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## Knowledge is survival

The Netherlands in a hostile world, 1905-1919

The opening decades of the twentieth century were a dangerous time for the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The country was exceptionally vulnerable to international conflict. This was due to geographic and economic reasons. The Netherlands lay at the strategic junction of three great powers and controlled the mouths of three major rivers into the European interior. It possessed a vast and profitable but far away colony. Its proportion of overseas investment and dependence on foreign trade exceeded that of any other country in that era. It could not rely on force. The industrial revolution had exacerbated the military power gap between great and small.

Yet the Netherlands emerged intact from this era. This has been attributed to good luck, being strictly neutral, or the fact that Dutch neutrality happened to be in the interest of the great powers. None of this is true. The Netherlands maneuvered actively and successfully through the danger years. This could not have been accomplished without a good level of knowledge about the surrounding powers. Certainly the statesmen of the time appreciated this, and they actively gathered information about their neighbors.

### **Can we know what they knew?**

But how was it done? The great bureaucracies of today simply did not exist. The Dutch foreign ministry, for example, had fewer than 150 employees.

There are no massive archives to peruse. Politicians, diplomats, and soldiers developed sources, but they either kept their notes in the back pocket or took no notes at all. We are left with tantalizing references in memoirs and documents, the occasional oblique reference in a letter to a 'confidential source' or a 'source known to you,' and government actions that were probably a response to secret revelations; probably, but not certainly. Truly important conversations were sometimes unminuted. The logical positivist neo-scientific certainty modern historians are expected to produce is beyond our reach.

The foreign ministry gathered such information as it had via diplomats, who were expected to develop useful contacts and read newspapers, attempting to deduce if articles had been placed on the sly by governments (a very common practice then). The military and security services, such as they were, were only slightly more methodical. Officers were interested in information but not fond of spies and agents. There may have been some legitimate concerns about reliability. For example, the war minister received a report in 1913 from an 'espionage bureau' in Switzerland claiming that the Germans had plans to move through the northern provinces of Groningen and Friesland.<sup>1</sup> Correctly doubting this, he wondered whether this was a swindle (as money was asked for) or an attempt to misdirect Dutch deployment. But who or what was this 'espionage bureau'? Probably we shall never know.

Yet officers did develop their own sources of information. In the absence of an organized intelligence service, this was the only way. General C.J. Snijders, for example, had several confidential sources in neighboring countries (about whom he left no documents). Sometimes the initiatives taken by officers have a comical ring in our age of satellites and electronic interception. At the outbreak of the war amidst reports of the invasion of Belgium, the commandant at Maastricht simply sent a staff car to Visé to check for German troops (none were seen).

This informal approach to intelligence was not adequate (although, as will be explained below, it yielded two of the most spectacular espionage coups in modern Dutch history). In 1910 a border guard service was organized, followed three years later by the establishment of military intelligence (GS-III). Its exact founding date is in dispute. It was apparently

1 N. Bosboom, *In moeilijke omstandigheden: Augustus 1914 – Mei 1917* (Gorinchem: 1933) 23.

formed because the Minister of War was asking the Chief of Staff a lot of questions, which the latter could not answer. At first it was little more than a clipping service, scanning publications or relevant information. Eventually it would develop its own sources, but again, the exact date when this began is not known. The practice of individual officers maintaining their own foreign contacts continued. There was also growing concern about foreign espionage against the Netherlands, most notably the 'accidental' border crossings by German 'topographers' near Roermond and the flight of the Viktoria Luise over the fortifications of Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup>

### **Foreknowledge**

There are three areas in which Dutch espionage was successful: spying on foreign agents and legations during the war, anticipating the outbreak of the war, and foreseeing belligerent plans, in particular the Schlieffen plan. The wartime espionage was run through the new official intelligence agency, but the other successes resulted from informal intelligence.

