Since the late 1940s, Anne Frank and Sukarno have functioned as “icons of memory” in the divergent ways in which World War II in Europe and Southeast Asia has been commemorated in the public imagination and historical literature of the contemporary Netherlands. The concept of “icon of memory” will be introduced rather than the notion of “site of memory” (lieux de mémoire) because it is less fraught with nostalgia – whether of a restorative, reflective or feigned variety – that might be projected on to more tangible places of commemoration.

Both Anne Frank and Sukarno have emerged as icons of memory in the Netherlands since the early 1950s through paradoxical patterns of repetition and omission, making them not only sufficiently stable but also flexible enough to function in changing historical contexts. Their iconic role in Dutch memorial practices, however, have yielded diametrically opposed consequences. Despite heated debates about the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands as an epic struggle between good and evil – versus a recent revisionist trend aiming to depict World War II as a murky grey past characterized by mostly apolitical and opportunistic behavior – the commemoration of Anne Frank has functioned as a locus of consensus or an “Angle of Repose.” In contrast, the still palpable memories of Sukarno as a willing collaborator of the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies during 1942-45 have produced a “post-colonial deficit” by constructing Indonesian nationalism as a Japanese invention imposed on the indigenous population of the Dutch East Indies through the singular agency of Sukarno.

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