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Democracy or Dictatorship: An American reaction to the developments in The Netherlands between 1935 and 1945



by Bert Hopman

This article deals with the attitude of Americans and particularly with the attitude of the Dutch-Americans in Michigan toward the events in The Netherlands between 1935 and 1945. Even though Americans were isolationists, the Dutch-Americans quickly realized that the dictator wanted not only to gain world power but also to destroy Christianity. According to the Dutch-Americans, life's greatest values were at stake.

Mary Maples Dodge's story about a little Dutch boy

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who prevented a dike from bursting by placing his finger in the hole is more than a nice little story for children. It informs us that dangers have to be detected early or they can grow to horrible extremities, such as fascism and national socialism did in Europe.

Democracy in The Netherlands at Stake?

The Netherlands was in the middle of an economic crisis in the pre-war years 1935 to 1940. Many people were unemployed (30 percent); as a result, many were receptive to the influence of fascist movements. The effectiveness of the democratic political system was openly discussed. It was therefore not a surprise that the Dutch fascist party, founded in 1931 under the name "Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging" (NSB), attracted an increasing number of Dutch people. Nevertheless, politicians were surprised when in 1935 the NSB gained 7.9 percent of the total votes of the First Chamber (Staten Generaal) elections.

The developments in Germany opened the eyes of voters more and more because old Dutch values of tolerance and democracy were being violated. Two years later the NSB lost the Second Chamber elections and their share dropped from 7.9 to 4.2 percent. Democracy was on the rise. Dictator Hitler had become an enemy in The Netherlands. It was in those years that the Dutch churches, both Catholic and Protestant, openly warned their members that membership in fascist organizations was in conflict with the principles of Christianity.

Isolationism

Between 1935 and 1940, the United States was not interested in Europe any longer. After the frustra-

tions of the post World War I discussions, the United States had turned its back to Europe, feeling safe between the two oceans. For example, Van Balluseck, the managing director of the principal Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Handelsblad*, reported from his trips through the United States that he was told everywhere that the United States was not going to fight for Europe again.¹ Hugh Brogan tells us in *Pelican History of the United States of America* that even as late as 1940, only 7.7 percent of all Americans were ready to enter the war (574). And Stephen E. Ambrose wrote in *Rise to Globalism* that isolationism reigned in the Congress, "reflecting a national mood." He refers to the United States in that chapter as "the reluctant giant" (2). "The American First Committee" founded in those years told Americans that "the mistake" of 1917 should not be repeated.

The Real Issue

When reading periodicals like *The Banner* and *The Calvin Forum*—papers that reflected the opinion of the leaders of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Michigan—one can see that events in The Netherlands were overshadowed by events in Europe, and particularly by those in Italy and Germany.

The Banner and *The Calvin Forum* discussed pacifism and anti-pacifism. Pacifists warned their readers about the power of war industry in the United States. They were also afraid of British imperialism, which they denoted as a power in itself. In 1935 B. Mulder was the spokesman of this opinion (53).

Those who opposed Mulder argued that war could be supported if it was a just war. Did not Israel fight just wars in the Old Testament? And did not the Dutch fight a just war against the Spaniards in the Eighty Years' War to protect their religion? And last, but not least, did not the Americans fight a just war in the American Revolution?

H.J. Kuiper, editor of *The Banner*, wrote in 1934 that a Calvinist could not be a pacifist because, as he said, "Mañ is prone to mischief." He further saw war as part of life, or in his words, "Wars are bound to come" (317).

However, isolationism prevailed in Dutch-American circles. The Dutch also felt the frustrations of the developments in politics after World

War I. But some, at least, kept their eyes open for what really was going on in Europe.

There was indeed a little boy who saw the danger and wanted to put a finger in the hole of the dike! That was Clarence Bouma, the managing editor of *The Calvin Forum*. In his article "The Struggle Between Democracy and Dictatorship," written in December 1936, he explained that the European struggle was not just a political battle between fascism and communism, as it appeared. The deeper issue was the future of democratic government. He foresaw two conflicting forces: democracy and dictatorship. If war comes, wrote Bouma, the real issue at stake will be the free institutions, religious as well

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as political, of democracies such as Great Britain, France, Holland, and others (101).