### **The Schlieffen Plan**

The army was most interested in Germany. It could hardly have been otherwise, the German army being the only one in position to invade instantly. Not that other countries were ignored; in 1906 the Dutch had an astonishingly accurate calculation in hand for the size of a future British Expeditionary Force. However, this interesting tidbit pales beside the discovery of Germany's intentions to invade the Netherlands. Alfred von Schlieffen decided in 1905 to defeat France in a future war by a massive invasion through the low countries. War minister Bosboom recalled:

'Dat de Duitsche legerleiding by hare voorbereidingen een doormarsch door Limburg ernstig in overweging zou hebben genomen, behoefde niet te worden betwijfeld. Eenige jaren te voren waren mij uit particuliere, vrij betrouwbare, Duitsche bron, berichten toegekomen, die zelfs de aanwijzing van een vaststaand voornemen daartoe zou bevatten.'<sup>3</sup>

Bosboom's revelation is interesting because it was not until much later that

2 *New York Times*, 19 June 1912.

3 Bosboom, *In moeilijke omstandigheden*, 23.



Dutch minister of War Nicolaas Bosboom (1913-1917)

Germany conceded that this was indeed the plan. However, what is perhaps more interesting (and typical) is the way in which he obscures his source even further by adding the following footnote: ‘In 1906 of 1907. Kort voor of kort na het optreden van VON MOLTKE als chef van den generale staf.’<sup>4</sup>

Schlieffen retired involuntarily at the beginning of 1906. So this was a rather critical moment on the German General Staff in terms of leadership changes, appointments, and so on. Possibly Bosboom remembered very well, but by being vague about the date he made it even harder to determine who his source was.

The idea that southern Limburg might become an invasion route was not new. However, the timing of Bosboom’s information is too uncannily close to the development of the first Schlieffen Plan to believe that the revelation was merely a restatement of an older suspicion. How Bosboom got the information is pure speculation. He was stationed in Arnhem at the time, so a cross-border contact is not out of the question.

Only two things can be said with any certainty. The first is that the army became extremely active in terms of improving the defences of southern Limburg. This included deployment changes, maneuvers in 1907 which assumed invasions of Limburg and Brabant, and making plans to destroy the bridges across the Meuse, among others. Second, these preparations were certainly noticed by the Germans. Schlieffen always suspected that the Dutch would defend Maastricht, but in his postwar career he became so certain of this that he called for an extensive occupation and invasion of most of the southern Netherlands. Much more important was the decision taken by Helmuth von Moltke ca. 1909 to avoid the Netherlands completely,

4 Ibidem.

a decision largely based on military considerations and one with fateful consequences for Europe's path to war.

Officers began crossing into Germany with greater frequency to find out first hand what was happening during crises. The idea was hardly new; Dutchmen spied at Aachen in 1830, perhaps to monitor Prussian reactions to the Belgian revolt. In 1906 Captain M. D. A. Forbes Wels, later a critical link in passing along intelligence concerning the coming of war, travelled to Liège and Aachen to investigate rumors of a German invasion.<sup>5</sup> In 1911 captain (and future general) Willem Röell made at least two trips during the summer war scare, stopping at Düsseldorf, Cologne, Coblenz, Trier, and Moers to gather intelligence on troop concentrations. It was a more innocent age; at one stop he obtained information about where German reservists were going simply by asking them.<sup>6</sup> His reports were apparently considered important enough to be funnelled immediately to the minister of war. In general, the further south he went, the more activity he observed. He must have been an energetic man. His late August trip required him to take the night train on two hours' notice and return from his entire Rhine journey in 36 hours, probably followed by the immediate writing of a report.

### **A strange telegram and rapid mobilization**

The most significant bit of 'intel' produced by this rather ad hoc system of information gathering would make the Netherlands to be the first western European nation with its army in the field. Looked at from one angle, it is an unusual chapter in the history of espionage. We know the identity of the spy; we know the identity of the recipient of the message; and we know the actions that were taken afterwards. The only thing we do not know is what the spy actually saw.

