



FROM ONE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED
STUDY TO ANOTHER
HENK L. WESSELING

Henk Wesseling is Professor Emeritus at Leiden University and Honorary Fellow of the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) at Wassenaar, both in The Netherlands. He studied History in Leiden where he also received his Ph.D. In 1971–72 he was a Fellow of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* (Paris) and in 1980–81 of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. In 1973 he was appointed to the Chair of General History of Leiden University, and in 1995 he became Rector of NIAS. He has published some 15 books, many of which have been translated into English, French, German, and other languages. His best known book is *Divide and Rule: The Partition of Africa, 1880–1914*, which has appeared in seven languages. Henk Wesseling is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, of the *Academia Europaea* (London), the *Académie des Sciences d’Outre-Mer* (Paris) and the *Académie Royale des Sciences d’Outre-Mer* (Brussels). He is also Joint-Editor-in-Chief of *European Review*, the journal of the *Academia Europaea*. – Address: NIAS, Meijboomlaan 1, 2242PR Wassenaar, The Netherlands. E-mail: h.l.wesseling@nias.knaw.nl

Life at Wiko

“Old age is a shipwreck” as General de Gaulle famously said *à propos* of the sad case of old Marshall Philippe Pétain. To avoid such shipwrecks, businessmen, when they retire, often take up many new activities because they fear that otherwise they will soon be forgotten and end their days in a rocking chair behind the aspidistras. The result of this *Torschlusspanik* is that they take on more new obligations than they can reasonably manage

and end up sillily complaining that they now have a busier life than they ever had before, which in actual fact largely means that they are missing their chauffeurs, secretaries, expense accounts, and other perks.

Academics do not normally behave in such a silly manner and there is no reason for them to do so. First of all they are not normally used to chauffeurs, expense accounts, or even secretaries. Moreover, they can mostly continue to do their work. All the same, even they also often have the illusion that after their retirement there will be plenty of time for all sorts of things, and some of them also fear that if they don't take up new things they will also end up behind the aspidistras. I am a shining example of such foolishness. When in September 2002 I retired from Leiden University, where I had held the chair of general history for more than 30 years, as well as from the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), where I had been rector for nearly eight years, I thought that there would be no problem now to accept some responsibilities that I had previously delayed, as well as some new ones that were on offer. Thus I became chairman of a number of foundations (for example Morocco-Netherlands 400 years), and of a number of commissions and committees (for example the Conseil de coopération franco-néerlandais) as well as Joint-Editor-in-Chief of the *European Review*, the journal of the Academia Europaea/Academy of Europe.

Rather than concentrating on writing the new book that I had begun, I found myself spending so much time with these and other diversions and occupations that – strange as it may seem for a Fellow of an Institute for Advanced Study! – I felt the need to get away from it all and to find escape in a quiet place such as ... an Institute for Advanced Study. If only for that reason, I was delighted to accept the kind invitation of Dieter Grimm to be his guest at the Wissenschaftskolleg while at the same time regretting that I could only remain there for two months. However short a time it was, these two months were a most enjoyable bimonthly sabbatical in a life that had turned out not to be the permanent sabbatical it had promised to be.

It was a strange but very interesting experience to leave NIAS, where I have been for so long, for another Institute for Advanced Study. Sure enough, I had visited the *Kolleg* several times, for example for the annual meeting of the SIAS group, the rather loose club of Institute for Advanced Study Directors that had been set up by my predecessor at NIAS, Dick van de Kaa: a most cheerful and stimulating group of similarly minded colleagues with similar concerns. Wolf Lepenies and Dieter Grimm as well as Joachim Nettelbeck have played an important role in setting up this gang of six and in keeping it going. I also

knew what Institutes for Advanced Study have to offer their Fellows. I had been a Fellow in Princeton in 1980–81 and at NIAS in 1983. Our SIAS meetings had brought me to other places as well. I had been asked to evaluate the London Institute for Advanced Study, been a member of the Board and the Research Council of the Collegium Budapest, of the Board of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Paris), et cetera. So I knew that basically they are all the same, but that each has its own particular character and flavor.

