is not in a negative sense, but it never leaves you. It gives you the conviction: I must commit myself to this.” Respondent 11 also emphasized the sense of camaraderie among individuals united by shared values during such trips:

You’re with like-minded people, and it’s not a sad event: Being in Neuengamme or those places affects everyone, but in the evenings or on the bus there’s also room for fun and light moments. After all, all the people there find remembering important. (Respondent 12)

These examples illustrate how collective remembrance through memorial travel can serve as a powerful source of moral motivation, reflecting the socially constructed nature of memory (Halbwachs, 1992). They also emphasize the perceived significance of place in resistance memory, whether local or distant, and how this spatial connection can foster both educational engagement and emotional resonance.

### **5.3.2. Personal Memory Practices in Public Settings**

Within memory practices, many participants described personally motivated acts of remembrance that unfold in collective contexts. This demonstrates how preserving the legacy and memory of the civil resistance during World War II can transcend binary categorizations of public versus private memory. Indeed, the findings reveal a dynamic space of remembrance that moves between public activities and intimate engagement; a hybrid space shaped by personal meanings within shared and open settings.

#### **5.3.2.1. Creative and Artistic Memory Practices**

Four participants with family links to the resistance and one without engaged in creative or artistic forms of remembrance. Among them is Respondent 10, who, despite uncertainty about her family’s wartime involvement, is writing a historical novel on the resistance. Her motivation stems from a concern about the perceived societal neglect of this history.

By combining fiction and historical research, Respondent 10 aims to make resistance history more tangible and appealing for contemporary audiences. As she noted, a book “is there, so you can reread it. And it sticks with you; what you read really sticks, it always stays with me too.” This shows an understanding of literature, specifically historical fiction, as an enduring medium for resistance remembrance; one that invites emotional resonance and sustained engagement beyond traditional memory practices. Respondent 10’s decision to write a book reflects a desire to reclaim agency and address what she considers as a significant omission in official remembrance, namely the lack of attention for resistance history. In doing so, she creates a negotiated, personalized counter-memory practice that challenges the limited focus of formal memory, seeking to correct what she views as an imbalance of the historical narratives presented by institutional actors (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

Respondent 3, whose grandparents were involved in the resistance, authored a book that recounts her family’s history within the broader context of the civil resistance. She described the writing process as deeply emotional and psychologically intense, stating that “it felt as if I myself was going to the concentration camps.” Respondent 3 framed her engagement in remembrance as a means of processing intergenerational trauma in her family. The war’s legacy, she explained, had profoundly shaped their emotional dynamics, particularly her father’s. He had always struggled to communicate his recollections of the previous generation’s involvement in the resistance, often only managing to share and repeat fragmented stories. Her grandfather, who had survived the war, had only shared his stories about his time in the concentration camps with her during her childhood. After that, he lapsed into silence. This prolonged quietness surrounding the family’s painful past speaks to the difficulty of articulating trauma, suggesting that surviving resistance members may have carried emotional burdens too painful to express or even process.

A pivotal moment came during a period of severe illness that left Respondent 3 in intensive care. Confronting her own vulnerability catalyzed a profound emotional connection to the suffering endured by her grandparents during the war, since “it’s only when you experience something bad yourself, that you can better imagine someone else’s suffering” (Respondent 3). As she put it, “the suffering inflicted on my grandparents was so diabolical, it’s hard to comprehend, and they remained silent about it.” This realization gave rise to what she described as a moral obligation: “I thought: I need to give them a voice. I owe it to them; in the form of my grandparents, my father, and all those who suffered alongside them.”

She later emphasized her perceived importance of resistance stories once more, stating that “I have to hear it from my father, who can’t talk about it, so the stories fade away, but they shouldn’t fade at all. They are too important not to be told” (Respondent 3). This reveals a strong empathetic identification among descendants with the previous generations’ experiences of suffering, echoing the concept of postmemory (Hirsch, 2008). It illustrates how these experiences can foster a perceived moral responsibility to represent and remember loved ones who resisted injustice yet remained unheard in official remembrance.

Another participant who engaged with his family’s resistance legacy through the publication of a book is Respondent 12. Alongside his sister, with whom he shares a deep interest in their father’s history as a resistance fighter, he commissioned a ghostwriter to produce a book recounting their father’s story. This initiative was not limited to a book alone: They also visited the former concentration camp in Germany where their father had been imprisoned, creating a short film on-site in which his sister provides a testimony about their father’s imprisonment. The video was subsequently made publicly accessible via YouTube, demonstrating how deeply personal motivations can give rise to public acts of remembrance. Respondent 12 described the book project as a therapeutic undertaking, particularly because it took place relatively shortly after his father’s death. Like Respondent 3, he emphasized the emotional aftermath of civil resistance involvement that continued to shape family dynamics long after the war. In his account, special attention was given to the role of his mother, who had supported his father through the long and painful process of recovery from his wartime experiences:

You have to understand that when my father came back, he weighed very little, and he wasn’t a man anymore. He couldn’t function anymore. That lasted for a long time and my mother had a great deal of patience with it. But she was also confronted with it, including the nightmares. She played a very important and loving role in all of that. If you think about it, you carry that with you in your upbringing, in how you treat someone. You carry it with you in how you remember someone and how you wish to be remembered. (Respondent 12)

This testimony provides a meaningful insight into the long-term emotional consequences of civil resistance engagement, and how these continued to influence family relationships after the war. The resistance fighter, once physically and psychologically affected by imprisonment, emerges as a deeply impacted survivor whose trauma demanded care and emotional labor from loved ones.

Respondent 12's reflections foreground the often-unnoticed role of partners of resistance fighters, specifically the contributions of women. This corresponds with academic observations that women's resistance, in any form, is largely absent from existing historiography (Corthals, 2025). Through their emotional support, caregiving, and the maintenance of family stability in the wake of wartime trauma, these partners became silent witnesses to resistance legacy. Thus, Respondent 12's personal remembrance offers a holistic representation of civil resistance involvement, including both its visible consequences and the quieter efforts to heal, those directly involved in the resistance, and those indirectly involved through caretaking of resistance fighters and their family members.

Engaging creativity in memory practices can give rise to alternative modes of remembering, as exemplified by Respondent 2, who developed a theatre performance based on his family's involvement in the civil resistance. Now retired, he reflected on how his professional career in the radio industry had consistently nurtured his creative expression and storytelling abilities. When he came to recognize the narrative potential of his family's resistance history, he felt instinctively drawn to a mode of storytelling that aligned with his creative strengths. At the same time, he acknowledged the boundaries of his comfort zone, explaining that stepping into unfamiliar narrative formats, such as creating a solo monologue, is "not something I'm cut out for as a radio person" (Respondent 2). He also emphasized that his decision to engage in this creative act stemmed less from a desire to participate in collective remembrance than from a personal urge to share a family story. As he put it, Respondent 2 is "probably a very atypical participant in this conversation," who "really enjoys being on stage, loved working for the radio, and every good story fits into that." His involvement appears to be driven more by the impulse to narrate a personal past than by conventional remembrance purposes, which would be focused on celebrating the unity and heroism of the Belgian population during the war. Respondent 2's memory practice thus exemplifies Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) oppositional reading: By rejecting generalized and anonymous narratives of resistance history and instead positioning his own family at the center of remembrance, he redefines the scope of resistance memory rather than following the prescriptions of official memory agents.

Respondent 2's preference for individually tailored memory practices became further evident when he described his grandparents' and mother's participation in the civil resistance, including sheltering British pilots. He explained how fragmented childhood memories combined with an interest in retracing this history had provided the impetus for his creative piece. His project was further fueled by a personal curiosity about the emotional aftereffects of resistance membership, particularly concerning his mother, who had been arrested by the Nazis during World War II and imprisoned in Antwerp. Reflecting on her silence, Respondent 2 remarked:

She never talked about it, just like people rarely spoke about the war – occasionally a detail here or there – but it was clearly a traumatic experience. Unfortunately, the term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' has only existed about 40 years, but those people must have gone through immense trauma. I am quite curious about how she dealt with it. (Respondent 2)

The silence of resistance fighters, he further observed, shapes how families remember – or fail to remember – their own past. When lived experiences are neither spoken about nor documented, they risk being lost entirely, leaving descendants with little to no means to trace their histories (Respondent 2). Respondent 2's reflections suggest that trauma not only affected the lives of resistance fighters during and after the war but also left lingering silences that continue to influence intergenerational memory today. In this sense, resistance memories retain a deep emotional impact, due to their unresolved nature, a finding supported by the literature review (Frijda, 2007).

Through his creative engagement, Respondent 2 may give a voice to these silences. While acknowledging the emotional voids left by past silent suffering, his remembrance constructs a narrative space in which familial trauma can be recognized and potentially resolved. Similarly to other participants, Respondent 2's memory practices offer an empathic representation of the civil resistance, recognizing its members as deeply affected individuals whose pain often remained unspoken, but nonetheless shaped the emotional legacy passed down to descendants. His motivation to engage in remembrance lies in giving a voice to loved ones whose experiences may otherwise remain forgotten, ensuring that their emotional and historical presence continues to resonate in the present. It is precisely this family connection to the civil resistance that gives its remembrance personal relevance and brings it to life (Cordonnier et al., 2020).

### 5.3.2.2. Sharing Personal Testimonies Publicly

A second category within the middle ground between public and private remembrance includes giving testimony about personal resistance history in public contexts. While memory practices that involve sharing stories with third parties can take various forms, several research participants explicitly described these as core aspects of their engagement.

Two respondents discussed occasionally visiting local schools to recount the experiences of their relatives who were involved in the resistance. These testimonies, often shared at the request of the schools themselves, reflect a form of community-based remembrance that connects personal legacies to broader educational contexts. Respondent 12, who tends to undertake this activity with his sister, described one instance where they gave a presentation to approximately 400 pupils. Although initially concerned that the planned 90-minute session would fail to hold the students' attention, their presentation ultimately lasted three hours due to the high volumes of questions and interest. Respondent 12 expressed a level of surprise by the engagement of the students, who even left written reflections, some of which were incorporated into the book about his father's resistance legacy. This could be an indication of the importance that Respondent 12 places on intergenerational memory transmission and the perceptions of younger audiences. Additionally, Respondent 12 highlighted the emotional impact of sharing his testimony in schools, stating that "the tears ran down my cheeks because my father went through so much; he suffered so much and that's pretty tough." This shows an empathic view of the resistance fighter, embodied by his own father, whose suffering continues to affect contemporary personal remembrance. It also underscores the deep emotional impact that remembrance can have, especially for individuals directly affected by the historical events in question, as Frijda (2007) proposes.

A similar remembrance activity was communicated by Respondent 8, who actively shares his testimony in formal and informal contexts. His memory practices are deeply anchored in his parents' resistance activities, which he recounts with great respect and admiration. He primarily emphasized their efforts to hide and protect Allied pilots during the Nazi occupation. Notably, he explained that his parents, together with other resistance fighters, had helped prevent around 350 people in their municipality from being deported for forced labor in Nazi Germany.

For Respondent 8, this may be the core of what civil resistance means; quiet, yet impactful actions rooted in individual bravery and particularly connected to his parents. In contrast, he expressed less identification with the armed resistance, such as bombings, as these were not part of his family's experiences. His testimony thus foregrounds a more humanitarian view of the civil resistance, privileging everyday courage and peaceful activity over militant actions. In line with Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) concept of the oppositional reading, personalized memory practices of descendants may, then, oppose official narratives that emphasize armed resistance as the most significant form (Lagrou, 2003) by centering the specific actions of their relatives in remembrance.

Beyond the classroom, Respondent 8 has shared his story through broader public forums, such as local events, magazine interviews, and television appearances. These engagements serve a dual purpose, according to him. On the one hand, they act as tributes to his parents. On the other, they aim to raise awareness of resistance history among Respondent 8's local community by framing it in local terms. In his words, he is involved in initiatives that highlight stories "about people from [my town] for people from [my town]," arguing that "it's not something like: 'Oh yeah, but that happened in Poland' or 'that's about the Chinese.' No, it also happened right on their own doorstep" (Respondent 8). These statements reflect a desire to bring the memory of the resistance closer to home, both figuratively and literally, which this participant may view as an effective method to encourage greater engagement in remembrance.

### **5.3.2.3. Digital Memory Practices**

Another way in which personal resistance histories are integrated into public memory is through digital communication channels. In addition to Respondent 12, who created and shared a short film on YouTube about his father's involvement in the civil resistance, three other participants engage in digital remembrance, each with personal motivations and methods. A clear example is offered by Respondent 1, who collaborates with her cousin in managing a Facebook page dedicated to their grandfather, a former resistance fighter. The page features posts that highlight biographical information about their grandfather, share contemporary updates on resistance remembrance in Flanders – including upcoming official initiatives and media coverage of museum exhibits or films about the resistance – and present memorial content related to him, such as photographs from the World War II era.

Although Respondent 1 acknowledged that the Facebook page has a limited reach, she expressed satisfaction with this, suggesting that it corresponds with her current, more passive level of engagement. Contributing to the page, she explained, initially helped her process the emotional weight and family trauma associated with her grandfather's resistance legacy. Over time, however, her involvement has become sporadic, which may signal a sense of closure; an indication that the personal imperative to honor her grandfather has, for now, been fulfilled. In addition to a Facebook page, her cousin runs a publicly accessible website that traces the origins of their family name. While these platforms share private family information, their open accessibility represents a blend of intimate and public remembrance. Within these collaborative efforts, Respondent 1 positioned herself as a secondary actor, describing herself as "just a follower" due to her limited familiarity with social media, and attributing the initiative largely to her cousin who is "more interested in these things than I am."

Family heritage seems to lie at the core of Respondent 1's remembrance approach, particularly her grandfather's underrecognized contributions to the local resistance. She expressed strong support for an upcoming municipal monument scheduled for 2025, which will include his name. She identified this as a long-awaited form of public acknowledgement, describing it as "the last step," after which "maybe then we'll have peace" (Respondent 1). This statement suggests that her engagement with remembrance may be framed as a personal quest for familial recognition, positing her grandfather's actions as morally significant deeds deserving of lasting respect. When asked about other memorial formats, such as the installation of a *Stolperstein* in front of her grandfather's former home, Respondent 1 supported the idea in principle but firmly declined to contribute financially, reasoning that "we are the victims, not the perpetrators." Her overall satisfaction with the erection of a municipal monument dedicated to the resistance, particularly its official and financial backing by city authorities, demonstrates acceptance of hegemonic ways of remembering, as the initiative originates from institutional actors. This stance is enhanced by her refusal to contribute financially to alternative memorials, like stumbling stones, where she positions her family as victims deserving recognition rather than as responsible for funding or maintaining contemporary memorial projects. In other words, she does not seek to challenge the city's initiative but rather regards it as long-awaited justice, which is sufficient and legitimate, reflecting the preferred reading described by Hall (1977, 1980, 1997).

Similarly, Respondent 8 frequently shares posts about his family's resistance on Facebook. On significant dates, such as the death anniversaries of his parents, he uploads photos accompanied by detailed information about their specific resistance activities during World War II to honor their legacy. However, these posts are not disseminated on his general Facebook profile. Instead, he uses a closed Facebook group called "Community Helden van het verzet," an initiative by the non-profit organization *Helden van het verzet*, as his primary digital platform. The private Facebook group includes both members of this non-profit association as well as individuals with an interest in the remembrance of the civil resistance. In discussing this specific choice of audience, Respondent 8 stated: "The rest of Facebook really has no business with it, but within the context of *Helden van het verzet*, I believe it has a rightful place, that I post it there and turn it into a memory that others can respond to." Though he does not share photos of his parents on every remembrance date, Respondent 8's online activity somewhat parallels official remembrance by following significant dates, much like formal memory days. This suggests a partial acceptance of the temporal framework of hegemonic remembrance, where certain days hold particular importance. However, his choice to post on emotionally significant dates related to loved ones, and to do so within a private group, can indicate a perceived lack of attention for individual stories within official remembrance. By sharing his personal story in an intimate, community-oriented, and trusted online space with others who share his values, Respondent 8 exercises full agency in remembrance and reflects the negotiated reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997), seeking validation through peer affirmation rather than institutional acknowledgement. He emphasized this ability of social media platforms, like Facebook, to increase individuals' agency in remembrance, as "even if you're not part of a large association or group, you have the opportunity to tell your story yourself."

