Seeking Peace in the Wake of War

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‘Liberators and Patriots’

Military Interim Rule and the Politics of Transition in the Netherlands, 1944-1945

Peter Romijn

Between Liberation and Peace

In September 1944, British and American forces occupied the strategically important Dutch town of Nijmegen as part of Operation Market Garden. After several days of heavy fighting, an emergency issue of the first local newspaper appeared. ‘The yoke of slavery is cast off now’, announced the acting mayor. He expressed his delight about the arrival of the Allies and told the citizens to behave in a disciplined way, as the war was not over yet. The front page displayed three more solemn statements. A proclamation by Queen Wilhelmina promised a swift transition to freedom and normalcy: ‘the Netherlands shall rise again!’ The Prime Minister, Pieter S. Gerbrandy, announced that a temporary state of siege had been declared, under which the Allied commanders would exert the highest administrative authority. The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, told the citizens that he had assumed that authority, and added, ‘all means at our disposal will be required in order to dispel the enemy from your country. The battle will bring you much more deprivation [...] but be patient, the end is near.’ Thus, the transition from occupation to liberation, from oppression to independence, and from war to peace, began as a period of interim rule by the Allied military. The dynamics of this crucial episode and its impact on the restoration of the Dutch state after German occupation is the topic of this chapter.

More than six decades after the end of the Second World War, the event of ‘the’ liberation is generally remembered with images of cheering crowds, military vehicles covered with celebrating civilians and smiling soldiers. The dominant memory of a happy liberation contributes to the narrative of a successful transition to peace, democracy and prosperity. The liberation

2 De Gelderlander Dagblad van Nijmegen, 22 September 1944, pictured in De onvergetelijke uren. Omszien naar de bevrijding (Zutphen: Terra s.a., 1985), p. 43.
lives on as the specific moment of transition out of catastrophe and into a much happier post-war period and, consequently, remains a powerful marker in the history of the twentieth century.\(^3\) Even though the political history of the Netherlands may not rank among the most problematic and divisive in Europe,\(^4\) it is important to note that the Dutch transition from war to peace was not predetermined, nor without passionate debates and political struggles over options for reconstructing the state and society.

The liberation of the Netherlands was part of larger processes of social and political transition all over Europe, which entailed more than simply chasing away the enemy oppressor. In many states, the transition from national socialist and fascist rule to successor regimes installed by the various Allied powers was a prolonged struggle for power and for legitimacy. Regime change began long before the actual liberation of the national territories and would come to an end only after a certain degree of social and political stability had been reached. ‘Liberation’ is actually a politicized term used for describing the regime change by suggesting its desired impact. Considering all the states liberated from German occupation, one might ask, ‘who felt reason to celebrate liberation?’ For Soviet-occupied Poland, for Allied-occupied Austria, or for north-western Europe, for example, the answer would be quite different. In the Netherlands, ‘liberation’ came with a friendly occupation by allies after an oppressive foreign occupation. Even so, significant parts of the Dutch population were not in the mood to celebrate.

For obvious reasons, more than 100,000 Dutch supporters of the defeated national socialist ‘new order’ did not feel liberated at all.\(^5\) On the contrary, these people lost their freedom and were ostracized, persecuted, put in prison camps and made to fear for their lives. Leaving aside the vanquished, the victims and their families had little more reason to celebrate exuberantly. A large majority of Dutch Jews had been deported – more than 107,000 out of a total of 140,000. Small numbers of these deportees, about 5,200, had survived only to return to the few members of their families who had

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3 According to the Dutch government took steps to centralize the official celebrations from 1946 onward. A National Committee was mandated to organize the form and content – and it still does so.


5 Including their families between 250,000 and 300,000 – a conservative estimate. Peter Romijn, Snel, streng en rechtvaardig. De afrekening met ‘fout’Nederlanders, 2nd ed. (Amsterdam: Olympus, 2002), p. 164.
survived in hiding.\textsuperscript{6} Returning to the liberated societies and taking up their old lives, they met with much indifference and many difficulties.\textsuperscript{7} At the same time, hundreds of thousands of people were on the move, as ‘displaced persons’: compulsory labourers and political prisoners in Germany, and people hastily evacuated from war zones. The International Red Cross Committee reported that in May 1945 one-fifth of the total population of little more than 9 million was displaced. These people may have been happy enough that the Nazis had been defeated, but their memory of the time is still bittersweet.