In the April 1937 issue, Bouma plumbed the depths of the real issue by saying: "Those who tell us that nazism and communism are two sworn enemies of Christianity are right. Those who think that the issue is merely an economic or political one need only to study the spirit and philosophy of these two dictator nations thoroughly to be convinced of the error of their diagnosis."

The Dutch-Americans closely followed the developments in the German church. The German church crisis helped them to detect what was really going on in national-socialist Germany. The Dutch church press with its close relations in Germany was very helpful in this process.

There was no freedom of religion in Germany any longer. Bouma in "Germany and Russia Have Not Repented" wrote about the German church election: "This promises to be a farce in what was once the most educated and enlightened nation on earth" (196). The German church appeared to be under great pressure to accept "germanification." That would mean loss of independence and acceptance of state control and state obedience. In "Church Heroes" of August 1937 Bouma wrote: "God is raising up martyrs in the country of Luther. Persecution is the acid test of the Christian church" (4).

The Forum gave special attention to the German clergyman (and ex-submarine commander) Martin Niemöller, who was sent to a concentration camp by Hitler's political machine. The Swiss Karl Barth, theological professor in Germany, who was later expelled from Germany, also attracted some attention in CRC circles. This was the man who in 1935 had openly said in Germany that the church could not be expected to follow Jesus Christ and Hitler at the same time.

The Forum concluded that Hitler wanted to take away the Jewish basis of the church, which corresponded with Germany's anti-semitism. The church risked being incorporated in the national-socialist philosophy that hated the Jews and despised the weak people in society. The dictator Hitler was organizing the rule and regulation of the conscience of the German believer.

In 1938, a year before World War II broke out, *The Forum* openly emphasized that the survival of democracy depended on the United States and England. This was a reaction to Hitler's invasion of Austria on March 13. Its managing editor, C. Bouma, wrote: "This is Teutonic paganism with the new trinity to be worshipped: Hitler, Goebbels and Rosenberg." The persecution of the Jewish Austrians was clearly signalled in that same article: "The Jew hater Streicher has put up his headquarters at Vienna . . . Prisons and concentration camps will soon do their deadly work" (195).

The Netherlands Rudderless

After the Germans occupied The Netherlands in May 1940, the Dutch were impressed by Germany's military power but also confused by the German efforts to consider the Dutch as their Germanic "brothers." Very soon, however, the Dutch understood what their attitude should be. Their attitude was strengthened by Queen Wilhelmina's speeches from London, which reflected the higher values at stake.

The Germans started their nazification program, which meant that the existing political parties were forbidden. The trade unions were forced to merge into one Nazi union. And of course, the press and the radio broadcasts were put under strict control. Freedom was over, or, in the words of Queen Wilhelmina, "The lights over Holland have gone out."

The Dutch population had lost its democratic instruments and a considerable number of its political leaders as well, who were sent to hostage camps. The country was rudderless. It is understandable that the churches, visited by about 80 percent of the Dutch people, became important meeting places, especially because meetings not having a Nazi purpose were forbidden. Although the churches were not a bulwark for the resistance, the Bible contained sufficient messages for the minister to console and encourage the listener, and thus the church strengthened the spiritual resistance of the believers. Dr. L. de Jong, the official historian of World War II in The Netherlands, emphasized in volume 5 the importance of this resistance in the war (659).

Sympathy

Americans reacted to the events in that small country on the other side of the ocean in sympathy. It could be not more than that as Hitler's "blitzkrieg" in Europe had changed the whole political world.

When Queen Wilhelmina visited Washington on August 7, 1942, she delivered a speech which according to the *New York Times* was received by the Senate with great enthusiasm. The paper spoke about a "queen of undaunted Holland." Queen Wilhelmina took the opportunity to emphasize that the United States was important in saving the world for democracy. She also referred to the historical ties between the United States and The Netherlands.

The Dutch felt that the isolationism of the United States had lasted long enough—too long. Americans understood those feelings. This realization appeared in an advertisement of December 21, 1942, in *Life*, reproduced in *De Wervelwind*, a booklet in color that was dropped by the Allied Air Forces over Holland. In the picture you see a very worried Dutch farmer in his wooden shoes. The caption says: "Patience, Pieter, patience . . . We here in American were caught off guard . . . we have been too confident" (#9).