Contrary to participants who approach digital remembrance more privately, some intentionally use online platforms to reach wider audiences and provoke engagement. This approach is exemplified by Respondent 13, the youngest participant in the sample, who actively uses Facebook to disseminate biographies of his great-uncle and other local resistance fighters in the province of Limburg (see Figure 3). He shares messages in both Dutch (Flemish) and English.

This participant's interest in war history began in early childhood, initially focused on the role of American soldiers in the World Wars. His early fascination later led him to build an extensive network of online connections, and eventually, to explore his own family's role in the Second World War. Today, Respondent 13 regularly posts historical information, photos, and messages about his great-uncle and the broader local resistance. His memory practices reflect a belief that the civil resistance, despite its complexities, deserves to be remembered for its moral and patriotic intent:

It should be known that those boys did what they did for our freedom. Their actions were not always 'pretty'; they sometimes involved violence or morally difficult choices – but they were carried out with the right intentions: to shorten the war. There are always exceptions because the resistance is very complex, but it should be clearly represented that the resistance did what it did for our freedom, and not for financial gain or attention. (Respondent 13)

Respondent 13's online memory practice is educational and designed to inform an extensive public, aligning with official remembrance goals like raising awareness and promoting historical education. His posts often relate to genealogical research using official archival sources, which are thus regarded as reliable for reconstructing or completing family histories. However, he partially diverges from institutional remembrance and applies Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) negotiated reading by centering his great-uncle and other specific local resistance fighters, rather than the generalized or anonymous resistance narratives typical of official remembrance. His use of Facebook further reflects a personalized approach to memory, where personal networks shape the visibility and nature of the published messages. Through his mediated remembrance, Respondent 13 advocates for public recognition of the resistance as a critical contribution to the liberation of Belgium, which is worthy of continued engagement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, even 80 years after World War II ended.

Figure 3: Screenshots of personal Facebook posts (Respondent 13)



### 5.3.3. Personal Memory Practices in Private Settings

The interview findings reveal that remembrance takes on a more intimate form as well, particularly when rooted in the private sphere of one's family or home. This section provides an overview of the principal private memory practices identified in the study.

#### 5.3.3.1. Collective Private Remembrance

A first example of private remembrance encompasses actions undertaken within one's private circles in the collective presence of family members and friends. In this regard, nine participants described regularly reflecting on the civil resistance with loved ones, engaging both with broader historical narratives and private family histories, and often doing so at home. Notably, this included two participants without direct familial ties to the resistance.

One such case is Respondent 7, who developed an interest in the resistance only in the past two years or so. Besides reading about the topic and visiting memory sites, her engagement involves raising awareness of civil resistance history among friends and family. For example, she initiates conversations by discussing specific resistance-themed media she has encountered, such as the series *Kinderen van het verzet*. In addition, Respondent 7 recalled a specific instance where she presented the biography of resistance fighter Hortense Daman to her friends during a Christmas gathering, where each guest was invited to give a short PowerPoint presentation on a subject of personal interest. For Respondent 7, the decision to spotlight Daman's story reflected the strong importance she attaches to civil resistance history and her desire to share that significance with those closest to her.

She further articulated a moral identification with the civil resistance, encompassing notions of civic virtue and ethical integrity. Her motivation to engage with their stories derives from the belief that it is important that "as a good Belgian citizen, I am informed about what the good Belgian citizens did back then during the resistance, and that I somehow also owe it to them to read and know those stories" (Respondent 7). This representation positions the civil resistance as a morally exemplary group of those who stood on the right side of history, portraying the remembrance of these historical figures as a civic responsibility. Her reflections also revealed a profound emotional connection, as she explained that her present-day values and actions around remembrance and resistance resonate with those of past resistance fighters, fostering a sense of continuity between them:

I also feel a certain admiration or pride. Admiration for what people did back then. Pride as in that you somehow feel part of the same group. Like, you hope that if someone from the resistance were to look at your life right now, they might say: you're part of the same group of citizens, you stand behind the same ideals.  
(Respondent 7)

When asked which elements of the civil resistance should be remembered, she emphasized their opposition to unequal treatment, such as that faced by Jewish citizens during World War II, a struggle she sees as resonating with present-day injustices. Respondent 7 drew a direct parallel between the civil resistance and contemporary civilians resisting oppressive regimes, such as political prisoners from Syria seeking refuge in Belgium. She concluded that “if we think about it, our ancestors were, after all, not so different” from these individuals, who could be perceived as engaged in forms of contemporary resistance.

By calling resistance fighters “good Belgian citizens” and expressing her aspiration to embody that same ideal, Respondent 7 articulates an identification with a tradition of perceived civic virtue and moral courage. This identification is reinforced by comparing World War II resistance to contemporary acts of opposition, such as political refugees resisting authoritarian regimes, who could be perceived as engaged in contemporary resistance. Through these connections, Respondent 7 frames the resistance as deeply moral, heroic, and emotionally resonant through its perceived ethical alignment with her personal values. In doing so, she opposes the more neutral and generalized narratives often conveyed in official memory practices, which tend to avoid overt moral judgments and prioritize consensus-based history with a seemingly equal focus on resistance and collaboration. Respondent 7’s insistence on strong emotional and moral framing constitutes an oppositional reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997) of existing hegemonic forms of memory and reframes resistance memory in personalized ways.

Respondent 6 provides us with a compelling illustration of how individuals may recall and transmit their family’s involvement in the civil resistance during World War II. With both of her grandparents having been resistance fighters, Respondent 6 frequently shares her familial history with her own children within the private sphere. Her memory practices are rooted in family storytelling, through which she reflects on the experiences of previous generations. Her interest was triggered by specific familial changes, such as her mother becoming ill, prompting her to realize that “it kind of became my task to carry on” the family legacy, “not officially of course, but that’s how I feel, that it became my responsibility” (Respondent 6). Central to her account is a sense of admiration for the courage and selflessness of her relatives, who were “on the right side of history” (Respondent 6).

She described the resistance movement as a form of unspoken heroism, stating her appreciation for the “heroism of the people and how they, perhaps in a certain sense without fully realizing it, committed themselves to preserving the freedom they were used to living in.” She also recounted one particular episode that highlights the contributions of her grandfather in defending those unfairly condemned in the aftermath of the war:

I remember my mother always told me that during the liberation, her father had made a great effort to support women who had worked with the Germans as spies. After the war, these women were publicly shamed, while in reality they had worked for the resistance, supporting the Belgian cause. My grandfather strongly advocated for them not to be punished by having their heads shaved or being publicly humiliated. (Respondent 6)

Through this recollection, Respondent 6’s grandfather emerges as a morally principled figure; one who not only participated in the resistance but also intervened to protect others whose resistance efforts were misunderstood by the public. Respondent 6’s familial pride was further exemplified by another vivid anecdote: Her grandmother would meet a fellow resistance fighter at an ice cream parlor in Ghent, and, as a form of cover, brought along her young daughter – Respondent 6’s mother, then only three or four years old. Reflecting on this, Respondent 6 recognized the enormous danger involved. She noted that if the Nazis had discovered it, things would have ended badly, as “they murdered enough Jewish children too, so they didn’t shy away from that.” By stressing the brutality of the Nazi regime, Respondent 6 underscored the profound risk her grandmother had taken, not only for herself, but for her child.

When asked about the most important lessons gained through engagement in remembrance, Respondent 6 emphasized altruism and perseverance as essential personal qualities, along with the importance of collective effort. She connected these values to the experiences of her own relatives in the resistance, noting that resistance membership demanded profound trust in others since betrayal was always possible: “That’s what happened to my grandfather: They don’t know if he was betrayed, because he was suddenly arrested. But you had to trust people, because if not, you couldn’t be part of the resistance.” In this sense, participation not only required resilience and altruism but also the capacity to trust others, which are skills that not everyone possessed.

In these personal stories about cherished loved ones, Respondent 6 portrays civil resistance as a deeply sacrificial act; one that could even entail endangering the safety of one's own family in service of a greater cause. She underscores the altruism and bravery of her relatives, emphasizing that their actions were motivated by duty and aimed not only at resisting the occupation but also at protecting others and upholding justice and human dignity, both during the war and in the turbulent times of the liberation days in Belgium. This framing, which juxtaposes the heroism and courage of resistance fighters with the brutality and cruelty of the Nazis, creates a clear moral dichotomy between good and evil, shaped by Respondent 6's own family legacy. By recounting anecdotes that cast her relatives in a distinctly positive light and explicitly marking their actions as ethically right, brave, and heroic, Respondent 6's narratives convey the oppositional reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997) by resisting the generalization or neutrality often found in formal remembrance. Instead, she advances a clear moral judgment of right and wrong, an approach that diverges from institutional memory practices. This oppositional stance is further reinforced through Respondent 6's account of her grandmother, which sheds light on the often-overlooked role of women in the resistance, a gap in historiography noted by Corthals (2025) and in our study by Respondents 4 and 9.

Finally, collective private remembrance can take the form of genealogical research into the lives of resistance-affiliated relatives. Four interviewees mentioned engaging in such research, compiling archival findings into detailed documents, such as Excel files (Respondent 1), or using them as a foundation for further memory practices, as in the case of Respondent 2's creative performance. Respondent 13's memory practices exemplify this type of involvement. In recent years, he and his father have taken a deep interest in uncovering the wartime story of his great-uncle, a resistance fighter who died in the camps. Motivated primarily by their family connection, they have consulted official historical archives, especially those of the *CegeSoma*, to understand the circumstances surrounding his arrest and death. This reliance on formal archival sources reflects their perceived trustworthiness for personal history research and demonstrates an acceptance of official remembrance within personalized memory practices, a phenomenon previously observed (see page 91). Over time, their research has expanded beyond the individual, tracing the wider local network in which the great-uncle was embedded. This includes identifying individuals who belonged to the same resistance groups or were imprisoned in the same concentration camps or prisons.

The research process has not only deepened their historical understanding but also fostered a personal connection to the past. The latter is evident in Respondent 13's layered portrayal of the resistance. He acknowledged the negative reputation of his great-uncle's resistance group, the Armed Partisans, noting that "you had people who were rather intense and went out to shoot collaborators" (Respondent 13). In contrast, his great-uncle and another local member engaged primarily in humanitarian acts, such as "simply giving people food." As Respondent 13 put it, "mistakes were made during that time, but mostly with good intentions." Rather than casting the legacy of the civil resistance solely in heroic terms, Respondent 13's account affirms the enduring personal significance of remembrance despite historical ambiguities, such as regarding societal perceptions of resistance groups or forms.

By juxtaposing radical acts of armed resistance, such as the assassination of collaborators, with more modest, peaceful efforts like food distribution, his narrative highlights the contested and diverse character of the resistance. This suggests that the value and meaning of resistance memory may reside precisely in the diverse forms through which opposition to Nazi rule was expressed by citizens, and most importantly, in the tension inherent to this diversity. Official World War II memory narratives tend to generalize these historical events, emphasizing large-scale armed activity, such as sabotage and bombings, often conveyed to contemporary audiences through statistics from official archival sources. In contrast, Respondent 13's discourse offers a refreshing and more nuanced view, showing that resistance extended beyond armed activity to include everyday acts deemed "small" or ignored by formal remembrance, including providing food to those in hiding. Additionally, it highlights that citizens could combine different acts of resistance and were not bound to one resistance form or group, a nuance less likely to be emphasized within official remembrance, but which was mentioned in our literature review by De Wever and Wouters (2020). These reflections exemplify an oppositional reading that broadens and reshapes the scope of what constitutes civil resistance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997), in contrast with the limited perspectives presented by institutional sources.

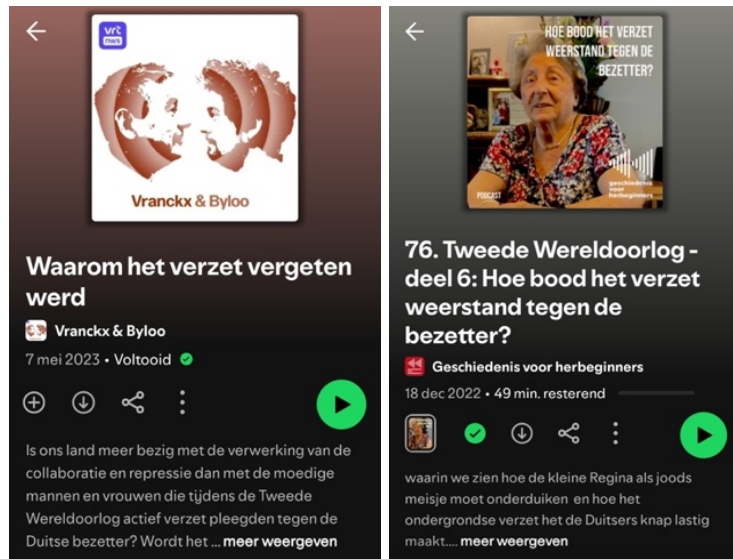
Looking ahead, Respondent 13 and his father intend to retrace his great-uncle's wartime trajectory by visiting the sites where he was held in captivity. This planned journey illustrates how memorial travel can grow out of personal historical research and serve as an intergenerational practice of meaning-making and connection to familial pasts.

### 5.3.3.2. Individual Private Remembrance

Another aspect of private remembrance involves individual acts carried out in personal settings, primarily through the consumption of media. Six respondents reported regularly or occasionally reading historical books about World War II and its civil resistance. Respondent 12 offered a noteworthy reflection, stating that after the war he had consulted scientific literature on concentration camps to better understand the experiences of those imprisoned during World War II, including his own father as a resistance member. At that moment, reading gave him a means to understand the emotional reactions of his traumatized father, which he found difficult to comprehend or manage. This memory practice involves the preferred reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997) through reliance on established historical books likely aligned with official narratives focusing on national identity and Holocaust victimhood, reflecting trust in authoritative sources such as government-endorsed historians. By consulting such sources, Respondent 12 positions himself as a passive receiver of historian-imposed resistance memory, reinforcing the hegemonic character of official remembrance.

Digital memory practices likewise played a role in shaping personal engagement with the past. Respondent 6, for example, primarily accesses academic materials online to learn about resistance history, such as theses. Moreover, Respondent 7 described how her interest in the subject of resistance was sparked by the Flemish television series *Kinderen van het verzet* (Children of the resistance), which features descendants of resistance fighters narrating about their family links. This initial exposure was followed by the purchase of a biography of Hortense Daman and motivated her to seek out related content, such as resistance-themed podcasts on Spotify (see Figure 4). She described her efforts as a form of moral responsibility: “As one person, I can make my contribution by reading stories and making sure I know some names and that they stay somewhere in my mind. That is important.” These digital memory activities were further complemented by sensory memory practices related to popular media, such as listening to radio broadcasts about the resistance and watching films and series. Depending on the creators of these media and the focus of the narratives they convey, these memory practices may involve either a negotiation or reproduction of state-sanctioned versions of resistance history, as promoted by official historians or government-affiliated actors (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

Figure 4: Screenshots of podcasts about the resistance in Flanders (Respondent 7)



## 5.4. Spatial, Material, and Temporal Factors in Shaping Personal Engagement

So far, the findings chapter has illustrated that the Flemish citizens' memory practices take place in public and private contexts, as well as in hybrid settings that combine elements of public and private remembering. According to the study findings, certain contextual factors are likely to influence these personal manners of engaging with civil resistance memory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; that is to say, the spatial, material, and temporal dimensions of memory affect personal remembrance. In consequence, this observation warrants careful examination of how precisely these elements shape memory practices.