The Netherlands had been occupied in May 1940 by German armed forces. Adolf Hitler had installed a German civil administration at The Hague under command of his personal representative, Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart.\textsuperscript{8} The end of German rule came between September 1944 and May 1945, as part of a violent and exhausting campaign waged by American, British and Canadian forces supplemented by Polish and French units, plus exiled Dutch troops. Vast armoured columns of tanks, trucks, and other vehicles carried men, arms and supplies to and through the Netherlands. During the final nine months of the war, the fighting caused large-scale destruction and human suffering in areas already exhausted by the hardship and violent oppression of the German occupation. The end of national socialist and fascist rule came with large piles of rubble; a ‘clean slate’ did not exist when the Second World War came to an end. In the Netherlands as everywhere else, the enemy occupation had eroded the authority of the national states and their administrations. Amidst mental disorientation and material destruction, political and civil leaders could only warn that the ‘war was not over’ and that the ‘peace still had to be won’.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{7} Martin Bossenbroek, De Meelstreep. Terugkeer en opvang na de Tweede Wereldoorlog (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2001), introduction, pp. 9-13.
\textsuperscript{8} Gerhard Hirschfeld, Nazi Rule and German Collaboration: The Netherlands under German Occupation, 1940-1945 (London: Berg, 1988).
With the Axis powers defeated, the liberated nations were challenged to construct their future political and social regimes. In the Netherlands, as in the other liberated states of north-western and western Europe, the Allied military victory restored indigenous political elites to power. In the immediate wake of war, the first aim of the returned rulers was to channel all forces in society towards the re-unification and re-construction of the downtrodden nations. This chapter aims at a better understanding of the dynamics of ‘getting out of the war’ and ‘organizing the post-war’.

In the dynamic process of transition, the Allied military authorities played a leading role. They took control in liberated areas, engaging with representatives of what remained of the civil society and the administration. At the same time, they garnered influence at the national level, where central government was re-installed. This chapter will point out that for the Allied, interim military rulers in the Netherlands, ‘getting out of the war’ meant holding the reins and, at the same time, delegating responsibility to those who could handle their own affairs.

Preparing for Interim Rule

Military occupation and liberation require as many preparations in the fields of economy and politics as other military operations do. The Allied planners belonged to SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Forces in Europe under General Eisenhower. The planning committees took a leading role, in particular with regards to the smaller nations like the Netherlands, and prepared instructions for their Dutch counterparts. In 1943 SHAEF assigned lawyers to prepare formal arrangements with exiled governments and with the Free French leadership. Formally, these covenants recognized the exiled governments as legitimate rulers and as partners in the post-liberation processes of regime change. A ‘legal agreement’ with the Netherlands, concluded on 16 May 1944, gave General Eisenhower full authority to deal with administrative matters in the liberated Netherlands until Germany surrendered.


10 Nico Wouters, Oorlogsburgemeesters 40/44 (Tielt: Lannoo, 2004); Peter Romijn, Burgemeesters in oorlogstijd. Besturen onder de Duitse bezetting (Amsterdam: Balans, 2006).

11 Klep and Schoenmaker, De bevrijding van Nederland, pp. 78-79.
The mandate for this projected military rule was embedded in international law, particularly in the 1907 Convention of The Hague, which regulated the rights and obligations of occupying armies towards the territories under their control. Regarding complications in occupied Italy and disputes with General de Gaulle, the Allies came to prefer light arrangements for liberated western Europe. They expected to leave as much business as possible to the indigenous authorities. Therefore, indirect rule of newly liberated states was anticipated as soon as military operational necessity would allow. The first priority of the Allied commanders was to establish security and safeguard supply lines in the rear of the advancing troops. This required that they arrest armed collaborators and possible saboteurs, gain control of the armed resistance, and consolidate their monopoly on violence as soon as possible. Next came the need to restore public life in the liberated territories. International law explicitly required the Allies to provide relief in areas destroyed by fighting, as well as to re-establish and supervise indigenous public authorities.  