Brave Little Holland

The editor of *The Banner* wrote in 1939, when World War II broke out, that war was nothing to be proud of; it was just sowing the seed for the next. However, the fall of France, the isolation of England, and especially the invasion of The

Netherlands did turn sentiment, as James Bratt observed (153).

Calvin Forum's editor C. Bouma, when Germany occupied The Netherlands, emphasized that the war in Europe was of a different magnitude than before when it had been a balance-of-power conflict. In an article, "At Last America is Waking Up," he pointed out that the battle was for human rights, for freedom as a citizen, and for freedom of religion, that: "A civilization deeply molded by Christianity is being crushed beneath the heel of this triumphant demon . . . and is in jeopardy throughout the world." In the same article he quoted Queen Wilhelmina who had said right after her escape from Holland that it was not just a matter of losing or winning a war, but that our higher values, our ideals, and our Christian civilization were at stake. *The Forum* called her speech: "Heroic words of a queenly queen (235).

Bouma was convinced that Holland would survive. In his article "Brave Little Holland" Bouma wrote: "The Dutch spirit is not crushed. It is only purified and strengthened. The Germans have taken Holland but they have not taken the Dutch. Brave little Holland, we greet you across the Atlantic. We admire you . . . because we see you standing on the side of freedom" (84-5).

Under the title "The Faith of a Calvinist" (March 1941), *The Forum* quoted the words of the Dutch prime minister Dr. P.S. Gerbrandy: "The structure of the states of England and The Netherlands are in the last analysis proof against the Nazi doctrine . . . because they are built on a rock. The state conception of Mussolini and Hitler are built on the shifting sands of myths. Hitler's house—he went on in his biblical language—will surely fall, and its fall will be tremendous."

The Dutch Americans of the CRC followed closely the developments in The Netherlands and particularly what was happening in the Dutch churches, in which they knew there was the will to resist. In 1943 Bouma wrote that he was proud of the students of the Calvinist Free University who almost to the man refused to sign a declaration of obedience to the occupation authorities (230).²

Bouma was also proud of the attitude of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. In "The Church in Holland" Bouma wrote that the Dutch Nazi leader had said that the intellectuals and the church were the nucleus of the opposition. He cited

the Dutch cabinet minister Dr. J.W.F. Burger who had said in a speech in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, early 1943, that only one body raised its voice openly in Holland and that was the church (251).

Conclusion

We can conclude from the above that the CRC leaders, as good followers of Mary Dodge, had discovered the dangers in an early stage. The dangers of the Nazi regime were clearer to the Dutch-Americans than to the average American. That is understandable. They had their roots in Europe. They had their religious cousins in The Netherlands. They wanted to know what was go-

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ing on in the country of their ancestors where the Calvinistic belief was the basis for the thinking of many people. By this contact they could see through the eyes of the church leaders in The Netherlands what was going on in Germany. The growth of a dictatorial regime coincided with the conversion of the German church into an institution that would become part of the National-Socialist philosophy with its anti-Jewish attitude.

The real issue of the war, they concluded, was not only the fight between democracy and dictatorship, but also a fight for Christianity. The suffering in The Netherlands was respectfully approached and described by Bouma in "The Problem of Peace": "Brave, heroic Holland cannot help standing out in this European picture. Yes Holland, we have watched you and admired you. These have been five terrible, demonic, but also glorious years in your history. No nation in Western Europe has suffered as have you. But you have been great in your suffering." Those words make clear that The Netherlands had survived quite well spiritually. Holland's material survival was possible, thanks to the effective Marshall Aid Program..

The Dutch-Americans were very happy that their fatherland was back as an independent country. *The Calvin Forum* translated part of Bilderdijk's poem, which expressed what they felt.³

Again shall Holland live and strive
and fly her flag once more

her ships shall greet the unborn day
as in the days of yore.

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NOTES

- 1 A. Lammers, *Uncle Sam en Jan Salie* (Amsterdam 1989) 136.
- 2 C. Bouma, "The Free University of Amsterdam Closed," *CF* 8 (1943) 230. Ninety-eight percent of the students refused to sign. The Catholic University showed the same result. The figures of other universities ranged from 75 to 92 percent.
- 3 C. Bouma, "Conditions in The Netherlands," *CF* 10 (1945) 158. Willem Bilderdijk is a famous Dutch poet (1756-1831). The strophe has been taken from the poem "Afscheid."