### 5.4.1. The Role of Place

#### 5.4.1.1. Official Sites of Memory

Regarding physical locations that play a role in memory practices, the theme of official memory sites – as in, spaces designated and maintained by official institutional actors, such as former concentration camps, museums, and memorials – recurred repeatedly. Specifically, eleven participants mentioned having at least once visited such a formal place or doing so sporadically.

Interviewees mentioned travelling to official sites for a variety of reasons, which tended to be driven by the personal connections associated with these locations. In summary, our findings propose that physical presence at such sites or personal experiences there may foster involvement. Respondent 1, for instance, travelled to the Dora concentration camp in Germany as part of her genealogical research into her grandfather's involvement in the civil resistance. Furthermore, Respondent 9, whose family history is linked to the resistance, finds significant meaning in the Kazerne Dossin<sup>1</sup> memorial in Mechelen, Belgium, prompting him to return periodically. These examples indicate that memorial sites can hold significance regardless of their distance.

Respondent 8, whose parents were part of the resistance, has visited several former concentration camps, including Buchenwald, Dachau, and Ravensbrück. He noted that his visits focused mainly on camps connected to his parents' experiences, indicating that family history can strongly influence personal memorial travel: "I wanted to see with my own eyes what my parents had experienced. Not that you can see it there, but you can see the camps and get an idea of what the structures were like." This statement illustrates how Respondent 8 finds meaning in these visits through the historical authenticity that he attributes to the sites' institutional preservation, exemplifying Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) concept of the preferred reading. Also, it reflects an acceptance of hegemonic remembrance where official memory makers are seen as trustworthy and responsible custodians of the past. Likewise, Respondent 8 draws on this official memory to sustain a deeply personal connection with his parents, demonstrating how formal remembrance practices can enrich, rather than constrain, individual memory. This way, he reaffirms the dominant authority of the institutional actors behind official memory sites and integrates their narratives into his own personalized remembrance.

The spatial dimension of civil resistance memory was also evident in the memory practices of Respondent 11, who is active as a guide in a local history museum. As part of this activity, he discusses World War II history as part of guided tours, including the role of resistance fighters like his grandfather. Respondent 11 spoke of feeling pride in remembering his grandfather's actions, stating: "That there are people in my family who did that, who had the courage to do it. I see that as an example, and I also see it as my duty to carry that story forward."

---

<sup>1</sup> Kazerne Dossin is a contemporary memorial, museum, and research center located on the symbolic site of the Dossin barracks, which served as a transit camp and deportation center for Jews, Roma, and Sinti during World War II. For more information, consult: <https://kazernedossin.eu/en/what-we-do/>.

This shows how sites of remembrance can act as tangible reminders of family resistance and may help preserve personal memory across generations and communities. Respondent 11's additional memory practices support this argument. Following his mother's death in 2019, this participant inherited several objects connected to his mother and grandparents. Respondent 11 chose to donate these items to the local museum, citing the long-term preservation of these objects as his primary motivation. By entrusting personal memorabilia to a public institution, Respondent 11 affirms the museum's authority in shaping collective memory, contributing to its hegemonic role in remembrance. However, this is not a passive surrender of personal memory. Rather, as an active guide at the museum, Respondent 11 has insight and influence over how his private objects are displayed and highlighted during guided visits. This involvement enables him to foreground his family's resistance narrative within broader official World War II histories, challenging standardized versions of the past imposed by museums and therefore negotiating and transforming official memory from within (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

Respondent 12 described travelling to sites as Wernigerode, Buchenwald, and Nordhausen in connection to his family history. Particularly his visit to Wernigerode, where his father had been imprisoned during the war, was described as "really intense" because "you're standing there with your nose up close because the structure has been preserved." This illustrates once more how citizens may associate authentic remembrance with officially maintained memory sites, underscoring the power of formal institutions. However, despite having visited this former camp three times, Respondent 12 said he would only consider going to memorials like Fort Breendonk<sup>2</sup> if he happened to be nearby. By linking visitation to conditions such as proximity, Respondent 12 places official memory sites in a background role within his personal remembrance. As will be shown, he places greater value on private sites symbolizing his family's story. In this way, Respondent 12 negotiates official remembrance by acknowledging its legitimacy while limiting its influence in his own memory practices (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

---

<sup>2</sup> Fort Breendonk is a national memorial and museum that functioned during the Second World War as a prison for Jews, resistance fighters, and political prisoners detained by the Nazi regime. For more information, consult: <https://breendonk.be/en/see/memorial>.

Respondent 6 was another one of these individuals. She explained that her family frequently visits official memory sites related to the World Wars, driven by both her own and her children's general interest in history. These visits include trips to Ypres, Belgium, to attend the Last Post ceremony in the context of World War I. In the summer of 2024, the family travelled to Normandy to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings. Emphasizing the value of being physically present at such historic locations, Respondent 6 remarked that "you can really feel how important these places have been for our history." As another example, Respondent 6 visits the execution-site cemetery in Oostakker, East Flanders where her grandfather, who was a resistance fighter, is buried. She returns to this physical location approximately ten times a year. However, she also noted that other relatives are buried there, suggesting that the cemetery's significance could extend beyond its direct link with the resistance and may reflect a broader family connection. These examples show that formal memory sites fulfill both public and personal purposes: They serve an educational role while also supporting intimate family remembrance. This accentuates the social nature of resistance memory as a shared practice between different generations (Halbwachs, 1992). In short, Respondent 6 negotiates official memory by appreciating its historical and educational meanings but prioritizing the personal connections to relatives that these sites embody within her personalized remembrance, reflecting Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) concept of the negotiated reading.

Respondent 13 offered a supplementary perspective on how cemeteries can feature in personal remembrance. As part of his ongoing research into local resistance fighters, particularly those connected to his great-uncle, he frequently visits their graves and lays flowers. He also makes efforts to reach out to their descendants: "I try to look for family so I can say: 'Hey, your great-uncle or your grandfather is still being remembered, I place flowers there.'" While Respondent 13's primary focus remains on his great-uncle, these gestures indicate a broadening of his memorial scope to include others within the local resistance, with special attention to those closely connected to his great-uncle. His other memory practices confirmed this, illustrating how he actively collects obituary cards of these local resistance fighters (see Figure 5). Respondent 13's engagement with cemeteries where war victims are put to rest affirms that institutional memory sites are legitimate and meaningful in remembrance. However, his deliberate focus on local graves, especially those of resistance fighters connected to his own relative, resists the centralized, top-down logic of official remembrance by rescaling remembrance to the community level.

In doing so, Respondent 13 reclaims authority over who and how to remember, challenging the dominance of official institutions in defining remembrance and articulating Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) concept of a negotiated reading. His attention to descendants and efforts to inform them further contest official remembrance, which typically lacks such personal outreach.

Figure 5: Obituary cards of local resistance fighters (Respondent 13)



These reflections underline how family connections to specific official places stimulate site visits. The emphasis on personal narratives in the interviews may suggest a tendency among participants to prioritize the memory of one's own relatives in the civil resistance, implicitly reinforcing their relevance within collective resistance memory.

#### 5.4.1.2. Informal Sites of Memory

Nearby locations, too, hold significance in remembrance, both for individuals with family links to the resistance and for those without. Three participants identified private or informal memory sites as relevant in their remembrance. For instance, Respondent 12 recounted how his father had once planted several trees in his garden (see Figure 6), thereby creating a private memorial space. Positioned behind the house, these trees are part of Respondent 12's routine, as he consciously reflects on them and the memories they evoke at least once a week. This relocation of memory to the domestic sphere has transformed Respondent 12's garden into a personal site of memory, facilitating an intimate, continuous connection with his father:

Sometimes I ask for advice, like ‘how would you have done that?’ or ‘how would you do it?’ Then it has nothing to do with the resistance, but it has to do with my father as a person. Just thinking about it and also remembering what he actually went through, and that we really had a good upbringing – those kind of things. (Respondent 12)

Figure 6: Remembrance trees (Respondent 12)



Alongside this exclusively private site, which is only accessible to Respondent 12 and his close family, the importance of semi-public memory sites also surfaced in his account. He referred to churches, which he regards as reflective places to visit as an opportunity to remember his father. These examples demonstrate how civil resistance remembrance can be deeply personalized, centering primarily on family members that were involved. In the case of Respondent 12, the core of his remembrance shifts away from official memory towards private sites that embody the memory of his loved one, who was a resistance fighter.

#### **5.4.1.3. Local Sites of Memory**

The theme of local memory frequently emerged throughout the interviews, reflecting participants’ appreciation for local civil resistance history and its presence in their memory practices. While local memory has been touched upon in earlier parts of this chapter, several respondents offered more detailed reflections on its significance.

One noteworthy example of local memory sites is the *Stolpersteine* or stumbling stones. Created by German artist Gunther Demnig, this initiative aims to honor the victims of Nazi persecution through brass plaques embedded in pavements. Three participants expressed their interest in locating these stones within their own cities or abroad, and some actively advocated for their placement in their municipalities. Participants noted that while local governments sometimes organize the placement of stumbling stones, in many cases, citizens must request it themselves. Nowadays, many municipal websites include an option for such requests (Respondent 4). Additionally, Respondent 4 referenced the use of a digital application to locate *Stolpersteine*.

Another three participants discussed the role of stumbling stones in relation to remembering their own relatives involved in the resistance. For instance, Respondent 8 encountered opposition from a cultural council member when seeking to install stumbling stones for his parents. Conversely, Respondent 3 successfully arranged for *Stolpersteine* to be installed in honor of her grandparents in her municipality. She described this process as a psychological journey, calling the placement of these stones “almost logical” to emphasize their significance as publicly accessible, visible acts of remembrance that passersby can unexpectedly encounter. She viewed the installation as a symbolic confrontation with personal trauma: “It is a summary of four generations of sorrow, loss, but also silence – and by placing such a brass stumbling stone right in the middle of the street, you naturally break that silence.”

Continuing her reflection, she argued: “You say, look, my grandfather, my great-grandfather, he lived here. He was a resistance fighter. I am proud, I no longer hide, because that shining stone; it’s here forever.” It illustrates that she grew up in a resistance family, and “is a child of the resistance, it’s in my genes” (Respondent 3). In this sense, remembrance may function as a reclamation of familial dignity, helping to counter what Respondent 3 described as a lingering “veil of shame” surrounding the local legacy of the resistance: She explained that processing intergenerational trauma had always been especially difficult because her family used to live in a small town where everyone knew each other and gossip circulated widely. As a result, her family had long feared openly identifying with the resistance, believing it to be shameful and a frequent subject of local gossip. Considering this long-standing silence, the installment of the *Stolpersteine* may be understood as a powerful source of pride and moral affirmation for Respondent 3’s family. The use of *Stolpersteine* indicates acceptance of typically official memory practices, namely, the construction of memorials, as legitimate forms of remembering World War II.

While the installation of a stumbling stone may be requested by citizens, it often occurs in collaboration with local municipalities, which sometimes even bear the costs. This memory practice may thus rely on official resources and reinforce the authoritative role of institutions in shaping remembrance. Yet, Respondent 3's active role in initiating the placement distinguishes her from traditional top-down, government-led approaches. By focusing on personal narratives and linking the abstract notion of "the resistance" to specific names and biographical information, she transforms this monument into a bottom-up initiative. In doing so, she reclaims agency partially from institutional authorities, altering the content and focus of remembrance and illustrating the negotiated reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

In addition, several respondents underscored the value of their connection to their local communities. A strong identification with place, combined with a sense of personal relevance in local resistance stories, motivated their memory practices. These local ties, then, seem to act as stimuli for continuous involvement in remembrance. Respondent 7's memory practices are a testament of this dynamic. She described her own engagement as relatively passive, in the sense that she does not actively seek out opportunities to remember the resistance. Instead, her remembrance is prompted by external stimuli, requiring the initiative of others to present her with "bite-sized ways of remembering" (Respondent 7). One such moment of engagement occurred when she coincidentally encountered a mural dedicated to local resistance fighter Hortense Daman (see Figure 7):

Figure 7: Mural of Hortense Daman (Respondent 7)



Besides viewing the mural, another memory practice consisted of reading a biography of Hortense Daman, which deepened Respondent 7's involvement. She attributed this impact primarily to the local relevance of the story, arguing that "I would feel differently about reading a book on the resistance in Brussels, for example, because I have less of a connection with Brussels than with my own city." Indeed, Respondent 7's account compellingly illustrates how a sense of place-based familiarity can foster identification and intensify personal engagement with resistance memory:

I think it's something about recognition, where you can more easily identify with those people, especially when you know that they walked on the same streets that I walk on every day, that it happened here. I think that helps make it feel real, that it's not a movie, not a story, but real history that took place here. (Respondent 7)

Respondent 7's representation of the civil resistance is strongly rooted in the local context, focusing on those who lived and were active in the resistance in her immediate surroundings. She articulated this localized perspective by emphasizing that the resistance emerged to her as "a very local story, and then really to the street or city that you know well," evidencing how one's connection to the local community can stimulate engagement, a dynamic also noted by Winter (2016) in the literature review. A comparable narrative is found in the memory practices of Respondent 5. He considers stories about the resistance as "stories of the community" which he engages with "because you are touched by them and take on the commitment to tell them" (Respondent 5). Accordingly, public local places play a prominent role in his memory practices, such as a municipal photo wall (see Figure 8) dedicated to citizens who were deported to the camps during World War II, among whom were resistance fighters.

Figure 8: Local photo display (Respondent 5)



Through his close involvement in a war remembrance association and his dedication to researching regional wartime history, Respondent 5 constructs a remembrance framework that highlights perceived underrecognized local histories. He expressed a concern that broader collective memory privileges more prominent international events, while marginalizing the stories that unfolded in his municipality 80 years ago: “The general image of the Americans is well known, but what happened here locally, such as stories about local soldiers and the resistance that was very much alive here, is less known.” In addition to these activities, Respondent 5 interacts with descendants of local resistance members. This involves recovering and returning personal artefacts that have been separated from the families to whom they originally belonged, such as farewell letters written by resistance fighters before their deaths. Alternatively, local contacts emerge through supporting individuals with genealogical inquiries into their family’s involvement in the resistance.

Respondent 5 elaborated on how these social engagements provide him with new insights into the history of the civil resistance. By conversing with descendants of former resistance members, he becomes emotionally drawn into their stories, remarking that “you realize that those men made huge sacrifices” (Respondent 5). He further reflected on the broader repercussions of resistance activity for families, particularly when resistance fighters had died in the camps during the war: “You notice that after those men had not returned from the camps, apart from the sadness, there were also financial aspects to consider, as those families had to survive in society.” This statement, though implicitly, positions civil resistance members primarily as brave men who fulfilled both public and domestic roles, particularly as financial providers. Their families are subsequently portrayed as vulnerable and dependent on the contributions of the father figure, facing both emotional and material consequences following their absence or death. Moreover, throughout the interview, Respondent 5 recounted numerous stories he had discovered about local resistance history. In one such event, he accentuated the exceptional risks taken by civilians engaged in the resistance:

That story says it all about the ordinary civilian, without any military training, who falls outside all the conventions of war. And as a civilian, you take on much more risk than a soldier. Because, if you’re taken as a prisoner of war, the soldiers came back. But a resistance fighter? He literally got a bullet, that’s how it was. And if you look at the resistance fighters, many of them were still young and already had children at the time. (Respondent 5)

From Hall's (1977, 1980, 1997) perspective, Respondent 5 applies a negotiated reading. Through his involvement in a war remembrance group, he reproduces elements of formal remembrance, including organizing national ceremonies on state-designated remembrance days and consulting official archives for historical research – reflecting trust in institutional curators of World War II and resistance history. His references to resistance members in general terms as “those men” also mirror the male-centered perspective of official historiography (Corthals, 2025), indicating partial acceptance of dominant memory structures. It is important to note that he did not solely make generalized, male-centric references during the entire interview, though. At the same time, Respondent 5's remembrance challenges hegemonic memory. By focusing on local history and emphasizing the lack of recognition for the local resistance compared with widely known Allied history, he highlights gaps in national remembrance. His own remembrance, then, shifts attention from nation-centered accounts to community-based resistance memory, rejecting the standardized framing of World War II history. Moreover, his discourse moralizes the experiences of “ordinary” citizens in the resistance, portraying them as brave individuals who risked personal and family obligations, especially in contrast with professional soldiers. His emphasis on personal sacrifice and heroism amplifies the significance of local resistance actors through the expression of a moral judgment, thereby reinterpreting official memory narratives.