Indirect rule called for the Allies to cooperate with indigenous counterparts. For the duration of the transition, the Dutch administration would operate under the supervision of the Civil Affairs branch of General Eisenhower's command. Such devolution of authority to the liberating Allied Forces was difficult for most exiled governments to swallow, in particular for de Gaulle's Free French. On the other hand, the lesser allies like the Dutch had no other choice and decided to be pragmatic about it. After all, the legal agreement made it clear that the sovereignty of the returning national governments would remain formally unchallenged. Regarding the military situation, the various parties had to decide to what degree the Allied commanders would exercise emergency powers. The legal status of the Dutch side was defined through the institution of a ‘Special State of Siege’ for all liberated territories. In accordance with existing Dutch constitutional law, under the State of Siege, a Military Authority would be responsible for exercising emergency powers in order to safeguard the security of the state.

For this purpose, in 1943, the Dutch Government had decided to found a body called the Netherlands Military Authority or NMA (Militair Gezag or MG). This was conceived as a corps of militarized civil servants recruited in England under the leadership of a Chief of Staff-NMA, Major-General Hendrik J. Kruls. NMA was instructed to follow the advance of the Allied forces and – under the overall authority of SHAEF – exercise the authority of the Dutch government over the indigenous civil administration. Their priorities would be to safeguard public order, discipline the indigenous resistance movement, arrest Dutch collaborators and take measures for social and administrative reconstruction.\textsuperscript{15} NMA started as a small task force numbering 740 officers and those of other ranks, which had assembled when the first patches of Dutch territory were liberated, but it would develop within the course of a year into a huge, nationwide, shadow bureaucracy of about 16,000.\textsuperscript{16}

While preparing the Allied occupation, a main concern for the exiled governments in London, including the Dutch, was the position of the indigenous resistance movements. They feared a power vacuum within their states in the event of a possible collapse of German rule. In such a case, autonomous and revolutionary forces within the resistance might aspire to take over power and prevent the exiled rulers from re-establishing their authority. The ‘London’ governments were hardly in a position to estimate the actual strength of such tendencies, particularly not in the Dutch case. Prime Minister Gerbrandy was among those who feared the left-wing element of the resistance. The conservative part of the exiled Dutch community anticipated a return of the revolutionary situation of November 1918. In those confusing days, after the German Emperor had abdicated, the Dutch Socialist leader Pieter J. Troelstra had announced that his party was ready to assume power. This verbal move had effectively been countered by a mobilization of royalist militias, and the young Protestant politician Gerbrandy was one of those who had enlisted to rush to The Hague and defend the established order.

In order to prevent a power vacuum, Gerbrandy’s government had started preparations to establish its political control over the indigenous resistance. The armed branch of the Dutch resistance was a patchwork of small groups


\textsuperscript{16} Overzicht der werkzaamheden van het Militair Gezag gedurende de bijzondere staat van beleg. 14 September 1944-4 Maart 1945 (‘s Gravenhage, s.a.), p. 43.
carrying only light arms. Their actions were intended to support other resistance activities, such as liberating prisoners, attacking registry and rationing offices, and killing dangerous collaborators. After the invasion in Normandy, the Dutch government called for all armed resistance to join a new national organization, to be called the Forces of the Interior (Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten). In doing so, the Dutch authorities followed the example of the Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur under General Pierre Kœnig. The government appointed a conservative officer from the former Colonial Dutch Army, General Henri Koot, acting Commander in the occupied territories. Prince Bernhard, the son-in-law of Queen Wilhelmina, would be the Supreme Commander of the Forces of the Interior. He was also Commander of the Dutch Brigade of some 2,000 troops who had been trained in England during the war. The Queen in particular hoped that after the foundation of the Forces of the Interior, the Dutch resistance would be able to contribute to the liberation of the Homeland, like the French resistance had. Bernhard was a flamboyant and charismatic man who displayed much enthusiasm for all things military. His position would be largely symbolic, because SHAEF remained in direct operational control of the small Dutch forces. Moreover, as long as the Forces of the Interior were insufficiently organized, the idea that they would be able to liberate the nation was as risky as it was romantic. Bernhard’s own Chief of Staff referred to it in his diary as, ‘a wild scheme, full of dangers, almost certain to produce a civil war’, expressing the hope that the Allies would beat the Germans before the Dutch resistance could become active.

