Examining the Dutch Resistance Movement During World War II

Abstract

*This paper is an analysis of the Dutch resistance movement during World War II. During the German occupation of the Netherlands, 102,000 Dutch Jews were deported and killed, which amounted to approximately 75 percent of the pre-war Jewish population in the Netherlands. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of Dutch civilians were forced to work in German work camps to fuel the German war machine. Despite this, only 4% of Dutch citizens participated in the resistance movement. This paper will examine the roles of these resistance fighters, as well as several primary sources that demonstrate their importance and significance. It will explain that resistance work was incredibly dangerous work done by many local organizations that when combined formed a national movement. The resistance movement was recognized and encouraged by the Dutch government in exile and was viewed as a threat by the German occupiers. Ultimately, members of the resistance movement should be viewed as heroes who were willing to stand up to the evil of the Nazi regime and risk their lives for freedom.*

The Netherlands was invaded by Germany on May 10, 1940. Five days later, the Dutch surrendered. For five long years the nation was under German occupation, until it was liberated by allied troops largely composed of Canadian soldiers. Throughout the years of occupation, there was an effort by Dutch citizens to resist their German occupiers. This resistance movement is the focus of this paper. The first section of the paper will be an overview of some of the key academic discussions surrounding this topic, and it is here where I will outline my thesis, and attempt to situate myself within the scholarly conversation. The second section of the paper will focus on conditions during the war, and the variety of actions that were undertaken by the resistance movement. The third section will be an analysis of two primary sources; the first being a speech by Dutch Prime Minister P.S. Gerbrandy, and the second a memo regarding the attempts of the German occupiers to control the information sector. These primary sources combine nicely to emphasize the importance of the resistance movement. The essay will conclude on a more personal note by recognizing several of my ancestors who were members of the Dutch resistance during World War II.

There has been much written about the Dutch resistance to the German Occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. While most of the literature is in Dutch, there is still a sufficient amount of scholarly material available for English speakers to draw upon for research. For several decades after the war the resistance was hailed as a national success and the historiography mirrored this sense of Dutch nationalism. However, a few decades after the war the scholarly discussions surrounding the resistance shifted, and many historians began to ask whether the majority of Dutch civilians were complicit in genocide, or whether they did enough to protect the vulnerable. Much of this discussion was due to the reality that a greater percentage of Jews in the Netherlands perished during World War II than in any other country in Western Europe.[[1]](#footnote-1) Additionally, the number of citizens that actively participated in resistance efforts was relatively low when compared to other countries like Belgium, where the percentage of citizens who participated in the resistance was four times what it was in the Netherlands.[[2]](#footnote-2) In recent years, there have been several studies focused on examining the prevalence of PTSD and emotional trauma found in veterans of the resistance movement. It was indeed a very difficult time for many resistance members, as of the 45,000 people who were a part of the movement, around 10,000 lost their lives.[[3]](#footnote-3) Another central conversation among scholars is whether to examine the resistance on a national or local scale. Ultimately, this paper will utilize a combination of primary and secondary sources to enter this scholarly conversation in three main ways. First, the paper will analyze conditions in the Netherlands during the war, and the nature of the Nazi regime to emphasize the difficult conditions faced by members of the resistance. Secondly, the paper will examine some of the main tasks undertaken by resistance groups and will highlight that although these tasks were mostly nonviolent, they made a difference and undoubtedly saved thousands of lives. Thirdly, the paper will use two primary sources, a speech from Dutch Prime Minister P.S. Gerbrandy, and a memo in the British war correspondence, to demonstrate that the Dutch resistance in World War II should be viewed as a national movement composed of local groups. The resistance was understood as a national movement both by the Dutch government, as well as the German occupiers, and was seen by the former as an opportunity for non-violent rejection of German policy, and by the latter as a real threat to their legitimacy.

The Netherlands was under German occupation for five years, from 1940 to 1945. Jeroen Dewulf is a scholar who focuses on the low countries, and explains that with regards to the Netherlands, Hitler ultimately desired, “the Nazification and Germanization of the country, followed by its dissolution and absorption into a greater Germany.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Unlike eastern European countries, the Germans did not wish to annihilate the Netherlands. Instead, they hoped that they would be able to utilize the Dutch infrastructure and manpower to aid in Germany’s war effort. As a result, for much of the population, life during the early years of the war was not as radically different as one might expect. Dutch scholar Werner Wermbrunn refers to the first four years of the war as “The Long Wait”, which spanned from 1940-1944.[[5]](#footnote-5) Historian J.C.H Blom argues that for the majority of Dutch citizens in this part of the war it was “as if the normal routine went on as before.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