Building on earlier examples of local engagement, Respondent 4 is actively engaged in remembrance initiatives in the city of Antwerp. Her involvement in resistance memory was initially sparked by a lack of historical knowledge, which seems to have evoked a sense of moral obligation, prompting deeper participation in remembrance practices. Her reflections demonstrate how memory may be informed by one's personal ethical frameworks:

I found it quite a disturbing realization that I knew a lot about collaboration, but very little about the resistance. I thought that's unfortunate, because the collaboration was terrible – it was the wrong side – whereas the resistance played a crucial role. For example, if you look at the resistance activities of the ship repair workers in the port of Antwerp, they helped bring the war to a quicker end through numerous acts of sabotage. (Respondent 4)

Respondent 4's recent awareness of her own knowledge gaps suggests that for much of her life, she uncritically accepted the dominant World War II narratives presented by the Belgian government and other institutional actors, reflecting a passive alignment with official memory.

Her subsequent critique of the prominence of collaboration narratives, which she views as marginalizing the resistance, signals a rejection of these state-supported accounts in her current memory practices. Also, her recognition of ship repair workers' sabotage frames these individuals and their acts of resistance heroically and acknowledges the variety of resistance. Together with the emphasis on how the collaboration was the "wrong side of history," both Respondent 4's memory practices and her discourse exemplify the negotiated reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

The spatial factor of memory has similarly gained significance for Respondent 13, whose memory practices have expanded beyond his family connection and now encompass broader resistance history in the province of Limburg. He expressed satisfaction in connecting historical events to physical locations, stating "you can drive somewhere in Limburg, and you know that this happened here in this house or that happened on that corner, that's quite something," which makes it "nice to know a little bit about the history of your own neighborhood" (Respondent 13). Respondent 13 places special emphasis on small-scale, overlooked stories. For him, the significance of remembrance lies precisely in the hyperlocal, referencing "those small groups and villages where maybe five people got together, and after the war almost no one knew about it anymore" (Respondent 13). This highlights a perception of the local resistance as a marginal, often forgotten component of World War II collective memory, which remains dominated by official memory actors. By emphasizing the local resistance as modest in scale, yet rich in historical and emotional significance, Respondent 13 enacts an oppositional reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997) of the general and abstract historical narratives embedded in formal memory practices.

Respondent 13 concluded his account by noting that conducting research on the resistance in cities further away, such as Ostend, holds less personal relevance for him than exploring stories in Limburg, since it is "so close to home and it's a little more personal than if I were to look for something about the resistance in Ostend" (Respondent 13). This statement underlines the role of geographical proximity and familiarity in fostering deeper engagement, a perspective that was shared by Respondent 10. The latter participant visits resistance and World War II monuments in her vicinity, where she takes a moment to reflect on their historical significance. This reflective memory practice, initiated by Respondent 10, exhibits a way of remembering the civil resistance that acknowledges or values state-sanctioned memorials, corresponding to the preferred reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

## **5.4.2. The Role of Cultural Artefacts**

A complementary aspect of memory explored in this study concerns its material embodiments, specifically the role of cultural artefacts in personal remembrance of the resistance. This theme became apparent through participants' reflections on the significance of tangible objects, irrespective of how these were acquired. Though different in form, our findings indicate that relevant material items can be categorized according to their function, spanning from a passive background presence to a more active influence on how remembrance is personally experienced and enacted.

### **5.4.2.1. Peripheral Material Contributions**

For six participants, material objects played a distant or passive role in their memory practices of the civil resistance during World War II. From the perspective of participants with family connections, this lack of engagement with objects may relate to the fact that relevant material items are kept by other family members. This applied to Respondent 1, who noted that her grandfather's civil resistance and war medals are in the possession of her cousin. She expressed no personal attachment to these artefacts, instead affirming satisfaction that her relative preserves them: "If my cousin is happy with them, he should keep them, they are not important to me."

A distinct insight was provided by Respondent 7, who lacks a direct family connection to the resistance. She revealed that no material objects hold personal significance for her. However, she did reference reading a biography of Hortense Daman, though she emphasized that this is not a material symbol of remembrance in the conventional sense: "It's not like I burn candles or anything like that" (Respondent 7). This narrative comes across as a representation that contrasts with more traditional or ritualized forms of memory, instead favoring one's own informal remembrance. Respondent 7's disregard for specific objects in remembrance thus reflects an oppositional reading of institutionalized approaches to remembrance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). By integrating remembrance into everyday actions – such as reading a book on resistance history or talking about it with loved ones – without reliance on specific material markers, Respondent 7 resists the idea that meaningful remembrance should happen through state-sanctioned rituals involving interaction with conventional physical objects, like candles.

For Respondent 2, physical objects, or, rather, their disappearance or inaccessibility, considerably shape his memory practices. He recalled a set of spoons engraved with the initials of Allied pilots rescued by his relatives in the resistance, believing they might provide insight into his family's involvement in World War II. However, the unknown whereabouts of the spoons currently stall his personal exploration: "Finding them would be an incredible breakthrough in that part of the story which is currently at a dead end" (Respondent 2). He described the importance of the familial dimension of material remembrance by stating that "it is always in function of the family story." Following this example, the absence of physical objects may become meaningful in stimulating engagement: Precisely because it complicates research, it may enhance one's drive to resolve unanswered questions within the family history. Indeed, personal memorabilia can serve to sustain the visibility of the past within a family, preserving its legacy across generations (Crooke, 2016) – even decades after the remembered historical events took place.

#### **5.4.2.2. Material Artefacts as Active Agents of Memory**

The findings of the study underscore a salient dynamic in recollections of the civil resistance: the influential presence of personal artefacts. Seven interviewees touched on the importance of physical objects in their processes of remembrance, most of which were associated with family involvement in the resistance. These objects were described as deeply intimate and irreplaceable, with six participants identifying them as tangible links to the past and symbols of intergenerational continuity.

One striking illustration came from Respondent 3, who inherited a canteen cup that her grandfather had used during his incarceration in a concentration camp. Today, this item is one of the few surviving physical traces of her grandfather, as other artefacts – such as her grandfather's prison uniform and photographs from the camps – were discarded by her father. She explained that her father's decision to do so stemmed from an inability to cope with the trauma associated with the family's involvement in the resistance. As she put it, "it was simply too painful" (Respondent 3). Though she retains copies of archival documents related to her grandfather, this participant underscored the unique value of the canteen cup, as it stands as the sole remaining original relic directly linked to her grandfather. She stores it on a bookshelf at home, ensuring it remains in plain sight (see Figure 9).

The choice of a visible place, she clarified, is intentional, affirming the canteen cup's role in preserving and transmitting family memory: "I feel that it's safe here. Considering the past with the photos and the prison uniform that my father destroyed, I'm glad it's here, and I'm also certain that my son will keep it." The interview with Respondent 3 revealed that both private objects and official material items feature in her memory practices, though with different levels of significance. Her use of formal archival records, consulted for writing her book on her family's resistance history, demonstrates trust in state-managed sources and recognizes their factual authority as a foundation for memory. However, the greater emotional value she assigns to private objects, like the fragile canteen cup, enhances informal remembrance. As the sole remaining tangible link to her grandfather, the canteen cup's age and fragile state intensify its symbolic weight, sustaining a sense of family continuity and, consequently, connection to the legacy of the resistance. By prominently displaying and discussing this artefact during the interview – contrasting with the copies of archival documents kept in the background – Respondent 3 demonstrates a hybrid approach to memory that shifts the focus of remembrance towards the intimate, private memory of a cherished relative rather than generalized official narratives (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

Figure 9: Canteen cup in its place of safekeeping (Respondent 3)



The relevance of familial associations with material objects also became evident in the interview with Respondent 6, who continues to safeguard a box of personal belongings inherited from her mother (see Figure 10). The collection includes a booklet signed by Allied soldiers during the liberation days of World War II, pins awarded to her mother, an identity card certifying her as the youngest political prisoner, a card signed by resistance fighters, and a postwar photo of her grandparents.

These items were either collected directly by her mother or handed down from her grandparents, with her grandfather having participated in the civil resistance during the war. Respondent 6 accentuated the profound emotional resonance these items hold, describing them as vessels of familial memory. She remarked that “seeing these objects and the fact that my family held on to them, and that my mother, and before her, my grandfather, made the effort to keep these items all those years – that alone shows the objects had value to them, and that alone makes them valuable to me.” She contrasted the personal significance of family heritage with the more distanced experience of viewing similar war-related objects in museums: “When you see something in a museum, like something from the war or something someone had, that can also affect me, but something that is personal comes from people without whom I would never have been there myself.” At another point, Respondent 6 reflected on her recurring engagement with these memorabilia, expressing how she often revisits them to learn more about her family’s resistance past or as part of intergenerational transmission. She noted being struck by their age: “Thinking that they are so old, it is fascinating to see that” (Respondent 6).

Respondent 6 prioritizes her grandparents’ legacy as resistance fighters, symbolized by the artefacts they left for her mother, which she later inherited. She contrasts the emotional intimacy of these family objects with the detached experience of encountering similar items in state-run museums, signaling a rejection of hegemonic memory makers that universalize or anonymize the past. By centering her memory practices on personally significant objects, Respondent 6 emphasizes that meaningful remembrance depends on emotional authenticity and proximity rather than curated institutional neutrality, reflecting an oppositional reading of dominant remembrance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). Importantly, by involving her own children in intergenerational storytelling practices, she conveys the emotional and historical significance of these events to a generation that did not experience them, highlighting the collective, familial nature of remembrance (Halbwachs, 1992) and its continuation in the postmemory era (Hirsch, 2008). In short, the resistance is not an abstract historical phenomenon for Respondent 6, but a legacy of her courageous relatives, with the objects they left acting as potent symbols of this heritage.

Figure 10: Box full of personal family objects (Respondent 6)



The affective attachment to objects originating from close relatives was similarly reflected by Respondent 8, who integrates personal artefacts into storytelling at schools and public events. These mainly consist of personal belongings from his parents, who were both members of the civil resistance. While he usually preserves intimate objects in the private sphere of his home, he repeatedly stressed their usefulness in fostering collective engagement. According to him, personal artefacts enhance the concreteness and authenticity of historical narratives, enabling audiences to more vividly imagine past events. Distinguishing between the emotional resonance of different types of objects, he commented on the irreplaceability of his parent's prison uniform (see Figure 11):

I think I'd lose my mind if, due to circumstances, that jacket was lost. The photos, I mostly have duplications or had them reproduced later, so if one of those were to go missing, it wouldn't be the end of the world. But that prison uniform is, of course, unique, so I consider it very important. (Respondent 8)

Figure 11: Prison uniform of Respondent 8's parent (Respondent 8)



In alignment with Respondent 11, Respondent 8 reflected on the future of these inherited objects. Acknowledging the weight of their emotional and historical value, he explained that he plans to pass them on to his grandchildren, leaving the decision of what to do with them in their hands. This plan suggests both a trust in familial continuity and an acceptance that the meaning of the objects may evolve across generations. On the one hand, this approach reveals hope that the artefacts will stay within the family. On the other, it indicates a willingness to allow future generations to redefine their significance, based on personal perspective. In this way, descendants are given the freedom to develop new memories that build on or replace those of previous generations (Schwartz, 1982), shaping the family's legacy according to their own engagement with the inherited memorabilia.

The emotional weight of familial remembrance was likewise evident in the accounts of Respondent 13, who encountered only a limited number of objects belonging to his great-uncle and continued to long for a personal memento. In response, he had his very own remembrance ring created, dedicated to his great-uncle; an act that embodies reverence and a desire to honor the memory of his relative. He engages with the ring daily and brought it to the interview (see Figure 12). As Respondent 13 shared: "Just recently I had a ring made for him, with the logo of the Partisans, because he was in the Partisans, and on the inside, I had his name engraved. So, in a way I carry him with me every day."

Figure 12: Personal remembrance ring in memory of great-uncle (Respondent 13)



Respondent 13 described a deeply personal connection to his relative. Despite never having met him, he portrayed his great-uncle as a courageous individual who fought for his ideals:

I never knew the man, but still, knowing that he is a family member ... When you think about the fact that he had a one-year-old daughter and a wife, and yet still made the decision: ‘I want to do something for my country, I want to do something for Belgium’s freedom’ and then chose to join the resistance, risking his life – and ultimately losing it – it is truly something special to stand in that place and reflect on what happened there 80 years ago. (Respondent 13)

This memory practice centers emotionally on the legacy of Respondent 13’s great-uncle, whom he never knew personally but deeply appreciates. Despite the scarcity of original personal objects, this participant had a remembrance ring created. This suggests that official material culture, such as generalized monuments honoring those involved in World War II – even one bearing his great-uncle’s name nearby – cannot satisfy the emotional need to remember a loved one; or at least not fully. This indicates a rejection of institutionalized memory, which lacks the affective dimension Respondent 13 seeks. Instead, he pursues personalized memory practices that align with his own understanding of the meaningful remembrance of his great-uncle. In Hall’s (1977, 1980, 1997) terms, this reflects an oppositional reading, where personal family significance takes precedence over generalized memorials, especially regarding the importance ascribed to material culture.

Finally, Respondent 5's commitment to preserving the legacy of those who perished during World War II is deeply nurtured through community connections and enhanced by the material dimension inherent to these relations. During the interview, he noted that although he does not possess personal artefacts central to his remembrance, he places great value on gifts from descendants of prominent figures in local war history, such as pins and badges. He explained that "these serve more as mementos of the stories, of the personal connections, and they hold greater significance" for him than other objects, such as the World War II memorial medals he acquired himself. This illustrates that informal objects can carry great emotional and relational weight, often surpassing the perceived significance of official material items, such as historical documents or books used by Respondent 5 in his memory practice of conducting historical research. Hence, the material dimensions of his memory practices signify a negotiated reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

### **5.4.3. The Role of Events**

As a concluding point, this study assessed how memorial events shape personal approaches to remembering the resistance. The data reveal that the sampled citizens commonly participate in both formal and informal events, with the latter often emerging from citizen-led initiatives. This sub-section presents briefly how engagement with events is reflected in memory practices, as this emerged as a minor tendency in the findings compared to other themes.

#### **5.4.3.1. Official Events**

Ritualized events are typically organized on official national remembrance days of the World Wars, adhering to a prescribed calendar (Frijda, 2007). They tend to be initiated by governmental or municipal institutions. Eight participants confirmed that formal events constitute an integral part of their remembrance of the civil resistance, which they generally perceive as embedded within the broader context of World War II remembrance. However, for some, participation may be conditional. For three individuals, factors such as the event's location influence their attendance. This was particularly the case for Respondents 8 and 11, whose participation is constrained by reduced mobility due to age or physical distance.