The political and strategic importance of the new structure of the resistance under the authority of the Prince soon became evident. Only after the Forces of the Interior had been founded did the Allies start to send large amounts of arms by air into the occupied territories. Tens of thousands of adventurous men, at the time more than eager to contribute to the liberation of their country, found their way to the Forces. Meanwhile, the more independent-minded leaders of the original fighting squads felt overruled and hedged in – precisely what ‘London’ had expected to achieve. In heated discussions on the eve of liberation, these fighting squad leaders expressed

18 Diary of PGA Doorman, entry for Friday 1 September 1944, in Het geheugen van Nederland, http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/?/nl/items/EVDOor:NIMH01_KBN013000041.
the fear that their units would be ‘torpedoed’ by the newly centralized command and therefore were reluctant to accept their orders.20

Meanwhile, the exiled government had made more preparations for securing its influence over the political transition as part of the liberation. In May 1944 London appealed to the main organizations in the Dutch resistance to nominate their representatives to the newly created Grand Advisory Council (GAC) of the Resistance. The formal assignment was to council the government about measures to be taken to prepare for transition. A coordinating committee composed of three political neutrals, along with a left- and a right-wing member, performed the real job: uniting the resistance in loyalty to the Queen’s government. The most prominent figure in the Committee was the moderate Social Democrat Willem Drees. A parallel step was the appointment of the ‘Council of Trusted Representatives’ (College van Vertrouwensmannen), assigned to exercise the powers of government in case of a vacuum. This council was composed of prominent men, representing different political affiliations and professional backgrounds. Before the liberation was a fact, the Council began preparing for the purge of the administration and the civil service, sending reports to London advising whom to dismiss and whom not.

The Dutch approach of disciplining and subordinating the resistance differed from the French and Belgian approaches, in which the authority to intervene was given to single individuals – in France, to the Republican Commissars appointed by General de Gaulle, and in Belgium, to Walter Ganshof van der Meersch, who as Haute Commissaire à la Sécurité de l’État was commissioned to take control over all government bodies concerned with maintaining public order and justice.21 Hesitating to delegate strong executive power, the Gerbrandy government, in typical Dutch fashion, decided to split responsibility for the transition period between a range of institutions. Mandates and competences were not clearly divided, and it was only to be expected that collisions might occur between the different organizations operating in the underground. Moreover, the Dutch government was badly informed about the capacities, ambitions, and expectations of the many tendencies encompassed by the Dutch resistance. At the same time, the underground leadership was not aware of the role the NMA, the entity by which Dutch military administrators would operate under the umbrella of the Allied Supreme Command. After all, the fear of revolution and civil war among the émigrés was equalled by distrust on the part of

the resisters towards the authoritarian impulses of the government. Queen Wilhelmina’s promises about the return of democracy, as printed in the Nijmegen newspaper, should be read from this perspective. However, the actual importance of these multilevel preparations for transition would be decided during the course of the liberation of Dutch territory.

Liberation in Upheaval

On 6 June 1944 a middle-aged Dutchman wrote in his diary how the news of the Allied invasion in Normandy reached his small town. People who clandestinely listened to the radio news from London went into the streets and discussed the prospects of a quick liberation from German rule. All were excited and many rumours were spread. On the very same day the black market prices of food, tobacco and shoes dropped 30 per cent.22 In fact, it would be a long time before the Allied armies reached the Low Countries. Normandy is about 500 kilometres from Brussels and 700 from Amsterdam, and it took until August before in France a breakthrough was realized. In early September 1944 the Allies crossed the southern borders of Belgium and, within a week, a large part of that country was liberated.23 Belgium survived the occupation with relatively little material damage and, perhaps even more importantly, the country remained intact and political authority undivided. In contrast, during the nine months to follow, the Dutch would live through interrelated and accelerating elements of disaster: material destruction, a humanitarian crisis and a fragmentation of their state and society.