In 1899, a young officer in the Royal Dutch Indies Army (KNIL) by the name of J. J. le Roy proposed the development of a telegraph network to the colonies that would skirt the British Empire. This received support because relations between the Netherlands and the United Kingdom declined in the following years — partly due to the Boer War, partly due to the pro-German

5 W. Klinkert, *Het vaderland verdedigd: Plannen en opvattingen over de verdediging van Nederland 1871-1914* (Den Haag 1992) 432.

6 Report of reconnaissance of VII and VIII German Army Corps Garrisons, 31 August 1911; Report, 5 August 1911; Report, 31 July 1911, Collectie Röell, nr. Toegang 21.000, ARA-II..

tendencies of Abraham Kuyper and his Anti-Revolutionary Party. The UK had censored other governments' telegrams during the war, so the concern about being completely dependent on the goodwill of the British Empire was hardly unfounded. Le Roy pointed out that 20 of 23 cable companies that worked the globe were headquartered in London (interestingly enough he also expressed concern about the pan-Islamic movement).

Le Roy had a series of meetings with German and Dutch officials which led to the formation in 1904 of the *Deutsch-Niederländische Telegraphengesellschaft* (DNTG), with Le Roy and a German official as directors. The company was subsidized by both governments but was expected to pay most of its own costs. Without Le Roy's energetic persistence the DNTG might never have come into being. Officials at both the foreign and colonial ministries mistrusted him, something that continued into later years as well. However, le Roy had his telegraph company, the stations were built, and the Dutchman was now ensconced in Cologne as a company director.

On 25 July 1914 Le Roy sent a telegram to his friend M.D.A. Forbes Wels, major on the general staff. The contents of the telegram were the words *API API*, which is Malayan for 'fire.' The telegram was actually received by the major's son (and future officer himself), Peter, who was expecting a congratulatory telegram for having passed his high school exit exams. Not understanding the telegram in the least, he gave it to his father, who immediately dashed out the door to notify the acting chief of staff, Col. Dufour. The following day, the first mobilization telegrams went out; the bridge destruction plans in Limburg were immediately activated.

The telegram, which was accidentally rediscovered during a postwar file cleanup, leaves a rather obvious question behind. What was it based on? Forbes Wels and Le Roy had apparently agreed that the latter would send a message in case of war, but it is inconceivable that the General Staff would have begun mobilization without having a somewhat more specific indicator in mind. The possibility of a clash between Serbia and Austria alone hardly would seem to warrant such a step. However, there is also evidence that le Roy would send the telegram if he anticipated German mobilization. Being in Cologne, he was well positioned to observe activity there, but that could also be done by means of sending officers across the border à la Röell. (Indeed, such missions were ordered.) So it seems more likely that his position atop a semiofficial telegraph company gave him access to information. However, he also had many German contacts that

might have given him information. We know that he and Forbes Wels had established a foundation for the sending of the telegram; but what it was is not certain. As many of the German army's actions in the last two weeks of July were and are deliberately shrouded from us, we simply cannot be sure.

What we can be sure about is the result. The General Staff acted immediately on the basis of le Roy's telegram — even in the absence of the Chief of Staff, who was vacationing in Germany and whose return was urgently requested on the 26th. (This suggests that Forbes Wels was not the only officer who knew the basis of le Roy's telegram.) As already mentioned, the Netherlands would be the first country in western Europe to mobilize. As an unquestioned neutral it was the one country that could do so without exciting a hostile response (the Belgian situation was more complicated). The mobilization is sometimes dismissed because of Moltke's earlier decision to avoid the Netherlands but this overlooks the incredible temptation that an undefended Limburg would have been for the German army — especially as we now know that Moltke had every intention of crossing the Netherlands if the Liège assault took too long.