Respondent 10 remarked that within official events, the resistance is “not remembered because it is somewhat concealed. People know little about it because very little is known about it.” This observation points to a perception that the civil resistance is overlooked in official remembrance, particularly in comparison with dominant wartime themes of the World Wars. In contrast with this marginalized aspect of how remembrance of World War II is performed and represented in Belgium, Respondent 10 actively participates in memorial events, emphasizing that those involved in the resistance movement were “ordinary civilians” whose contributions merit remembrance. Her narrative reflects an awareness of the complexity of resistance history, acknowledging both commendable actions and morally ambiguous aspects. The following statement conveys an image of the civil resistance as composed largely of everyday citizens who acted out of conviction, which contrasts with universalized official narratives. As observed, this remained a recurrent theme throughout the interviews.

People often say they were criminals. There were criminals among them, that's true, but there were also ordinary people, like a baker, or someone who works in a bar, who did a lot for the freedom of you and me. That's why we're not speaking German right now. It's very important to remember the ordinary people – that it wasn't just soldiers in the war. (Respondent 10)

In conclusion, Respondent 10's memory practices illustrate a negotiated reading of hegemonic remembrance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). While she critiques official memory makers for marginalizing resistance history, her continued engagement with monuments and events indicates a partial reproduction of the form and function of formal remembrance. She thus seems to value these practices as meaningful remembrance, even as she seeks to expand or redirect their focus. Her alternative memory practice of writing a book, aimed at making resistance history more tangible, can be considered as an attempt to address the perceived limitations of formal remembrance. Yet, by utilizing institutional spaces and events, the dominance of hegemonic memory agents remains: Respondent 10's book remains privately developed and unfinished for the moment, while official events continue to present the past to large audiences as imposed by institutional sources of memory. Paradoxically, it may then be her simultaneous rejection and engagement that amplifies the influence of established official memory makers.

Respondent 1 was among four participants who stated that they rarely or never attend formal events. She opposed her current disengagement with earlier experiences in her childhood, when she frequently attended ceremonies to accompany her grandmother, who was a widow of a resistance fighter. Today, however, she distances herself from such practices, reflecting that “I’ve built my own life and I’m letting it all rest” (Respondent 1). This shift underlines how personal memory practices may evolve over time, influenced by shifting personal priorities. It could indicate the oppositional reading described by Hall (1977, 1980, 1997), in the sense that individuals may no longer feel the need to engage in official remembrance after a certain period of time has passed: not necessarily as a critique of formal initiatives, but simply because they have already fulfilled their personal engagement in the past or have shifted their focus to other aspects of life. Accordingly, official memory recedes into the background, with resistance memory being practiced in more passive, private contexts that may, at times, implicitly reject institutional forms of remembrance.

For those without a familial connection to the resistance, like Respondent 7, formal events can evoke feelings of exclusion or alienation: “I sometimes have the feeling that I don’t entirely belong at those official remembrance events, because I don’t have a family connection to a specific resistance hero or anything like that.” Mirroring her rejection of material objects in personal remembrance, this detachment from official ceremonies reflects an oppositional reading of hegemonic memory (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). Respondent 7’s discomfort reveals how formal remembrance can be perceived as exclusionary, privileging certain groups over others. In response, Respondent 7 turns to private, personalized memory practices that implicitly critique the limited inclusivity of institutional remembrance. By restricting her own remembrance to intimate circles and adopting a largely passive stance in public remembrance, Respondent 7 withholds the emotional and participatory investment she feels to be absent from official ceremonies, thereby reshaping remembrance on her own terms.

Lastly, two participants noted that they usually do not attend public events simply due to a lack of awareness about their occurrence. This suggests that the limited visibility or communication surrounding these events may pose a barrier to broader public engagement in remembrance. As I suggest throughout, there are also other than simply practical and more important reasons why, when asked, ordinary citizens state that they find limited resonance in public remembering or outright reject it, as mentioned throughout the analysis chapter.

#### 5.4.3.2. Informal Events

The sampled citizens engage with informal, community-based remembrance activities. Among these, “resistance cafés” hosted by the non-profit organization *Helden van het verzet* were widely cited. In these gatherings, resistance fighters’ biographies are presented through personal testimonies provided by their descendants. Resistance cafés attracted participation from eight participants. For instance, Respondent 3 described her close involvement in one instance of these events. The appeal of resistance cafés lies in the authenticity of the personal testimonies shared (Respondent 10) and the local relevance of the subjects presented (Respondent 11). Respondent 2 further explained that his appreciation for the organizing body itself motivated his participation in these events. The latter notion corresponds with the frequent citing of *Helden van het verzet* as a reliable source of historical information about the resistance or its remembrance. However, not all experiences with these informal events were unproblematic. For some, such as Respondent 1, attending resistance cafés may be challenging because of their public and potentially interactive nature. This participant expressed discomfort participating in a setting where she might be expected to interact with others about a subject so closely tied to her family’s history. Furthermore, Respondents 8 and 12 emphasized the repetitive character of the stories told at these events, which may lead to a sense of monotony and diminished engagement over time.

Three respondents referenced the *8 mei coalitie* (8 May Coalition), a second citizen-led association dedicated to remembering the civil resistance to Nazi Germany during World War II. As participants explained, the group operates with the objective of establishing May 8 as a national day of remembrance in honor of the resistance. Though actively involved, Respondent 3 cautioned against the risk of ideological echo chambers within this association: “The *8 mei coalitie* consists of people who are very sympathetic to the resistance, but the danger is that you end up in a bubble and come out of it feeling very optimistic, because they are all people who share your views.” Respondents 4 and 6 shared similar concerns, noting that shared values within informal and private memorial spheres can limit exposure to differing perspectives, both in organizations and personal circles. This indicates that participants are aware of the potential constraints of informal memory practices. Similar to official remembrance efforts, often criticized for overlooking resistance history, citizen-led initiatives may also inadvertently promote one-sided narratives, albeit from the opposite end of the spectrum. In that sense, engagement in these informal organizations as a memory practice may reflect a negotiated reading for some participants (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997),

indicating a tendency among the citizens in our sample to identify flaws in both involvement in citizen-initiated memory practices as well as in state-sanctioned remembrance efforts. Indeed, the findings illustrate that participants often engage in public and collective memory practices, comprising both those organized by the state and those organized by individual citizens. Nonetheless, the results from our analysis suggest a widespread awareness of resistance cafés among the research participants, as well as a relatively high level of engagement with them. This could indicate that informal, citizen-led remembrance efforts play a meaningful role in contemporary memory practices of the resistance. It also underscores the collective nature of such engagement, reflecting the socially constructed nature of memory described by Halbwachs (1992).

The prominence of resistance cafés points to their potential as alternatives or complements to official public events, highlighting the relevance of informalized remembrance. However, aside from the examples outlined in this section and those discussed earlier in this chapter, relatively few public and collective citizen-led memory practices were identified. Among the earlier examples are the local neighborhood initiative mentioned by Respondent 9 and the involvement in war remembrance groups noted by three respondents, all of which operate in collaboration with official authorities. In such cases, engagement with remembrance appears to remain closely embedded in formal contexts, with participants more often reinterpreting official memory practices rather than rejecting them outright (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

## 6. DISCUSSION

This thesis studied how Flemish citizens engage with the memory of the Belgian civil resistance 80 years after World War II took place. Despite growing academic and public interest in this subject, the civil resistance during the Second World War in Belgium remains a relatively underexplored area of academic inquiry (Aerts & De Wever, 2012). Rather than adopting a purely historical approach, our study focused on the contemporary remembrance of these historical figures and events in Flanders. Drawing on Halbwachs's (1992) collective memory and Hall's (1977, 1997) representation theories, it considered how resistance memory is collectively constructed and expressed through everyday narratives, particularly informal ones that reflect underlying interpretive frameworks. Using Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model, the study further analyzed how personal memory practices relate to or diverge from formal remembrance.

To this end, thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, followed by a thematic analysis to identify key patterns in engagement and the personal meanings citizens attribute to resistance memory. Based on these findings, certain recurring trends are highlighted below to address the research questions. To reiterate the research questions, this thesis explored whether and how contemporary Flemish citizens' memory practices align with, reinterpret, or contest hegemonic forms of remembrance. In particular, it assessed whether ordinary citizens fully or partially reproduce official memory approaches or if they articulate their own different and alternative practices of remembering the civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II.

### 6.1. Negotiated Citizen Remembrance as Reappropriation of Resistance Memory

The literature review outlined the notion of the *politics of memory*, which examines how remembrance is shaped by and expresses hegemonic power relations (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007). Although political actors often dominate memory struggles, non-state actors, such as individual citizens, also participate by selectively recalling the past (Hunt & McHale, 2007). Guided by Hall (1977, 1980, 1997), this study identified how ordinary Flemish citizens respond to prescribed, state-sanctioned narratives and ways of remembering the Belgian civil resistance during World War II. The resulting decoding strategies are presented in the following table:

Table 3: Decoding strategies identified in the study following Hall (1977, 1980, 1997)

<b>Decoding type</b>	<b>Strategy</b>
<i>Preferred reading</i>	City-initiated monument construction as personal justice
	Active involvement in the organization/attendance of local remembrance ceremonies
	Consulting trusted official archives/works for family/local history research
	Enhancing personal memory through institutionally preserved sites
	Visiting and reflecting at state-sanctioned monuments
	Male-centric, generalized resistance discourse
<i>Negotiated reading</i>	Selective defense of official historical narratives within personal circles
	Citizen-initiated monument construction within official frameworks
	Critiquing narrow formal and uncritical informal historical narratives
	Donating private objects to a museum to increase one's own agency
	Engaging in official remembrance while pursuing counter-memory
	Filling gaps in local official remembrance through citizen-initiated projects
	Redirecting the focus of official remembrance towards the local resistance
	Digital remembrance of relatives within a trusted online community
	Combining historical education with emotional digital storytelling
	Local grave tributes to recognize overlooked individual resistance contributions
	Re-evaluating previously accepted official narratives
	Privileging private objects while preserving official archival documents
	Privileging private memory sites while acknowledging official ones
	Using both formal/informal objects but privileging those with personal significance
<i>Oppositional reading</i>	Privileging the intimacy of private objects over detached official artefacts
	Rejecting exclusionary official ceremonies by restricting private remembrance
	Detachment from conventional remembrance due to a lack of valued objects
	Expressing overt positive or heroic moral judgments of the resistance
	Prioritizing personal family narratives over conventional remembrance
	Creating own contemporary memory objects due to lack of authentic artefacts
	Juxtaposing armed resistance with everyday, ordinary acts of resistance
	Emphasizing peaceful/local/women's/relatives' resistance activities in discourse
	Portraying resistance members as forgotten, ordinary civilians in discourse
	Minimal engagement with official remembrance due to shifting personal priorities

The data indicate that the Flemish citizens in this study predominantly adopt a negotiated reading of hegemonic remembrance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). They tend to neither passively accept nor fully reject state-sanctioned memory of the civil resistance during World War II; instead, they selectively integrate official frameworks into their own acts of remembrance to implicitly or explicitly reshape existing hegemonic resistance memory (Shackel, 2001). This raises two central questions: What characterizes these personalized, citizen-built landscapes, and how do they reclaim authority over memory?

### **6.1.1. Forms of Personalized Resistance Memory**

#### **6.1.1.1. Nearness to People and Place: The “Person” in Personalization**

What emerges most strongly from the interviews is that Flemish citizens ground their remembrance of the resistance in particular *persons*, often cherished relatives who participated in the civil resistance or locally significant resistance fighters. Six participants focused primarily on family members, five on the municipal civil resistance, and two on both. Motivations for memory practices include perceptions that the contributions of these resistance fighters are underrecognized in official remembrance; a desire to honor and acknowledge their achievements; processing intergenerational trauma; reflecting on, reconstructing, or completing family history; personal interest in this aspect of national war history; and connecting the historical civil resistance to contemporary societal challenges. These motivations diverge from state-sanctioned remembrance, which tends to foster or reinforce patriotism (Shackel, 2001) on a national scale.

The focus on particular individuals in remembrance also shapes discourse, as participants consistently recounted personal anecdotes about family members or local citizens to highlight their concrete experiences within the civil resistance during World War II. This specificity contrasts with official narratives of history, which tend to favor universalized accounts of national World War II history and rarely acknowledge the contributions of particular groups or individuals. Indeed, such examples highlight that state and non-state actors may hold divergent perspectives of a painful past, often contesting each other’s interpretations (Ferrara, 2022).

### 6.1.1.2. Collective and Intergenerational Memory in Trusted Environments

Memory practices are rooted in closeness to admired individuals within the social groups one belongs to, typically the own family or local community. Citizens not only recall these figures' biographies but also engage in acts of remembrance *with* others, which demonstrates Zerubavel's (1996) claim that remembrance is inherently collective. These social interactions, often with like-minded individuals who share their family's resistance history or also have a historical interest in the local resistance, underline the socially mediated character of resistance memory (Halbwachs, 1992).

The study reveals a tendency for Flemish citizens to engage in informal remembering with significant other citizens in negotiated forms of hegemonic remembrance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). Some participants assume public leadership roles in remembrance, yet their actions target carefully defined audiences rather than the broad public typical of institutional remembrance. For instance, Respondent 8 posts messages about his parents' resistance only within a closed Facebook group, illustrating the significance of sharing memory in a trusted environment and the value of peer affirmation. Such dynamics are often absent in official remembrance, which tends to be used by political actors to push their agendas and own opinions as dominant narratives (Banjeglav, 2012), leaving little to no space for dialogue. Another example is Respondent 11's selective defense of hegemonic resistance narratives, which occurs only with local acquaintances. In both cases, participants carefully choose the audience for their remembrance, signaling that they seek specific contexts where their agency and individual interpretations are heard and respected. Their memory practices could suggest a degree of distance from traditional remembrance practices (Kook, 2021), which appear unable to accommodate those individual needs.

This pattern extends to marginalized memory practices, both among descendants of resistance fighters and those without family ties. Respondent 7, for instance, rejects official ceremonies perceived as exclusionary for descendants. She instead turns to private remembrance consisting largely of individual acts or small-scale interactions with close family and friends. From the perspective of a descendant, Respondent 6, in turn, involves her own children in the intergenerational remembrance of her resistance-affiliated grandparents, combining shared activities with reflective discussions around inherited objects. Through material remnants, family histories are preserved, ensuring that the experiences of previous generations are kept alive for the next (Crooke, 2016).

Overall, informal remembrance is embedded in restricted circles, underscoring how Flemish citizens act as memory activists (Ferrara, 2022) to exercise agency in determining how and with whom remembrance is shared. Consistent with Hall (1977, 1980, 1997), official memory is never simply imposed but instead depends on citizens' consent – consent that can be withheld, negotiated, or redirected into practices oriented towards alternative, carefully defined audiences.

### **6.1.1.3. Emotional Remembrance in the Postmemory Era**

World War II and its civil resistance against the Nazi regime occupy an evolving space in contemporary remembrance. With the survivor generation nearly gone and the second generation growing older, it is essential to examine how direct descendants – those who grew up with inherited resistance memories – handle and maintain this legacy, a phenomenon described by Hirsch (2008) as *postmemory*. At the same time, new memory makers have entered the landscape (Kook, 2021), including younger generations who neither experienced nor grew up alongside resistance narratives. Participants' experiences across different ages must be acknowledged.

Most of the citizens involved in this study reported family ties to resistance fighters, indicating a strong tendency for descendants to engage in remembrance. As noted in the findings, participants often involve subsequent generations in these memory practices, such as through intergenerational storytelling, consistent with Coopmans et al.'s (2017) observations. Alternatively, descendants author publications on their family resistance history (Ziino, 2010) or conduct genealogical research, which is facilitated by the contemporary accessibility of the Internet (Fabiansson, 2004). Digital memory practices were less prevalent among the participants, indicating that the mediatization of memory (Hoskins, 2014) remains marginalized in contemporary memory practices. Collectively, these citizens engage with relative-focused memory of the resistance in sometimes ideologically divergent ways. Some draw on institutional memory initiatives to provide resources for meaning-making, such as visiting officially preserved World War II sites viewed as authentic to connect with relatives' experiences (Respondents 8 and 12), finding satisfaction in city-initiated monument as recognition and justice for family members (Respondent 1), or consulting official historical works to process and comprehend traumatic family histories (Respondent 12). Such acts of remembrance can thus connect generations with each other (Frow, 2000), even across those who are deceased and remembered.