Hardship and disruption were not a matter of warfare alone. The Allied invasion in Normandy had quickly undermined the efficacy of the German and national socialist regimes of occupation.24 In early September 1944, the German Reichskommissar Arthur Seyss-Inquart declared martial law, and on Hitler’s instructions, authorized the police and SS to execute arrested resisters on the spot.25 Thus, the struggle between national socialists and resistance activists produced a ‘cumulative radicalization’ and further disruption of society. In the struggle between oppression and resistance

23 Schrijvers, Liberators, p. 55.
24 Conway, The Sorrow of Belgium, pp. 16-17.
25 Romijn, Burgemeesters in Oorlogstijd, pp. 505-508.
both sides targeted mayors and officials in the registry and rationing offices. Arming all male National Socialists and creating a militia (*Landwacht*) for protection contributed to the scale of killings on both sides. Consequently, the Dutch administration lost its capacity to cope with the disintegrating forces of occupation, terror and war. Local administrations became little islands of their own, exposed to ever more radical and demanding occupiers. They continued their work while compromising and muddling through.

Large numbers of people were uprooted owing to evacuations, forced labour, persecution, and the need to hide from the occupier, and in the end they were vexed by hunger and the violence of war. People were obliged to flee from areas in which battle was being waged to such an extent that by the end of the war, about 20 per cent of all Dutch were displaced in one way or another. Thus, the fabric of society was severely damaged, ties between people were severed, and family and friends were no longer available for support in case of need. Mutual trust, which is a lubricant of society under ordinary conditions, withered away as a consequence of the violent erosion of social and moral norms. Nobody could recall situations in which the law of the jungle had been so dominant. Many ordinary Dutch transgressed the norms they had internalized in normal times, disobeying authorities, entering the black market, or stealing firewood from abandoned houses, while resisters robbed rationing offices and killed collaborators.26 In January 1945, a Commander of the Interior Forces described the situation in occupied Amsterdam as one of ‘progressive exhaustion’, both physical and mental. Under the circumstances, his men were ‘running wild’.27

Under these circumstances, the Allied offensive offered the only viable possibility of relief. However, after the swift liberation of Belgium, the German armies on Dutch territory managed to set up a strong defence. By late September 1944, hopes for another breakthrough had been defeated by the failed Allied airborne operations in the Arnhem and Nijmegen area. Between September and December 1944, the provinces south of the delta of the Rhine River came under control of the Allied forces step by step. The eastern and northern parts of the Netherlands followed as late as April 1945. The densely populated western parts of the country, including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, remained under German authority until the collapse of the Nazi regime in early May 1945. Despite desperate requests by the Gerbrandy government, the Allies refused to change their top strategic priority, which was and remained the defeat of Nazi Germany.

27 Böhl and Meershoek, *Bevrijding van Amsterdam*, p. 25.
In the liberated areas, the Allied front troops first wanted to consolidate their positions. After securing a specific area, the operational commander would decide how to protect the campaign from the rear. In order to make sure that the local authorities were reliable, he would engage with local town halls and resistance leaders and decide whom to appoint to positions of responsibility for the time being. Then a town-major was assigned to take care of military-civilian relations. Field security units were deployed in order to safeguard the rear of the combat troops by means of counter-intelligence operations, including interrogations of arrested collaborators. Next came the Civil Affairs Section of SHAEF, charged with the assignment ‘to facilitate military operations’ in the countries within their sphere of responsibility.\(^2\) SHAEF needed to install loyal and efficient administrators. For the Netherlands, they did not have specific persons or parties in mind. The guiding principle was to apply indirect rule if possible, and to intervene only when vital allied interests were at stake. Such interests were of course tied to the post-war geopolitical order, with which all conquering powers were concerned. The ‘Country Units’ for Civil Affairs were relatively small. In September 1944, the Dutch unit consisted of thirty-eight British, Canadian and American officers under the command of Canadian Brigadier A. de L. Cazenove.

The Dutch counterparts of the Allied Civil Affairs units were the representatives of the Netherlands Military Administration, NMA. Upon arrival in liberated Dutch territory, they were far from able to take control of the local situation. Their preparations for regime change often proved futile, as many local resisters had taken their own measures, following political agendas of their own. They had removed incumbent mayors and aldermen and replaced them with new men close to or part of the resistance. Such steps were difficult to undo. Local resisters were not at all inclined to recognize NMA officers as representatives of the Government and challenged their authority. In the course of the liberation of Nijmegen, for instance, the collaborationist mayor was removed from office and arrested. The local resistance, the Allied Civil Affairs officer, and the NMA commissioner respectively nominated three different mayors for the town.\(^3\) It took much


\(^3\) Romijn, *Burgemeesters in Oorlogstijd*, p. 611.
time and persuasion before local resisters and notables would accept the authorities of the representatives of NMA.