Does the fate of the protagonists tell us anything about the significance of the episode? Not much. Forbes Wels clearly prospered, finishing his career as lieutenant general and chief of staff. In 1920 Le Roy received a promotion to the rank of major in the colonial army, presumably for retirement purposes as he was 52 by that time and the DNTG was history, its assets seized at Versailles because of its German origins. Le Roy himself worked with the colonial ministry and Telefunken during the war to develop a radio-telegraphic connection with the Indies but the colonial government remained mistrustful, apparently perceiving le Roy as too pro-German.

### **Information gathering in wartime**

The war created a completely different environment for espionage. On the one hand, the belligerents were far more alert to espionage — fearing Dutch spying might lead to a transfer of secrets to enemies. On the other hand, the Dutch needed to do know much more. Obviously there was the need for acquiring technical military knowledge, but there was also the need to monitor the activities of foreign officers and officials. The latter were active, spying on the Dutch military but even more interested in generating propaganda, massaging public opinion, and, of course, spying on each other.



A coastal patrol of the Dutch army

### **Intelligence expands**

In 1911 Snijders went to Berlin to visit German maneuvers and was appalled with the legation's complete lack of knowledge about German war preparations.<sup>7</sup> The absence of military attaches at the legations had a lot to do with this. Dutch officers did go on official visits to foreign military sites but these visits required a lot of work to arrange, were usually short, and dependent on the goodwill of the host country. Ironically Austria was much less accommodating than Germany.

The war changed the situation drastically. The GS-III staff grew from 1 to 25, while another 35 people worked on codebreaking for the newly-established GS-IV. As a result, both German and British codes were deciphered and the army was therefore able to let the government know what the envoys and their staffs were telling their governments throughout the war, an immensely useful form of knowledge. Eight radio intercept stations were established, and private transmitters that interfered with them were shut down. Propaganda efforts were monitored, especially the attempts by foreign agents to 'place' articles in Dutch newspapers. GS-III actively worked with the regular police to track and arrest foreign spies, although

7 A.J. Vinke, 'De Nederlandse militaire attaché 1907-1923' (Unpublished paper prepared at the Royal Military Academy, 1984) 35.



sometimes known foreign spy chiefs were asked to share information on their enemies — with the threat their agents would be arrested if they did not comply. The local police were more than happy to help, especially as GS-III had funds to compensate them. The appointment of military attaches finally became a reality in 1916, not without some resistance, and with somewhat general instructions: to study the current war. This they did; the attache in Berlin sent many reports, and the attache in Paris even fought in the front line. Snijders learned much, and not unnaturally became increasingly pessimistic.

### **Across the border**

The growth of GS-III did not mean that the old tradition of cross-border trips was abandoned. The so-called 'kondschappers' were not really considered spies (not by the Dutch, at least) but were supposed to be individuals with a legitimate reason for crossing the border and they were only to report back on what was publicly visible. To call it an old tradition is a bit of an understatement; the first instruction for this kind of service dates from 1651. The army was divided about its usefulness, but Snijders certainly endorsed it. Penetrating the occupied zone of Belgium proved extremely difficult, however. Few Dutchmen were able to penetrate Germany's increasingly strict border controls. The Germans definitely considered kondschappers spies, not surprising as their remit included the reporting of troop strengths, regimental numbers, and weaponry. More successful were officers' trips into Germany, which continued unabated during the war and were used to obtain both military deployment details and readings about German public opinion.

### **Getting caught**

The German government was anything but pleased with these expeditions, suspecting (correctly) that some Dutchmen crossing the border were in service to governments other than their own. A political crisis flared when the German consul in Amsterdam obtained a questionnaire that a Dutch officer was supposed to give his brothers, who were volunteers in German field hospitals. The questionnaire was extensive — some 60 topics were asked about, many of them involving highly specific military details. The German foreign office was concerned, the German army even more so. Loudon and

Cort van der Linden assured the German envoy that no information would be transmitted to Germany's enemies and emphasized that the government had nothing to do with the the questionnaire. The general staff likewise denied any involvement. Loudon went so far as to say he was 'pained' by the envoy's suggestion that information was being gathered on behalf of the Entente. The origin of the questionnaire was never resolved.

