

# ***Memories of defending the nation***

## ***Commemorating the Battle of Waterloo in the Netherlands, in 1865***

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### **Abstract**

On Sunday June 18, 1815, Napoleon led his army into battle on the fields in front of Mont-Saint-Jean, a few kilometres south of Waterloo. There he faced an Anglo-Dutch army, consisting of regiments from Great Britain, Brunswick, Hannover, Nassau and newly formed United Kingdom of the Netherlands, and a Prussian army. At end of the day Napoleon's army was beaten and a few days later Napoleon surrendered and abdicated the French imperial throne for the second and last time.

The main focus of this thesis is not on the events and details of the battle itself, but on how people dealt with and gave meaning to the past of Waterloo in later times. In other words this thesis focuses on the Battle of Waterloo in historical culture. More specifically, this thesis focuses on collective memories of the Battle of Waterloo in the Netherlands at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the battle in 1865. By studying a wide variety of articulations of collective memories of Waterloo in the Netherlands, and by studying in depth the commemorations of the battle in Rotterdam in 1865, I aimed to provide answers to the question of what the significance of Waterloo was for constructing a Dutch national narrative of the past within the context of transforming historical culture in the Netherlands around 1865.

My research shows that in June, 1865, Waterloo was commemorated throughout the nation in locally organized commemorations that took various forms and were organized by people of various backgrounds. Interestingly, the national government was not involved in these commemorations, with the exception of a commemoration ceremony for veterans of Waterloo in Leiden. The case of Rotterdam showed that people of various social, religious and political backgrounds were involved in the production and consumption of collective memories of Waterloo, resulting in a variety of articulations of said memories. In these articulations sub-national as well as national identities were expressed reflecting the social contexts and ideals of the producers.

Despite the variety of producers, consumers and, as a result, the variety of narratives of Waterloo, I argue that commemorating Waterloo was indeed significant for constructing a national narrative. Firstly, because the variety of people commemorating Waterloo were, by doing so, all involved in imagining the nation, albeit in different ways. The Waterloo commemorations thus invoked national consciousness among Dutch people from various social backgrounds. Secondly, almost all narratives of the battle itself, or larger narratives in which Waterloo was but a single event in a plotline, ultimately came down to defending the nation.