Others transform official memory forms to enhance their own authority. For instance, Respondent 3 leveraged institutional resources to install stumbling stones for her grandparents, wrote a book on her family history, and visited concentration camps; the latter being an experience that she described as almost vicariously lived, illustrating how later generations can produce memories of events they never directly experienced (Olick, 1999). For her, these Stolpersteine were crucial in processing intergenerational trauma, serving as memorials that offer recognition and reflection at the local level (Purdeková, 2022). Some descendants reject formal remembrance entirely, favoring self-directed practices. Respondent 13, lacking authentic artefacts from his great-uncle, created his own remembrance ring, showing how citizen-initiated mementos often fulfill needs that institutional frameworks cannot. As the youngest participant and being in his early twenties, this respondent's active engagement suggests that family resistance history can persist beyond one or two generations, contrary to Cordonnier et al. (2020).

More broadly, remembrance is fundamentally an emotional undertaking in the postmemory era, even in the absence of family ties. A marked trend is the interplay between emotional identification and engagement. Participants with family connections often begin by exploring their relatives' war experiences, which can spark genealogical research and expand their involvement; as in Respondent 13's case, who started with his great-uncle's story and later incorporated local resistance fighters connected to him. Additionally, Respondent 2 transformed an incomplete family history, marked by missing objects, into a theatre project, illustrating how family objects, or their absence, can stimulate engagement. For citizens without personal ties, general interest in history often initiated engagement, gradually cultivating profound emotional resonance with the resistance. Respondent 5 exemplifies this: His curiosity about municipal war history developed into admiration for overlooked local resistance and leadership in a remembrance group. For him, the local connections formed through remembrance are particularly meaningful, symbolized by the significance he attaches to objects gifted by descendants of local resistance members. These examples demonstrate that sustained engagement can produce intimate and emotionally resonant memory practices, where emotions are pursued and deliberately avoided (Frijda, 2007). Additionally, the dynamic between emotional identification and engagement highlights how personal biases shape which histories are considered important and worthy of remembrance (Mayo, 1988).

#### **6.1.1.4. Blending Strategies: Enhancing Personal Agency or Hegemony?**

Existing scholarship proposes that individuals frequently ascribe importance to multiple memory approaches to make sense of historical events (Winter, 2016). In our study, Flemish citizens similarly blend public and private, collective and individual, and formal and informal memory practices according to their own preferences, rather than fully accepting or rejecting formal remembrance. Yet, negotiated memory practices do not necessarily translate into greater citizen control over how history is remembered: Even when ordinary citizens attempt to assert their own perspectives, their efforts may paradoxically reinforce dominant institutional narratives. This, again, underscores the absence of consensus over how societies remember (Zerubavel, 1996).

Respondent 10 illustrates this tension. She critiqued official ceremonies for neglecting civil resistance history and began privately writing a book to give a voice to these marginalized narratives. Simultaneously, she continues attending formal events, producing a paradox: While her book acts as a form of counter-memory, its unpublished status in combination with Respondent 10's continued participation sustains the authority of institutional remembrance. Respondents 3, 4, and 6 highlight another dimension of this dynamic. They likewise criticized formal remembrance for omissions but also noted that informal, citizen-led practices can form echo chambers, where like-minded networks reinforce selective narratives. Even well-intentioned informal memory practices can therefore limit individuals' influence over historical representation by reproducing partial, sometimes exclusionary historical understandings. Finally, Respondent 9's neighborhood project exemplifies a negotiated reading that is citizen-led yet institutionally supported. While the project promotes local history and reflects citizen initiative, its funding and endorsement by the city suggest that state authority remains decisive. In this case, the project may appear participatory, but the influence and involvement of dominant, official actors ultimately signal a subtle triumph for institutional authority.

In summary, negotiated memory may appear to empower citizens, but in practice, it may curtail individual agency and inadvertently strengthen hegemonic structures. Official memory frameworks can function hegemonically by marginalizing alternative forms of remembrance (Molden, 2016) and prioritizing social unity (Shackel, 2001), rather than supporting citizens' own remembrance. Collective memory remains dynamic (Marschall, 2013), yet the interplay between citizen action and institutional power often produces outcomes in which personal memory practices serve established authority as much as, or even more than, the citizens themselves.

## **6.1.2. Key Themes in Representations and Discourse**

### **6.1.2.1. The Heroism of Flawed Human Beings**

Following Hall (1997, 1980, 1997), ideological meanings surface in everyday speech, where selective and partial portrayals present particular views as objective and absolute truths. These representations derive meaning from their social and historical contexts rather than existing independently. Our findings extend this framework by showing how personal connections to historical events and groups, such as the civil resistance, amplify discursive meanings and give corresponding representations of known and admired individuals greater discursive weight.

Descendants often recounted acts of courage, sacrifice, and moral duty: a young father who joined the resistance despite family responsibilities and ultimately lost his life (Respondent 13); a mother taking her young child along on dangerous resistance missions (Respondent 6); and a couple who helped save civilians from forced labor (Respondent 8). Others, like Respondent 1, stressed the injustice of their relatives' contributions being overlooked. These stories reflect what Welzer (2005) terms *cumulative heroization*: the portrayal of resistance fighters as altruistic, selfless, and too often forgotten. They also correspond with prevailing master narratives of World War II (Gorbahn, 2015). Such idealization is closely tied to the emotional attachments of descendants, whose memories are typically transmitted intergenerationally within their families (Halbwachs, 1992). Material objects, such as a canteen cup (Respondent 3), a prison uniform (Respondent 8), and a box of belongings (Respondent 6), reinforced these heroic views, preserving the emotional bonds with cherished but perished loved ones, and affecting their owners' perceptions (Rochberg-Halton, 1984) of meaningful remembrance.

Yet, alongside such romanticized views, participants recognized trauma as central to their families' resistance stories. For instance, Respondents 3 and 12 emphasized the deep scars of distress and loss, recounting how the physical and psychological suffering of surviving relatives had shaped their families after the war, sometimes leading to the disposal of painful objects, subsequent generations being unable to speak about these events, or the requirement of emotional labor from loved ones. Such expressions and consequences of trauma complicate romanticized versions of the past and challenge the celebratory tone of official remembrance (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991).

Beyond family ties, citizens articulated identification with the local resistance more broadly. They stressed the ordinariness of fighters, portraying them as “people like us” who nevertheless shouldered exceptional risks. Respondent 10 acknowledged that some members were criminals yet still insisted that their willingness to resist Nazi occupation merits recognition. Respondent 13 added that resistance actions were sometimes violent or ethically troubling but justified remembrance on the grounds that they had the right intentions of fighting for the freedom of all. Others contrasted civilian resistance fighters with professional soldiers involved in World War II, arguing that the former were especially courageous because they operated outside the protections of military conventions (Respondent 5). This view of flawed heroism fosters moral connection and empathy among citizens, anchoring remembrance in the human imperfection of individuals rather than standardized official accounts, and thus opposing the latter (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997).

The findings demonstrate that personal remembrance is relational and selective. Citizens valorize the sacrifices of specific individuals while navigating the ambiguities of their actions. In doing so, ordinary citizens may produce a discursive resistance memory that resists official, anonymized narratives of World War II, instead privileging the lived experiences and consequences of ordinary people’s resistance to the Nazi regime. This more nuanced view of heroism helps mitigate risks often associated with heroic representations, such as concealing lingering injustices or promoting an unduly romanticized version of history (Leebaw, 2019).

#### **6.1.2.2. Gender and the Civil Resistance**

While personal views of the resistance highlight flawed heroism, they are also shaped by external social structures, like gender (Bell, 2003; Fogu & Kansteiner, 2006). Official Belgian historiography largely presents the civil resistance to the Nazi regime during World War II as male-centered, with the role of women being absent (Corthals, 2025). Our findings confirm this dominant reading (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997): Discourse typically represented the civil resistance in plural, male terms, referring to its members as “those boys” (Respondent 13) or “those men” (Respondent 5). Respondent 5 strengthened this view by invoking the traditional image of the father as the family’s main provider, leaving behind a dependent family vulnerable to financial and emotional hardship if he did not survive the war.

References to women's participation in the resistance were less common and usually tied to specific family anecdotes. Even when participants used terms like "men and women," male fighters remained the central focus. Respondent 12 was an exception, describing at length his mother's critical emotional labor in caring for his father after the war and the lasting impact this had on his life. Such examples may suggest a tendency in resistance memory to unintentionally or intentionally sideline women, both as resistance fighters and supportive partners, calling for further inquiry into how such silent sacrifices are remembered, or, more starkly, forgotten, within civil resistance remembrance. These representations of the resistance underscore a risk of romanticizing the resistance, which can obscure the experiences of those whose resistance was less visible or deemed non-heroic (Leebaw, 2019). Indeed, history is never entirely objective (Sørensen, 2017).

### **6.1.2.3. Categories of Civil Resistance**

A final aspect studied in participants' discursive representations concerned the types of civil resistance they acknowledged. As noted in the literature, opposition to the Nazi regime during World War II took diverse forms, often blended by civilians (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). In line with broader trends in personal remembrance, our participants emphasized specific acts of relatives or local figures they considered meaningful. This focus contrasts with official narratives, which tend to valorize military or large-scale resistance while marginalizing smaller acts of resistance or acts not considered heroic (Leebaw, 2019). Yet, in contrast with Saito (2018), participants did not disregard morally ambiguous or modest resistance efforts; rather, they emphasized the diversity, showing that significance could reside in both radical, armed and peaceful acts. This awareness conveys a sense of national and regional pride in Belgian resistance to the Nazis (Conway, 2012). For example, Respondent 8 focused on his parents' resistance activities, largely outside armed civil resistance. Additionally, Respondent 10 highlighted the ordinary professions of resistance fighters, stressing their ordinariness while redefining what counts as significant resistance (Hall, 1977, 1980, 1997). Respondent 13 provided detailed insights, juxtaposing the violent acts of the resistance organization his great-uncle was a member of with alternative humanitarian acts, such as feeding those in hiding.

## 6.2. Limits of the Research

This study carries several limitations which merit consideration and awareness. First, due to the relatively small sample size of thirteen participants and the qualitative nature of the study, findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. While the findings revealed recurring patterns and coherence in personal memory practices of the resistance, a larger and more diverse sample might have allowed for deeper nuance or the identification of more diverse trends in personal remembrance.

Second, participants were recruited exclusively through the communication channels of a single citizen-led remembrance organization. This may have introduced bias, favoring individuals already sympathetic to or engaged with the association in particular or its approach to remembering the resistance. However, accessing different types of Flemish citizens who both met the selection criteria and felt comfortable discussing such a psychologically and historically sensitive subject was not so evident, hence the decision to utilize the communication channels of one particular association. Given the limited societal visibility of civil resistance remembrance, as discussed in the literature review, alternative recruitment strategies were not easily available or feasible. This was exemplified, for instance, by the lack of substantive response from the *CegeSoma*, which had also been contacted for recruitment purposes. For future research, it could be interesting to expand outreach by recruiting participants through both institutional and citizen-led remembrance organizations or actors.

Third, while the study initially aimed to include a variety of personal connections to the resistance, the final sample was composed primarily of descendants of resistance fighters. This pattern more broadly reflects the profiles of those who initially responded to the call for participation, largely skewing towards older age categories with family ties. Younger individuals, mostly in their twenties, either did not respond or mostly disengaged during the selection process. This likely reflects a generational gap in interest or engagement with the theme, resulting in a sample that leaned towards older participants. It may be relevant for future research to expand on these age gaps and how this may affect the form or motivations of memory more closely. As this specificity exceeded the scope of the present research, it was not explored in depth.

Finally, the original target group consisted of ordinary Flemish citizens with diverse motivations for engaging in remembrance. However, recruitment attracted many individuals whose relatives were resistance fighters or who actively assume leadership roles in remembrance, often participating in public initiatives like remembrance associations. While this can indicate that those inclined to engage in remembrance often do so in visible ways, it may have limited access to voices of those with more private approaches to remembrance. Despite this, I believe I was able to present a variety of meaningful viewpoints on the phenomenon of personal remembrance of the civil resistance in Flanders. This is in line with the study's objectives and questions, which were designed to gain a more profound understanding of the subjective meanings that Flemish citizens assign to their personalized experiences of remembering the civil resistance.

### **6.3. Avenues for Future Research**

Given that the research findings highlight the potential exclusion of women's resistance, a result consistent with Belgian resistance historiography (Corthals, 2025), future research should examine the role of female resistance fighters in contemporary remembrance more closely. This could include exploring the motivations behind their exclusion.

Secondly, the present study mostly attracted older participants, with very few younger people expressing initial interest and even fewer actually taking part. As the findings chapter showed, only two participants were younger than 30. This reflects existing literature, which notes that while young people can be interested in heritage and history, this does not necessarily translate into participation in acts of remembrance (Winter, 1995). In light of the passing of time and the fact that we are now in the postmemory era (Hirsch, 2008), where younger generations carry the duty to remember (Ricoeur, 1999), it is essential to examine how young people approach resistance remembrance. Comparative research with older generations, as well as studies on innovative ways of engaging younger people in memory practices in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, would be particularly relevant.

Additionally, since this theme did not emerge saliently in the findings of the study, future research should also focus on the connection between resistance remembrance and mediated memory practices. Specifically, it would be valuable to investigate whether initiatives similar to the *Eva Stories* (Henig & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, 2020) exist, or could be developed, in the context of the civil resistance, and how such initiatives would be received in Belgium or Flanders.

Future research may also compare how different geographical groups of citizens engage in remembering the resistance. This could encompass regional comparisons, such as Flemish versus Walloon citizens, or international comparisons, such as Belgian memory practices alongside those in the Netherlands, France, or even Germany; all countries that were confronted with opposition to the Nazis during World War II.

Finally, future research could examine existing governmental initiatives related to resistance remembrance in Belgium, compare them with best practices in other countries, and explore citizens' expectations of appropriate and adequate official remembrance.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Marking 80 years since the end of the Second World War in 2025, this study explored how the war is remembered today by citizens in the Flemish Region of Belgium. Scholars have noted that the Belgian civil resistance during World War II has long lacked a distinct place in national collective memory (De Wever & Wouters, 2020). This, combined with the passage of time and increasing generational distance from these historical events, raises concerns about the potential marginalization of resistance legacy. In response, and amidst the current *memory boom* (Winter & Prost, 2005), this study focused on how the memory of those who resisted Nazi occupation during the war is preserved and enacted by Flemish citizens nowadays.

The thesis primarily aimed to examine personal memory practices of the resistance and the meanings imbued in them, particularly in relation to formal, state-led remembrance. Through thirteen semi-structured interviews, we investigated how informal discourse reflects ideological perspectives on this contested history. It was proposed that remembrance is closely tied to interests in history and family heritage: Citizens motivated primarily by historical interest tend to follow existing dominant practices, whereas descendants of resistance fighters were anticipated to reappropriate remembrance by emphasizing heroic views of specific individuals and challenging institutionalized forms of remembrance that often overlook their contributions.

While there is no standardized format of personal memory and the findings are not representative of all Flemish citizens, they reveal a meaningful interplay between formal and informal remembrance, in which participants negotiate and selectively integrate elements from official remembrance into their personalized memory landscapes of the resistance. Motivations generally arose from a perceived neglect of family or local resistance stories, prompting their active preservation. Memory practices, in this way, become hyperlocal and people-based moral acts, in which ordinary citizens engage to preserve the legacies of admired and respected individuals rather than abstract historical movements. Remembrance was particularly rooted in private objects, intergenerational storytelling, and local memory sites, underscoring the emotional and symbolic power of in-person engagement over mediated forms of remembering in the postmemory era (Hirsch, 2008).