More generally, the Dutch military administrators met with distrust in the southern parts of the Netherlands, even though they were wearing British battledress.\(^{30}\) The first batch of NMA personnel during the war had stayed in London as civil servants or business people. They now were received as technocrats in uniform, who did not understand a thing about what life had been like during the occupation. Moreover, most of the staff was not from the south, with its distinct political culture dominated by Roman Catholicism. This provoked traditional southern sentiments against secular and Protestant ‘Holland’ traditionally ruling from far away. All this could be countered only by recruiting new officers from the south. After the liberation of the industrial centre of Eindhoven in particular, new men became available. Philips Electronics, established in Eindhoven, made able engineers and organizers available. The company also provided a provisional radio station for the liberated area, Radio Herrijzend Nederland (Radio the Netherlands Reviving).

Both the lack of personnel coming from London and the stalling liberation of the rest of the country made it imperative for the NMA to cooperate with the organized resistance of the south. This entailed recognizing their grassroots activism and adopting at least part of their ambitions for the transition. The first testing ground was the arrest of all national socialist collaborators. NMA had been instructed by the government to employ the local police to arrest all who were considered traitors. When arriving in the liberated areas of the south, the Civil Affairs officers found that local resisters had begun to take their revenge on these people. During the first weeks, ‘arresting squads’ of the resistance rounded up thousands of pro-German Dutch, taking them from their homes, mistreating them and putting them in makeshift prison camps.\(^{31}\) General Kruls tried to restore orderly conduct, and a full conflict arose over the responsibility for making arrests. Resisters argued that the Dutch police had been compromised by collaboration itself and therefore should not have the power to make arrests. Recognizing established facts, the NMA command gave in and accepted the Forces of the Interior as an auxiliary police, formally authorized to make arrests. This concession would create a large problem on a national scale, as the procedures would later reoccur in the rest of the country. Before

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31 Romijn, Snel, streng en rechtvaardig, p. 163.
the end of 1944, at least 10,000 collaborators would be behind bars in the south – a number that was to multiply in the year to follow. In the summer of 1945, at least 120,000 and perhaps as many as 150,000 people were living in prison camps, often under disastrous conditions.\footnote{Romijn, \textit{Snel, streng en rechtvaardig}, p. 164.}

After securing the territory to the rear of the advancing troops the next step was dealing with the living conditions of the civilian population. Relief and rehabilitation were politically sensitive issues. The local economy had come to a standstill, and in many places food, heating and other essential commodities were extremely scarce. As the war continued, supplying the front took absolute priority. To make matters worse, distribution of relief goods was severely hampered by the destruction of the infrastructure (especially bridges and railway lines). Stories of warehouses filled with stockpiles of food rotting away, or being traded by entrepreneurial military men, started to circulate through the starving areas. In November 1944, liberated Eindhoven saw a so-called ‘hunger strike’ for more food.\footnote{De Jong \textit{Het Koninkrijk}, vol. 10A, p. 601; Schoonoord, \textit{Circus Kruls}, p. 169.} The German-controlled Dutch media on the other side of the front line were obviously eager to highlight these matters, while the resistance press was duly concerned. Most of these papers condemned the ‘damage to the Allied War effort’. The underground communist paper \textit{De Waarheid}, however, said that if two months of Allied rule had not produced satisfactory conditions, the local people were fully entitled to press for improvement.\footnote{A survey of the underground press reports in the occupied Netherlands, late November 1944, in De Jong, \textit{Het Koninkrijk}, vol. 10A, pp. 608-609.} Cazenove did not panic but instead helped the NMA to improve logistics in order to enhance the daily rations to acceptable levels and distribute the available food more efficiently.\footnote{Schoonoord, \textit{Circus Kruls}, p. 172.}