### **Disformation**

The other side of obtaining information is the supplying of false information. Here the Netherlands was more likely victim than perpetrator. Several times, Germany signaled that the British were planning to invade, while occasionally 'tips' came from the Entente that Germany was about to seize Dutch ports. On the whole these were not very effective because analysts and officials in The Hague saw them for what they were for; to focus Dutch attention on threats from elsewhere. On the other hand, in one or two cases beneficial disinformation did flow out of the Netherlands, but it is not even clear that the Dutch were themselves involved.

In 1918 the Netherlands came closer to war than at any time since the outbreak. Germany demanded the use of critical railways and Erich Ludendorff proposed invasion and occupation, if necessary. The German military attaché in The Hague reported that the Netherlands could put one million soldiers in the field. This was at least the third time that German officials had overestimated the size of the Dutch military, and it was the biggest overestimate. In reality, the Dutch army if remobilized could field 450,000 men at most. What accounted for the error? Was someone feeding von Schweinitz false information? Or, as seems more likely, was the major exaggerating the situation to discourage the elements at German army headquarters who favored invading the Netherlands? We shall never know.

### **The last days**

In the last phase of the war clandestine work faced an interesting change of circumstances; the enemy changed from the Germans and the Entente powers to Belgium and the Bolsheviks. If the behavior of the former produced indignation, the latter were viewed as far more dangerous. Europe was convulsed with revolutionary activity in 1918-1920 and the Netherlands was no exception. GS-III at first was not very interested in the activities of

the Dutch communist SDP (Social Democratic Party; Communist Party in the Netherlands after November 1918) but this changed rapidly after the Bolshevik revolution, especially because intercept service GS-IV and the Amsterdam police discovered telegrams passing between SDP leader David Wijnkoop and the Soviets. GS-III began to work actively to infiltrate and monitor subversive organizations, working so closely with local police that their activities were virtually indistinguishable. The army mutiny in October-November 1918 added particular urgency. GS-III extended its activities against subversives by contacting the Germans, and, even amidst the annexation crisis (see below), the Belgians. After the unsuccessful revolution of November 1918, GS-III focused more and more on domestic matters and subversion within the army; the result was the creation of the civilian 'Centrale Inlichtingendienst' which absorbed some of GS-III's domestic work.

The clandestine actions surrounding Belgian irredentism in 1919 worked through very different channels. Basically, there were three underground operations. First, Belgium sought to develop public support in Limburg and Zeeuws Vlaanderen for annexation. This was a complete failure. Second, there was the Dutch counter effort to maintain public support for staying Dutch. This was successful and public — but it was supported, as was the public diplomatic campaign in Paris, by secret donations from various private groups; Rotterdam financial interests, for example, were willing to pay to prevent the Scheldt from being lost to Belgium, which would of course have benefited Antwerp. Finally, there were clandestine efforts to discover and penetrate pro-Belgian groups in Limburg and to embarrass the Belgian government — for which the Dutch government had to do remarkably little, as Flemish activists were more than willing to leak information, such as the foreign ministry's continued attempts to maintain a network of agents in Limburg. GS-III's role in all this was rather small, mainly concerned with rumors of a planned Belgian invasion.

## **Conclusion**

The years of the Great War are a remarkable chapter in the history of Dutch espionage. Without the many clandestine efforts, the Netherlands would have been more vulnerable to the threat of war, revolution, and loss of territory. Unfortunately in the postwar years the success of these efforts was ignored, along with many of the diplomatic and military initiatives of the

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era. A somewhat naive perception of how the Netherlands had remained secure in this era would leave the country poorly prepared for the next great upheaval.