Participants often engaged in informal remembrance with trusted individuals from their social circles, highlighting the socially constructed nature of resistance memory (Halbwachs, 1992). Heroic representations of the civil resistance frequently emerged in their narratives, rooted in the humanity and moral complexity of relatives or local figures. Moreover, the resistance was described in plural, male-dominant terms, highlighting the contributions of men while sometimes sidelining women. This points to participants' navigation of tensions within their personal ways of remembering: While they exercised agency in deciding what and whom to remember, their strategies could still be marginalized by hegemonic actors, even if assumed to enrich their remembrance. Additionally, their own memory practices could marginalize less visible forms of resistance.

Overall, citizen remembrance landscapes of the civil resistance in Flanders are deeply personal, emotionally charged, and morally motivated. They transcend the traditional boundaries between public and private, collective and individual, and official and informal, enabling individuals to reclaim authority by shaping collective memory according to their own priorities; choosing how to remember historical figures they relate to or whose memory they cherish. As a fellow Flemish citizen with a family link and personal interest in the resistance, I occupied an insider status (Holmes, 2020) in this study. This position brought challenges, such as the risks of potential biases and over-identification (Creswell & Poth, 2018) while engaging with participants. To mitigate these risks, I kept sticky notes with my research questions nearby and consciously redirected conversations towards participants' memory practices, carefully negotiating a balance between closeness and researcher distance.

Future research on resistance remembrance could focus on women's roles, younger generations' perceptions, the impact of technology and mediated memory practices, geographical variations at national and international levels, and ways to enhance Belgian governmental policies on remembrance. While much remains to be explored in the field of resistance remembrance, our thesis has sought to contribute to it by illustrating that the legacy of the Belgian civil resistance during World War II undoubtedly holds enduring significance in the hearts and lives of those who actively engage with it, like the participants in this study, to whom I express my sincere gratitude.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abercrombie, N., & Longhurst, B. J. (1996). *Audiences: A sociological theory of performance and imagination*. SAGE.

Adams, T., & Kopelman, S. (2022). Remembering COVID-19: Memory, crisis, and social media. *Media Culture & Society*, 44(2), 266–285.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211048377>

Aden, R. C. (2017). Public Memory. In *The SAGE encyclopedia of communication research methods*. Retrieved August 9, 2025, from <https://methods.sagepub.com/ency/edvol/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-communication-research-methods/chpt/public-memory>

Aerts, K., & De Wever, B. (2012). Het verzet in de publieke herinnering in Vlaanderen. *Journal of Belgian History*, XLII(2–3), 78–107.

<https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/nl/journal/belgisch-tijdschrift-voor-nieuwste-geschiedenis-xlii20122/verzet-publieke-herinnering>

Assmann, A. (2008). Transformations between history and memory. *Collective Memory and Collective Identity*, 75(1), 49–72. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972052>

Assmann, J. (2008). Communicative and cultural memory. In *Cultural memory studies. An international and interdisciplinary handbook* (pp. 109–118). Walter de Gruyter. [https://archiv.ub.uniheidelberg.de/propylaeumdok/1774/1/Assmann\\_Communicative\\_and\\_cultural\\_memory\\_2008.pdf](https://archiv.ub.uniheidelberg.de/propylaeumdok/1774/1/Assmann_Communicative_and_cultural_memory_2008.pdf)

Arthur, P. (2009). Trauma online: Public exposure of personal grief and suffering. *Traumatology*, 15(4), 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765609350781>

- Balcells, L., & Voytas, E. (2025). The troubles and beyond: The impact of a museum exhibit on a post-conflict society. *American Journal of Political Science*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.70001>
- Banjeglav, T. (2012). Conflicting memories, competing narratives and contested histories in Croatia's post-war commemorative practices. *Politička Misao*, 49(5), 7–31.  
<https://hrcak.srce.hr/99490>
- Basu, P. (2004). My own island home. *Journal of Material Culture*, 9(1), 27–42.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183504041088>
- Becker, H., Berger, P., Luckmann, T., Burawoy, M., Gans, H., Gerson, K., Glaser, B., Strauss, A., Horowitz, R., Inciardi, J., Pottieger, A., Lewis, O., Liebow, E., Mead, G. H., & Mills, C. W. (2002). Observation and interviewing: Options and choices in qualitative research. In *Qualitative Research in Action* (pp. 200–224). SAGE Publications Ltd.  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849209656>
- Berger, R. (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Berliner, D. (2005). Social thought & commentary: The abuses of memory: Reflections on the memory boom in anthropology. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78(1), 197–211.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4150896>
- Bigley, J. D., Lee, C., Chon, J., & Yoon, Y. (2010). Motivations for war-related tourism: A case of DMZ visitors in Korea. *Tourism Geographies*, 12(3), 371–394.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2010.494687>

- Bell, D. S. A. (2003). Mythscapes: memory, mythology, and national identity. *British Journal of Sociology*, 54(1), 63–81. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000045905>
- Bomba, J. (2016). Memory and commemoration. *Archives of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy*, 18(3), 7–12. <https://doi.org/10.12740/app/64759>
- Bouchat, P., Luminet, O., Rosoux, V., Aerts, K., Cordonnier, A., Résibois, M., & Rimé, B. (2020). A social psychological perspective on World War II collaboration in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: A Belgian case. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 50(7), 1406–1424. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2664>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Bukamal, H. (2022). Deconstructing insider–outsider researcher positionality. *British Journal of Special Education*, 49(3), 327–349. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12426>
- Burke, P. (1989). History as social memory. In *Memory: History, culture, and the mind*. Basil Blackwell.
- Cambridge University Press. (n.d.). Remember. In *Cambridge Dictionary*. Retrieved July 29, 2025, from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/remember>
- CegeSoma. (n.d.-a). CegeSoma. <https://www.cegesoma.be/>
- CegeSoma. (n.d.-b). *Achieven van de Witte Brigade*. Retrieved August 10, 2025, from <https://www.cegesoma.be/nl/achieven-van-de-witte-brigade>
- Confino, A. (1997). Collective memory and cultural history: Problems of method. *The American Historical Review*, 102(5), 1386–1403. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2171069>

- Conway, B. (2010). New directions in the sociology of collective Memory and commemoration. *Sociology Compass*, 4(7), 442–453. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2010.00300.x>
- Conway, M. (2012). The end(s) of memory. Memories of the Second World War in Belgium. *Journal of Belgian History*, 42(2/3), 170–187. <https://www.journalbelgianhistory.be/en/journal/belgisch-tijdschrift-voor-nieuwste-geschiedenis-xlii20122/ends-memory-memories-second-world>
- Cook, M., & Van Riemsdijk, M. (2014). Agents of memorialization: Gunter Demnig's Stolpersteine and the individual (re-)creation of a Holocaust landscape in Berlin. *Journal of Historical Geography*, 43, 138–147. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2013.09.001>
- Coopmans, M., Van Der Lippe, T., & Lubbers, M. (2017). What is 'needed' to keep remembering? War-specific communication, parental exemplar behaviour and participation in national commemorations. *Nations and Nationalism*, 23(4), 746–769. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12300>
- Cordonnier, A., Bouchat, P., Hirst, W., & Luminet, O. (2020). Intergenerational transmission of World War II family historical memories of the Resistance. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 24(3), 302–314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12436>
- Corthals, M. (2025). For food and freedom: Female resistance, hunger demonstrations and looting during the Second World War in Belgium. *Contemporary European History*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0960777325000128>
- Corthals, M., & Weyns, B. (n.d.). De twee zijden van de verzetsmedaille. *Belgium WWII*. <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/debatten/de-twee-zijden-van-de-verzetsmedaille.html>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Chapter 3: Designing a qualitative study. In *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

- Crooke, E. (2016). Artefacts as agents for change: Commemoration and exchange via material culture. *Irish Political Studies*, 31(1), 86–100.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2015.1126926>
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & Rochberg-Halton, E. (1981). *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139167611>
- De Bruyn, D. (2010). World War 2.0: Commemorating war and Holocaust in Poland through Facebook. *DIGITAL ICONS*, 45–62. <https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/1088978>
- De Wever, B., & Wouters, N. (2020, May 6). Why the Belgian resistance deserves more attention. *The Low Countries*.  
<https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/why-the-belgian-resistance-deserves-more-attention/?fbclid=IwAR0jeeDxYKfssW1xmU7AxienaoCx7mbupCHJoUOIOLqwBPo-leKhansKWa8>
- Erl, A. (2011). Travelling memory. *Parallax*, 17(4), 4–18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.605570>
- Fabiansson, N. (2004). The Internet and the Great War: The impact on the making and meaning of Great War history. In *Matters of Conflict* (1st ed., pp. 166–178).  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203502549-13>
- Ferenc, T. (2019). War monuments as vehicles of memory and activators of social actions. *The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture*, 1, 36–46.  
<https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/items/abc19e6b-a15c-4118-a0d5-786fb96886b1>
- Ferrara, A. (2022). Bottom-up and thought-provoking sites of memory. In *Localising memory in transitional justice* (1st ed., pp. 107–127). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429330841-7>

Finney, P. (2017). Politics and technologies of authenticity: The Second World War at the close of living memory. *Rethinking History*, 21(2), 154–170.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2017.1315967>

Fogu, C., & Kansteiner, W. (2006). The politics of memory and the poetics of history. In *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (pp. 284–310). Duke University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388333-010>

Foote, K. E., & Azaryahu, M. (2007). Toward a geography of memory: Geographical dimensions of public memory and commemoration. *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 35(1), 125–144.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45372710?seq=1>

Frew, E., & White, L. (2015). Commemorative events and national identity: Commemorating death and disaster in Australia. *Event Management*, 19(4), 509–524.

<https://doi.org/10.3727/152599515x14465748512722>

Frijda, N. H. (2007). Commemorating. In *Psychology Press* (pp. 283–303).

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315086071-11>

Frow, J. (2000). In the penal colony. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 24(64), 1–13.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14443050009387551>

Frost, W., & Laing, J. (2013). Understanding commemorative events. In *Commemorative*

*Events: Memory, Identities, Conflict* (pp. 1–14). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203374610>

Gough, P. (2004). Sites in the imagination: The Beaumont Hamel Newfoundland Memorial on

the Somme. *Cultural Geographies*, 11(3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44250983.pdf>

- Gorbahn, K. (2015). Perpetrators, victims, heroes – the Second World War and national socialism in Danish history magazines. In *Commercialised History: Popular History Magazines in Europe: Approaches to a Historico-Cultural Phenomenon as the Basis for History Teaching* (pp. 319–334). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv9hj7qx.15?seq=1>
- Gutman, Y., & Wüstenberg, J. (2022). Challenging the meaning of the past from below: A typology for comparative research on memory activists. *Memory Studies*, 15(5), 1070–1086. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211044696>
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory* (L. A. Coser, Ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Hall, S. (1977). Culture, the media and the “ideological effect.” In *Mass Communication and Society* (pp. 315–348). Edward Arnold.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 117–127). Academic Division of Unwin Hyman (Publishers) Ltd.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. The Open University. [https://fotografiaeteoria.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/the\\_work\\_of\\_representation\\_stuart\\_hall.pdf](https://fotografiaeteoria.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/the_work_of_representation_stuart_hall.pdf)
- Haugbolle, S. (2005). Public and private memory of the Lebanese civil war. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 25(1), 191–203. <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/article/185344/summary>
- Helden van het verzet. (n.d.). Over ons – Helden van het verzet. *Helden Van Het Verzet*. Retrieved November 23, 2024, from <https://heldenvanhetverzet.be/over-ons>
- Henig, L., & Ebbrecht-Hartmann, T. (2020). Witnessing Eva Stories: Media witnessing and self-inscription in social media memory. *New Media & Society*, 24(1), 202–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820963805>

Hess, A. (2007). In digital remembrance: Vernacular memory and the rhetorical construction of web memorials. *Media Culture & Society*, 29(5), 812–830.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443707080539>

Hirsch, M. (2008). The generation of postmemory. *Poetics Today*, 29(1), 103–128.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>

Hirsch, M., & Spitzer, L. (2006). Testimonial objects: Memory, gender, and transmission.

*Poetics Today*, 27(2), 353–383. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2005-008>

Holmes, A. G. D. (2020). Researcher positionality - A consideration of its influence and place in qualitative research - A new researcher guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8(4), 1–10.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1268044.pdf>

Hoskins, A. (2001). New memory: Mediating history. *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, 21(4), 333–346.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01439680120075473>

Hoskins, A. (2014). The mediatization of memory. In *Mediatization of Communication* (pp. 661–

680). De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110272215.661>

Houdek, M., & Philips, K. R. (2017). Public memory. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. Retrieved August 9, 2025, from

<https://oxfordre.com/communication/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-181>

Hume, J. (2010). Memory matters: The evolution of scholarship in collective memory and mass communication. *Review of Communication*, 10(3), 181–196.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15358591003632563>

- Hunt, N., & McHale, S. (2007). Memory and meaning: Individual and social aspects of memory narratives. *Journal of Loss and Trauma, 13*(1), 42–58.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15325020701296851>
- Huyse, L. (2006). Belgian and Dutch purges after World War II compared. In *Retribution and Reparation in the Transition to Democracy* (pp. 164–178). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511584343.011>
- In Flanders Fields Museum*. (n.d.). *In Flanders Fields Museum*. Retrieved August 1, 2025, from  
<https://www.inflandersfields.be/en/in-flanders-fields-museum-1>
- Inglis, K. S. (2004). *Sacred places: War memorials in the Australian landscape*. Melbourne University Press.
- Jonassen, D. H. (1991). Objectivism versus constructivism: Do we need a new philosophical paradigm? *Educational Technology Research and Development, 39*(3), 5–14.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/30219973>
- Jones, L. (2006). *Then they started shooting*. Harvard University Press.
- Kansteiner, W. (2002). Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies. *History and Theory, 41*(2), 179–197.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00198>
- Kiger, M. E., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE Guide No. 131. *Medical Teacher, 42*(8), 846–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2020.1755030>
- Kiszely, J. (2011). Forward. In *Lest We Forget: Remembrance & Commemoration*. The History Press.