I liked the flavor of the Wiko very much. The seminars were stimulating, the receptions generous. The library service was excellent. I was grateful for the nice office and the lovely apartment I was offered. I enjoyed the kind assistance of the staff, the quality of the Wiko's cuisine, the colors of the Grunewald trees in the Fall and the many attractions of Berlin, which we, my wife and I – but she more often than I – explored by car, bicycle, and S-Bahn. I had to go back to Leiden only once and got a lot of work done in what effectively became a two-month period that was exclusively devoted to research.

Work at Wiko

Erga kai hēmerai, works and days, such is the title of the famous treatise by Hesiod, in which he put the works first. So this report should not only deal with my Berlin days but also with my work. The project that kept me busy in Berlin and will keep me busy for most of 2005–06 is a book with the provisional title *France at War, 1870–1962*. The book is based on a simple but often neglected observation, viz. that over the last hundred years or so or, more exactly, between 1870 and 1962, France has been more often at war than any other European country, including its two great neighbors Germany and Britain. It fought three major wars with Germany (1870–71, 1914–18, and 1939–45) while also waging a great number of wars of colonial conquest in North Africa, West Africa, Madagascar, and Indochina, as well as two serious and protracted wars of decolonization, first in Vietnam (1945–54) and then in Algeria (1954–62). Germany, to be sure, was as often at war with France as France was with her, but its military adventures overseas were much more limited. It fought some colonial wars, the most notorious one being the war against the Herero in Namibia, but compared with France and Britain her efforts in this field were limited. And Germany never had to fight wars of decolonization at all, because she lost all her colonies at the Peace Conference of Versailles in 1919. Britain, for that matter, participated in the two world wars, but remained neutral during the first Franco-German conflict. She fought a great number of sometimes very bitter colonial wars – the most difficult of them

being the war against the Boers in South Africa – but the decolonization of the British Empire took place without any major wars. The British solution was not to fight but to partition!

Thus we can fairly conclude that modern France was influenced by warfare more than its neighbors were. In a way this is not surprising. There is after all a long tradition of France struggling to establish her hegemony over Europe. This started with the wars between Bourbon and Habsburg that culminated in the Thirty Years War (1618–48), was continued in the expansion policy of Louis XIV (Devolution War, War of the Spanish Succession, etc., etc.), and culminated in Napoleon's attempt to subject the whole of Europe to France's will. That attempt ultimately failed, and in 1815 France was a defeated and humiliated nation, but this situation did not last for long. Soon it was to retake its place in Europe and the world. The Bourbons sought to reestablish France's and their own prestige by conquering Algeria. Napoleon III fought the Crimean War, intervened in Italy, sent an expedition to Mexico, and ultimately challenged Prussia in the war of 1870, with which this book begins.

Of course, about subjects so big and so important as these, hundreds of thousands of historical studies have appeared. The First World War is probably the most important subject in modern history writing, August 1914 the most thoroughly studied month in world history. So a book like this can only be a book of synthesis, based on the existing literature on the subject. Its originality, such as it is, has to come from its perspective, which aims to look at the history of French wars as a whole, comparing the various experiences, their impact, and the way they were remembered and from drawing some general conclusions from that. So the book will not so much be a monograph, but rather a book of essays. Indeed, it will consist of five essays dealing respectively with:

- The Franco-Prussian War, 1870–71
- The Wars of Colonial Conquest (Algeria, Morocco, West Africa, Madagascar, Indochina) during the period 1870–1914, plus a short introduction about Algeria (1830–70) and an epilogue about Morocco in the 1920s
- The First World War, 1914–18
- The Second World War, 1939–45
- The Wars of Decolonization, 1945–62, with special reference to Indochina and Algeria

Each essay will deal with the origins of the war, its causes and outcome, the collective memory of the war, including the literary and artistic imagination, and its importance and consequences.

While in Berlin, I managed to write a first draft of the fourth chapter, the one about World War II. I still hope to finish the manuscript at the end of the coming academic year.