When discussing the Netherlands during World War II, one might initially assume that citizens were part of one of two groups; either they were Nazi collaborators, or they were part of the resistance. The reality was that most citizens were neither collaborators, nor resistance members. Blom explains that, “for most people it was not the choice between collaboration and resistance that came to mind, rather a concern to stay out of harms way as far as possible.”[[7]](#footnote-7) As a result, for most of the war, Dutch civilians were actually quite passive. In terms of numbers, the estimation is that, “in the Netherlands approximately 45,000 people were involved in the actual resistance activities during the Second World War.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This amounted to only 4% of the population.[[9]](#footnote-9)

While the lives of many civilians proceeded relatively normally, this was not the case for Jewish people living in the Netherlands. Tragically, the number of Dutch Jews who perished during the Holocaust was extremely high. Historians Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller explain that, “in the Netherlands at least 102,000 of the prewar Jewish community of 140,000 were deported and killed – about 75 per cent.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In February 1941, there was a general strike in Amsterdam after a public outrage over the forced deportation of hundreds of Jews.[[11]](#footnote-11) The Germans violently repressed this strike, and this violent repression led many resistance members to begin their work.[[12]](#footnote-12) Another reason that individuals became involved in the resistance movement was because of the large number of men that were sent to work in Germany. The unemployed in particular were vulnerable to being sent to Germany as part of the Arbeitseinsatz (forced labour in Germany).[[13]](#footnote-13) Blom explains that an estimated 100,000 men were sent to work in Germany during the first six months of the war, and by July 1944 there were around 530,000 Dutch men working in Germany.[[14]](#footnote-14)

These examples demonstrate that often the people involved in the Dutch resistance did not choose to join; rather, as Blom explains: “they tended to ‘find’ themselves in it.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The closer someone felt to the war, the more likely they were to join the resistance. For example, if a woman’s husband and sons were forced to work in Germany as part of the Arbeitseinsatz, she would be more likely to join the resistance than a mother whose husband and sons had stable jobs in the Netherlands. There were also many Jews involved in the resistance, which is important to note because often there is a stereotype that Jews were simply passive victims during the war.[[16]](#footnote-16) Indeed, members of the resistance came from a variety of backgrounds. The resistance was made up of men and women, young and old, Jewish and non-Jewish, Protestants and Catholics, and people of many different political views.[[17]](#footnote-17)

While Werner characterizes the first phase of the war as “the long wait” from 1940-1944, he characterizes the second phase of the war as “the final winter” of 1944-1945.[[18]](#footnote-18) During this stage of the war the majority of the Dutch population was affected. At times, the Caloric intake in the worst of the affected areas of the Netherlands was a miniscule 619 calories a day.[[19]](#footnote-19) During this phase of the war, nearly the entirety of the Dutch civilian population experienced “great hardship and tragedy.”[[20]](#footnote-20) It was in this phase of the war that the resistance movement really gained traction. More people were directly impacted by German policies and repression, and in addition the end of the war seemed imminent as the Allies were getting closer to liberating the Netherlands. Scholars Wypbrand Op den Velde, Ellen Frey-Wouters, and Henk E. Pelser explain that that, “from September 1944 onwards an army was put together in top secrecy, and trained to assist the eventual advance of the allied forces.”[[21]](#footnote-21) At this stage in the war, members of the resistance were prepared for violence.

While in the later stage of the war violence was on the table, the reality was that most resistance work was non-violent. Much of the resistance work was centered around providing shelter for certain individuals, including “to the Jews, to young men unwilling to do forced labour in Germany, to wanted resistance workers, and to members of the Allied air forces who bailed out over Dutch territory.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Another major priority for the resistance was communication. Later in this essay there will be an analysis of primary sources that will highlight the importance of this. During the occupation there was a heavy censorship of the press, and if caught listening to British radio one could be imprisoned. The resistance was also involved with distributing pamphlets and working with the Dutch government in exile in England.[[23]](#footnote-23) The Dutch government would send intelligence agents from England who would link up with resistance groups. Resistance groups would in turn provide these agents with information that was brought back to the Dutch government.[[24]](#footnote-24) Ultimately, “resistance work meant being in constant danger”[[25]](#footnote-25) and for many years after the war “members of the resistance suffered from vulnerability, recurrent fears, and emotional dislocation.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The next section of this paper will examine several primary sources. The first is a speech that was read out on the “Radio Orange” broadcast on April 4, 1944. Radio Orange was a radio program that was recorded in the UK and broadcast to people in the Netherlands during the war. This particular speech was made by Dutch President P.S. Gerbrandy, who at the time was the president of the Council of Ministers to the Personnel in Government Service. At this point in early 1944, Gerbrandy told the Dutch people that Germany’s defeat and the liberation of the Netherlands was, “clearly approaching.”[[27]](#footnote-27) It was also at this point in the war that the Germans had begun to force more and more men to leave the Netherlands to work in Germany. Gerbrandy’s feelings about this are evident. He states that, “the slave drive of the occupier continues. The enemy shrinks from no violation of the law. He wants to employ more and more people in his own war industry.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Gerbrandy also commends and encourages the resistance workers in the Netherlands, saying that their work against the German occupiers, “has not been in vain.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Gerbrandy goes beyond simply commending them, however. He also asks for employees to make sure that they have as many people as possible working for them, as a way for these people to avoid forced labour in Germany.[[30]](#footnote-30) He asks for people to be unselfish, as, “this is no time at which it is sufficient only to care for one’s family.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Finally, he states:

If resistance were always easy and without possible consequences, if the struggle against the enemy were always easy and without danger, then the word “patriot” would lose its meaning, and the honoured title of “fighter” would become a meaningless sound for always.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Ultimately, this speech highlights the idea that the resistance was a national effort, coordinated by local groups. People were encouraged to protect those closest to them like their neighbours and employees. In doing so, they were serving the country as a whole and acting as patriots and fighters.

The second primary source that this paper will examine is a memo that was sent from a Mr. T. Harman to British Air Commander Groves and Major Ryder on May 18, 1943. Not much more information is given in the archive regarding these men. The memo is a report on conditions in the Netherlands during this time, and specifically focuses on German efforts to repress and control information. This memo provides context to the importance of the resistance effort in providing information services to the Dutch people. By this point in 1943, the Germans had begun to confiscate individual radio sets. In the memo, Harman states that, “Seyss-Inquart has decreed that radio sets in Holland must be given up, apparently by May 22nd.”[[33]](#footnote-33) This was seen as devastating to many people. Harman asserts that many people felt that radios were, “as essential as food itself.”[[34]](#footnote-34) People longed for a reliable news source during the war. Harman states three reasons for the confiscation of the radio sets. The first was that the Germans feared that the radio sets would help the Dutch in “sustaining morale and resistance generally.”[[35]](#footnote-35) This shows the importance of radio sets for the resistance effort. Being able to know what was going on outside of the country ended up both inspiring resistance and sustaining morale throughout the nation. The second thing that the Germans were worried about was that radios would be effective “in transmitting specific orders and instructions from the Dutch government.”[[36]](#footnote-36) In the paragraph above, a speech from Prime Minister Gerbrandy was analyzed. It is evident that the Germans were right to worry about this, and throughout the war members of the Dutch government made speeches to encourage resistance and give specific instructions. Finally, the Germans were worried about the use of radio sets, “as a medium for operational instructions to the Dutch.”[[37]](#footnote-37) This was also a fear that was proved to be well founded. The Dutch resistance received operational instructions as the Allies got closer to liberating the Netherlands. Ultimately, this memo shows that the Germans were concerned about the resistance of the Dutch. It shows that many local resistance groups created a national movement that instilled concern in a much stronger German force. Ultimately, Jeroen Dewulf sums it up well when he states: “the Dutch resistance was, as Van Randwijk once observed, essentially a Bourgeois form of resistance that avoided direct confrontation, but that on the basis of a shared national consciousness and an attachment to freedom stubbornly opposed the intentions of the German propaganda to Nazify and Germanize Dutch society.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

I was inspired to write this research paper because several of my ancestors were involved in the Dutch resistance efforts during the Second World War. My great-grandfather Herman Van Bostelen was the leader of an armed resistance group in the Anna Paulowna Polder from August 1944 to the liberation on May 5, 1945. He received a personal thank you letter from Prince Bernhard after the war. Additionally, my mother’s great-grandparents Cornelis and Jentina Flokstra were also extremely involved in the resistance effort. These brave people held between 10 and 13 Jewish people on their farm throughout the war.[[39]](#footnote-39) At one point, the German police had received information that they were hiding Jews on their property, and they stormed the farm. However, despite being beaten and held at gunpoint, they refused to give away the location of the hidden Jews on their property.[[40]](#footnote-40) Members of the Dutch resistance were a minority group within Dutch society who acted courageously and displayed compassion for the most vulnerable members of their nation. They risked their lives in their everyday actions, and many lived away from their families for extended periods of time. Many people lost their lives as well. Members of the Dutch resistance movement ought to be remembered with all due respect and admiration because of their willingness to fight against the evil of the Nazi regime.

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