

Hyperlink on Jacques Presser

Rudolf Dekker: De ervenis van Jacques Presser. Waardering en gebruik van egodocumenten in de geschiedwetenschap, in: Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift, 29 (2002), 19-37, here 19-23.
Translation forthcoming: Jacques Presser's heritage. Egodocuments in the study of history, in: Memoria y Civilización. Anuario de Historia 5 (2002).

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The term egodocument was coined by the Amsterdam historian Jacques Presser. That a historian should enrich the Dutch language with a new word, is a unique event. Historians generally tend to prefer archaisms. Evidently, Presser needed a blanket term for the texts in which he was interested: autobiographies, memoirs, diaries, and personal letters. He defined egodocuments as "those historical sources in which the researcher is faced with an 'I', or occasionally (Caesar, Henry Adams) a 'he', as the writing and describing subject with a continuous presence in the text". Sometime later he formulated it more succinctly as "those documents in which an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself ..." Presser's useful neologism was generally accepted, to which its inclusion in the latest editions of the standard Dutch dictionary by Van Dale testifies, even though the explanation given there is somewhat too broad ("documents concerning personal events and life experience"). [...]

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Jacques Presser, born in 1899, as a secondary-school teacher at the Amsterdam Vossius Gymnasium, was already involved with what he was later to call egodocuments in the 1920s. During the German occupation Presser was dismissed together with other Jewish teachers, worked at the Jewish Lyceum for a time, and then went into hiding. In 1947 he was appointed lecturer, and a year later professor at the University of Amsterdam. After the war, Presser stayed with another historian for a time, Jan Romein, who was later to become his colleague at the University of Amsterdam. Romein was also interested in the (auto-)biographical approach to history. In 1946 Romein published "De biografie" [The Biography], a contribution to the historiography of the genre that is still regarded as informative and original. Shortly after the war, Jan Romein came across a special egodocument, a diary in which a Jewish girl had written about her life in hiding. Through a friend he had borrowed it from the father of the girl, the only member of the family to survive the war. Romein wrote an article about it in the daily newspaper "Het Parool". A publisher was found, and Romein's wife, Annie Romein-Verschoor wrote an introduction. Anne Frank's diary appeared in 1947, titled "Het achterhuis". Jacques Presser, who had also been one of the first readers, wrote about it in the magazine "De Vrije Katheder" immediately after it was published. He did so in more or less the same terms as Romein had used a year before, but with more explicit appreciation of Anne's style of writing. Later Presser himself was to write an introduction to another war diary, that by Philip Mechanicus.

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In 1949 Presser was officially commissioned to write the history of the Dutch Jews during the years of occupation. He based his findings partly on diaries, letters and other egodocuments. In addition he conducted interviews with other survivors of the Holocaust, and with people responsible for carrying out and organising 'the downfall', as he titled the book he wrote about it. His own estimate was that he conducted many hundreds of interviews. In an entirely different way, then, he was again faced with the problems surrounding egodocuments and 'oral history'. He was confronted with people whose memories were so painful that they were unable or unwilling to recall anything, but also with people who deliberately falsified their past. "De ondergang" [Ashes in the Wind] was published in 1965, causing many reactions, mostly positive but also a few negative ones. Some critics regarded the book as being too subjective.

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P. Spigt told the egodocument scholar Ruud Lindeman that Presser used the concept of egodocument for the first time in a course for undergraduates, which he gave in the academic year 1956-57. Spigt later wrote "Het ontstaan van de autobiografie in Nederland" [The Origins of Autobiography in the Netherlands], the only Dutch study on the subject. Egodocuments remained a fixed item in his courses when Presser transferred as a professor from the social sciences faculty to the faculty of arts. He never got around to writing a book, but his personal archives contain a large quantity of cuttings, reviews and notes on the subject. In his valedictory lecture he summarised what had been discussed. His lectures had centred on traditional high points of the genre, more especially Presser's own favourite authors, among whom were Stendhal and Henri-Frederic Amiel. Presser did not offer new theoretical insights, and he based himself largely on the great work on the history of autobiography by the German historian Georg Misch, and on that by the French philosopher George Gusdorf.

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Presser did not find time to elaborate his studies of egodocuments, because until his death in 1970, his energies were mainly occupied by "Ashes in the Wind" and the ensuing discussion. Beside being a historian, Presser was also a poet and a novelist. This gave him an eye and an ear for the literary aspects that are more clearly present in egodocuments than in official records, which have a higher status in the hierarchy of historical sources. He also started to write his own autobiography, but because of his untimely death, this never got beyond childhood memories. Shortly before his death he did recount the story of his life in a documentary made by Philo Bregstein.

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That the word egodocument became current was remarkable, but it did not lead to greater popularity of this type of texts among historians. With the exception of a thematic issue of "Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis", a major Dutch periodical, in 1970, historians preferred to give the anecdotal approach inherent in such texts a wide berth. Presser's preference for egodocuments did not enhance his reputation. The rather infelicitous title of his valedictory lecture, 'Clio peeps through the keyhole', did not promote more serious consideration of the subject. Presser found the general climate was against him. He knew that most historians were wary of egodocuments, and it was with some irony that he would quote the judgment by his colleague Romein from the latter's "De biografie": "the autobiography is the most dangerous of all sources". What was worse, was that the rising discipline of social and economic history had no place for this type of source at all. The young French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie had just prophesied that historians would thenceforth only be producing graphs at their computers. The then dominant Annales school regarded history as a social science, and the methods and techniques based on sociology did not leave room for a story, never mind a life story. In sociology itself the biographical approach, once an important method, had become controversial and marginal.

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