- Kook, R. (2021). Agents of memory in the post-witness era: Memory in the living room and changing forms of Holocaust remembrance in Israel. *Memory Studies*, 14(5), 971–986. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020959804>
- Kvale, S. (2007). Chapter 5: Conducting an interview. In *Doing interviews*. Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849208963>
- Kyriakidou, M. (2015). Media witnessing: exploring the audience of distant suffering. *Media Culture & Society*, 37(2), 215–231. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714557981>
- Lagrou, P. (1997). Victims of genocide and national memory: Belgium, France and the Netherlands 1945-1965. *Past & Present*, 154, 181–222. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/651120>
- Lagrou, P. (2003). The politics of memory. Resistance as a collective myth in post-war France, Belgium and the Netherlands. *European Review*, 11(4), 527–549. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798703000474>
- Lim, C.-M. (2024). Commemorative artefactual speech. <https://philarchive.org/rec/LIMCAS-2>
- Liu, J. H., Goldstein-Hawes, R., Hilton, D., Huang, L., Gastardo-Conaco, C., Dresler-Hawke, E., Pittolo, F., Hong, Y.-Y., Ward, C., Abraham, S., Kashima, Y., Kashima, E., Ohashi, M. M., Yuki, M., & Hidaka, Y. (2005). Social representations of events and people in world history across 12 cultures. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 36(2), 171–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022104272900>
- Lohmeier, C., & Böhling, R. (2017). Communicating family memory: Remembering in a changing media environment. *Communications*, 42(3). <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2017-0031>

Macgilchrist, F., Christophe, B., & Binnenkade, A. (2015). Introduction: Memory practices and history education. *Journal of Educational Media, Memory & Society*, 7(2), 1–9.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/44319952>

Mannergren Selimovic, J. (2022). The stuff from the siege: Transitional justice and the power of everyday objects in museums. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 16(2), 220–234. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijac002>

Marschall, S. (2013). Collective memory and cultural difference: Official vs. vernacular forms of commemorating the past. *Safundi*, 14(1), 77–92.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2012.760832>

Mayo, J. M. (1988). War memorials as political memory. *Geographical Review*, 78(1), 62–75.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/214306?seq=1>

Molden, B. (2016). Resistant pasts versus mnemonic hegemony: On the power relations of collective memory. *Memory Studies*, 9(2), 125–142.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698015596014>

Neudt, D., & Van Steendam, T. (2024, September 9). De mythe van de nieuwe verzetsmythe. De Standaard. [https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20240908\\_95791043](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20240908_95791043)

Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire. *Representations*, 26, 7–24.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928520>

Norton, M. I., & Gino, F. (2014). Rituals alleviate grieving for loved ones, lovers, and lotteries. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(1), 266–272.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031772>

- Olick, J. K. (1999). Collective memory: the two cultures. *Sociological Theory*, 17(3), 333–348.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/0735-2751.00083>
- Olick, J. K., & Robbins, J. (1998). Social memory studies: From “collective memory” to the historical sociology of mnemonic practices. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 105–140.  
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/223476>
- Paez, D., & Liu, J. H. (2010). Collective memory of conflicts. In *Intergroup Conflicts and Their Resolution* (1st ed., pp. 105–124). Psychology Press.  
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203834091-5/collective-memory-conflicts-dario-paez-james-hou-fu-liu>
- Pennebaker, J. W., Páez, D., & Deschamps, J. C. (2006). The social psychology of history: Defining the most important events of the last 10, 100, and 1000 years. *Psicología Política*, 32, 15–32. <https://www.uv.es/garzon/psicologia%20politica/N32-2.pdf>
- Pentzold, C., & Sommer, V. (2011). Digital networked media and social memory: Theoretical foundations and implications. *Aurora. Revista De Arte, Mídia E Política*, 10, 72–85.  
<https://revistas.pucsp.br/aurora/article/download/4704/3476/11652>
- Purdeková, A. (2022). Informal commemoration in post-war Burundi: Exploring the usefulness and the limits of the concept. In *Localising Memory in Transitional Justice* (1st ed., pp. 128–150). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429330841-8>
- Qu, S. Q., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, 8(3), 238–264. <https://doi.org/10.1108/11766091111162070>
- Ricoeur, P. (1999). Memory and forgetting. In *Questioning Ethics* (pp. 5–11). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203450833-4>

- Roberts, R. (2020). Qualitative interview questions: Guidance for novice researchers. *The Qualitative Report*, 25(9), 3185–3203. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2020.4640>
- Rochberg-Halton, E. (1984). Object relations, role models, and cultivation of the self. *Environment and Behavior*, 16(3), 335–368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916584163003>
- Roediger, H. L., & Wertsch, J. V. (2008). Creating a new discipline of memory studies. *Memory Studies*, 1(1), 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698007083884>
- Rolston, W. (2020). Ambushed by Memory: Post-conflict popular memorialisation in Northern Ireland. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 14(2), 320–339. [https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/files/78139838/Rolston\\_IJTJ\\_final.pdf](https://pure.ulster.ac.uk/ws/files/78139838/Rolston_IJTJ_final.pdf)
- Rosenfeld, G. D. (2009). A looming crash or a soft landing? Forecasting the future of the memory “industry”. *The Journal of Modern History*, 81(1), 122–158. <https://marcuse.faculty.history.ucsb.edu/classes/201/articles/Rosenfeld2009JMHLoomingCrashSoftLanding.pdf>
- Rosoux, V., & Van Ypersele, L. (2012). The Belgian national past: Between commemoration and silence. *Memory Studies*, 5(1), 45–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698011424030>
- Roudometof, V. (2003). Beyond commemoration: the politics of collective memory. *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 31(2), 161–169. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45293737>
- Royal House of the Netherlands. (n.d.). *Remembrance Day*. Retrieved August 9, 2025, from <https://www.royal-house.nl/topics/national-4-and-5-may-committee/remembrance-day>
- Saito, H. (2010). From collective memory to commemoration. In *Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (pp. 629–638). Routledge. [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss\\_research/1897/](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sooss_research/1897/)

- Saito, H. (2018). The changing culture and politics of commemoration. In *Routledge Handbook of Cultural Sociology* (2nd ed., pp. 648–656). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315267784-69>
- Savin-Baden, M., & Major, C. H. (2013). *Qualitative research: The essential guide to theory and practice*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003377986>
- Schuman, H., & Scott, J. (1989). Generations and collective memories. *American Sociological Review*, 54(3), 359–381.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2095611> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2095611>
- Schwartz, B. (1982). The social context of commemoration: A study in collective memory. *Social Forces*, 61(2), 374–402. <https://academic.oup.com/sf/article/61/2/374/1928396>
- Schuster, S. (2017). *The duty of memory: La violencia between remembrance and forgetting*. Cambridge Core.  
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/territories-of-conflict/duty-of-memory-la-violencia-between-remembrance-and-forgetting/2FAC1D6611132573FA3A7380D861E09A>
- Shackel, P. A. (2001). Public memory and the search for power in American historical archaeology. *American Anthropologist*, 103(3), 655–670.  
<https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2001.103.3.655>
- Sherman, D. (1995). Objects of memory: History and narrative in French war museums. *French Historical Studies*, 19(1), 49–74. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/286899.pdf>
- Sierp, A. (2021). Memory studies – development, debates and directions. In *Handbuch Sozialwissenschaftliche Gedächtnisforschung* (pp. 1–11). Springer.  
[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26593-9\\_42-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-26593-9_42-1)

- Sørensen, M. J. (2017). Glorifications and simplifications in case studies of Danish WWII nonviolent resistance. *Journal of Resistance Studies*, 5, 4.  
[https://resistance-journal.org/jrs\\_articles/danish-wwii-nonviolent-resistance/](https://resistance-journal.org/jrs_articles/danish-wwii-nonviolent-resistance/)
- Steffens, E. (2023). Commémoration de la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale : Pourquoi la résistance a-t-elle perdu la bataille de la mémoire ? VRT News.  
<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/fr/2023/05/08/commemoration-de-la-fin-de-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale-pourquoi/>
- Stone, C. B., Van Der Haegen, A., Luminet, O., & Hirst, W. (2014). Personally relevant vs. nationally relevant memories: An intergenerational examination of World War II memories across and within Belgian French-speaking families. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 3(4).  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2014-55223-007.html>
- Suleiman, S. R. (2004). History, heroism, and narrative desire: The “Aubrac Affair” and national memory of the French resistance. *South Central Review*, 21(1), 54–81.  
<https://doi.org/10.1353/scr.2004.0015>
- Thelen, D. (1989). Memory and American history. *The Journal of American History*, 75(4), 1117–1129. <https://berlinarchaeology.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/thelen-1989-memory-and-american-history.pdf>
- Tracy, S. J. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Wiley Blackwell.
- van Dijck, J. (2004). Mediated memories: personal cultural memory as object of cultural analysis. *Continuum*, 18(2), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1030431042000215040>
- Velte, S. (2022). Exploring the role of context models in memory-building: the completion of informative voids and the re-organisation of narratives in second-hand memories. *Information Research*, 27. <https://informationr.net/ir/27-SpIssue/isic22/isic2249.html>

- Verovšek, P. J. (2016). Collective memory, politics, and the influence of the past: the politics of memory as a research paradigm. *Politics, Groups and Identities*, 4(3), 529–543.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2016.1167094>
- Vinitzky-Seroussi, V. (2002). Commemorating a difficult past: Yitzhak Rabin's memorials. *American Sociological Review*, 67(1), 30–51.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240206700102>
- VRT NWS. (2022, November 11). 100 years ago, the Unknown Soldier was buried in Brussels. *VRT NWS*. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2022/11/11/100-years-ago-the-unknown-soldier-was-buried-in-brussels/>
- Wagner-Pacifici, R., & Schwartz, B. (1991). The Vietnam veterans memorial: Commemorating a difficult past. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(2), 376–420.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/229783>
- Welzer, H. (2005). Grandpa wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German family remembrance. In *American Jewish Committee*. American Jewish Committee.  
[https://courses.washington.edu/berlin09/Readings/Welzer\\_Grandpa.pdf](https://courses.washington.edu/berlin09/Readings/Welzer_Grandpa.pdf)
- Winter, C. (2016). Work, travel and home: A study of remembrance activity. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 19(6), 590–604.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271752698\\_Work\\_travel\\_and\\_home\\_a\\_study\\_of\\_remembrance\\_activity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/271752698_Work_travel_and_home_a_study_of_remembrance_activity)
- Winter, J. (1995). Sites of memory, sites of mourning: The Great War in European cultural history. Cambridge University Press.

- Winter, J., & Prost, A. (2005). Agents of memory: How did people live between remembrance and forgetting? In *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (pp. 173–191). Cambridge University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511614811.010>
- Wood, N. (1999). *Vectors of memory: Legacies of trauma in postwar Europe*. Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.
- Woodham, A., King, L., Gloyn, L., Crewe, V., & Blair, F. (2017). We are what we keep: The “family archive,” identity and public/private heritage. *Heritage & Society, 10*(3), 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159032x.2018.1554405>
- Wouters, N. (n.d.). De herdenkingen aan WOII: Meer geschiedenis, minder herinnering. Belgium WWII. <https://www.belgiumwwii.be/nl/debatten/de-herdenkingen-aan-woii-meer-geschiedenis-minder-herinnering.html>
- Yilmaz, K. (2013). Comparison of quantitative and qualitative research traditions: Epistemological, theoretical, and methodological differences. *European Journal of Education, 48*, 311–325. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12014>
- Zerubavel, E. (1996). Social memories: Steps to a sociology of the past. *Qualitative Sociology, 19*(3), 283–299. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF02393273>
- Ziino, B. (2010). “A lasting gift to his descendants”: Family memory and the Great War in Australia. *History and Memory, 22*(2), 125–146.  
<https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2010.22.2.125>

# ANNEXES

## Annex 1: Recruitment Poster

### DEELNEMERS GEZOCHT voor een onderzoek naar herinnering

Mijn naam is Nina De Winter en ik ben masterstudente Communicatiewetenschappen aan de Université de Montréal in Canada. Als onderdeel van mijn masterproef onderzoek ik de **herdenking van het verzet tijdens de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Vlaanderen**. Ik wil begrijpen hoe mensen naar het verleden terugkijken en wat herdenken voor hen persoonlijk betekent.

De gezochte deelnemers dienen te voldoen aan de volgende criteria:

- 18 jaar of ouder zijn
- Nederlands spreken en Vlaming zijn
- Een **sterke interesse** hebben in de geschiedenis van het verzet van WOII
- **Betrokken zijn** bij het **herdenken** van het verzet vandaag de dag, of het nu privé, openbaar, persoonlijk of online is
- Bereid zijn deel te nemen aan een interview van +/- 1 uur (face-to-face of via Zoom)
- Akkoord gaan met een audio-opname voor onderzoeksdoeleinden

\*Deelname aan dit onderzoek vereist geen specifieke kennis of expertise van de Tweede Wereldoorlog, alleen interesse is noodzakelijk.



**Uw deelname is vrijwillig en vertrouwelijk**

Voor meer informatie kan u mij per e-mail contacteren via:

**[nina.de.winter@umontreal.ca](mailto:nina.de.winter@umontreal.ca)**

Deze studie is goedgekeurd door de Ethische Commissie voor Onderzoek in de Cultuur- en Geesteswetenschappen (CERAH) van de Université de Montréal.

Ze wordt uitgevoerd onder begeleiding van Mirjam Gollmitzer, docente aan het departement Communicatiewetenschappen van de Université de Montréal.

Université   
de Montréal

## Annex 2: Examples of Coding and the Identification of Themes

### 1. Theme “public memory practices”

Coderen van interview 5 (R5)

Code	Citaat	Subthema	Thema
	<i>Eigen manieren van herinneren:</i>		<b>HERINNERINGSPRAKTIJEN</b>
Publicaties over lokale oorlogsgeschiedenis	"We brengen ook uitgaves met de vereniging die specifiek over de lokale oorlogsgeschiedenis handelt"	<i>Vereniging</i>	<i>Publieke herinneringspraktijken</i>

Translation (Respondent 5):

- Code: Publications about local war history
- Quote (citaat): We also issue publications with the association that specifically deal with local war history.
- Sub-theme (subthema): Association (vereniging)
- Theme (thema): Public memory practices (publieke herinneringspraktijken)

Coderen van interview 13 (R13)

Code	Citaat	Subthema	Thema
	<i>Eigen manieren van herinneren:</i>		<b>HERINNERINGSPRAKTIJEN</b>
Vaandeldrager	"Ik ben wel ook lid in ██████████, zo de ██████████ ik ben zo vaandeldrager"	<i>Vereniging</i>	<i>Publieke herinneringspraktijken</i>

Translation (Respondent 13):

- Code: Standard-bearer
- Quote (citaat): I am also a member in [my town] of [my association], I am a standard-bearer.
- Sub-theme (subthema): Association (vereniging)
- Theme (thema): Public memory practices (publieke herinneringspraktijken)

### 2. Theme “moral judgments”

			<b>WAARDEOORDEEL</b>
Grootse en dappere "gewone" burgers	"Dat waren gewone burgers die zich hebben ingezet om het land te verdedigen. Zo grote gebeurtenissen, dat was meer, ja, grote namen. ... Dit waren gewone burgers eigenlijk"	<i>Heldhaftig verzet</i>	<i>Positief beeld van verzet</i>

Translation (Respondent 1):

- Code: Great and brave “ordinary” citizens
- Quote (citaat): They were ordinary citizens who were committed to defending the country. Such major events, that was more, yes, big names. ... These were ordinary citizens, actually.
- Sub-theme (subthema): Heroic resistance (heldhaftig verzet)
- Theme (thema): Positive view of the resistance (positief beeld van verzet)

Strijders voor vrijheid	"Ja vooral de heldhaftigheid ook van de mensen en hoe ze zich eigenlijk, misschien, in zekere zin, zonder er volledig bij stil te staan, zich inzetten om toch in de vrijheid te kunnen blijven leven die ze kenden"	<i>Heldhaftig verzet</i>	<i>Positief beeld van verzet</i>
-------------------------	--	--------------------------	----------------------------------

Translation (Respondent 6):

- Code: Fighters for freedom
- Quote (citaat): Yes, especially the heroism of the people and how they, perhaps in a certain sense without even fully realizing it, committed themselves to preserving the freedom they were used to living in.
- Sub-theme (subthema): Heroic resistance (heldhaftig verzet)
- Theme (thema): Positive view of the resistance (positief beeld van verzet)

### Annex 3: Declaration on the Use of Generative AI

I did not use generative AI assistance tools during the research process of my thesis.

During the writing process of my thesis, I did use the generative AI assistance tool ChatGPT, but exclusively for the correction of my own text (rewording, syntax and grammar correction), without affecting its content. Specifically, I used ChatGPT to paraphrase my own written paragraphs of text in order to enhance academic writing and improve the formulation of my own written phrases for better comprehension of the thesis. I then manually reviewed the options suggested by generative AI and modified my own text by omitting obsolete words or replacing some parts of text with synonyms, while remaining critical to sticking to my own voice and tone.

In sum, I declare that all the text in this thesis is my own and was written by me, with the use of ChatGPT limited to grammar correction and enhancing the clarity and flow of academic writing (English being my second language). All ideas and research results in this thesis are my own and were discovered by me throughout the research process.