Meanwhile, the very experience of social disintegration had also produced a remarkable counter-movement, both in the liberated south and in the still-occupied areas. Professional people and leaders from civil society took responsibility for all kinds of emergency measures, which could be called ‘provisional arrangements’ at a grassroots level. Medical doctors, nurses, clergymen, schoolteachers and other notables improvised medical support and food relief. Their committees engaged local resistance leaders, who reciprocated by involving the same people in their plans for regime change. They worked with the local administration, even with some collaborationist ‘new order’ burgomasters. Such perceived ‘turncoats’ obviously
hoped their cooperation would testify to their professionalism and patriotic intentions. Such spontaneous assumption of public responsibility arose out of the general sense of emergency. The response was consistent with the reflexes of Western European bourgeois societies, in which political and professional elites were used to sharing responsibility and leadership. The practice continued over the course of the liberation, in the shape of newly founded ‘committees for social reconstruction’. In hindsight, these provisional arrangements were indispensable social capital for bridging the cleavage of authority that opened between the two regimes of occupation. They provided the political and social networks that were crucial to the Civil Affairs units’ efforts to make progress on the ground, and in the longer run, to repair the texture of society.

The Politics of Interim Rule

In liberated Belgium, the Allied Mission to Belgium under British Major-General George Erskine had been able to establish itself quickly in the government centre in Brussels. Erskine focused all attention on the level of the central state, which encompassed both the government and the Belgian military liaison to the Allies, headed by former Cabinet Minister Paul Tschoffen. The Dutch situation, however, developed in quite a different way. The central administration remained in occupied territory until the very end. The Civil Affairs officers were only able to connect to local authorities and resistance leaders in liberated territory. From early September 1944 onward, the exiled government could not play a role in ruling the liberated area, as it was geographically spread between London, Brussels and liberated Breda, later Eindhoven. The Cabinet did not enjoy much prestige in the liberated south and was in fact more or less ignored by NMA and resistance leaders. When in late September 1944 a delegation of the Cabinet arrived in the south in order to take stock of the situation, they

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38 Romijn, Burgemeesters in Oorlogstijd, p. 60 and further.
39 Conway The Sorrows of Belgium, pp. 63-64.
40 Schoonoord, Circus Kruls, pp. 264-265.
were stopped near the town of Boxtel and placed under arrest by a resistance squad for the inability to show satisfactory identification papers.\textsuperscript{41} Kruls, the Chief of Staff of NMA, bluntly advised the Cabinet members to stay away from the liberated areas until he had done what he was assigned to do and normality had been restored. In order to get his way, he even threatened to resign if the Cabinet ministers would not stop criticizing his policy, thus ‘giving the people an impression of indecision’ which would undermine all his authority.\textsuperscript{42} In this conflict, the Civil Affairs section provided backup support to Kruls and NMA\textsuperscript{43} – albeit silently and without giving the impression of meddling in Dutch internal matters.

The Gerbrandy government had been formed in 1940. As with most governments in exile, it had been steadily hampered by strong political disagreements, which came to a crescendo mounting to a high as soon as the policy to pursue reconstruction appeared on the agenda.\textsuperscript{44} The fact that the liberation was prolonged over the course of nine months made the situation even worse: waiting for liberation while simultaneously being in conflict was extremely unproductive. Queen Wilhelmina had an agenda of her own, aspiring to wield strong executive power under her personal leadership. The ministers quarrelled with the Queen and among themselves over preparations for the transition regime. In January 1945, the government collapsed, owing to an acute conflict over the extent of the political purges. A reconstructed Cabinet under Gerbrandy once again received a royal mandate to continue its work until German surrender and complete liberation. The government managed to improve its efficacy by accepting influential ‘new men’ from the liberated south into government positions. Men like Louis Beel, Jan de Quay (both of them later Prime Ministers), and Harry Tromp enjoyed the confidence of large parts of the resistance of the south and in their turn managed to channel the activism from below.

Meanwhile, resisters in the liberated areas organized themselves into local committees under the umbrella of the Gemeenschap van Oud-Illegale Werkers Nederland (Community of Former Resistance Activists in the Netherlands). This organization melded a rather conservative and religious mindset with grassroots activism. The members argued that they had proven to be the best category of Dutch citizens, and therefore were

\textsuperscript{41} De Jong, \textit{Het Koninkrijk}, vol. 10A, p. 795.
\textsuperscript{42} Schoonoord, \textit{Circus Kruls}, p. 268.
\textsuperscript{43} Schoonoord, \textit{Circus Kruls}, pp. 280-281.
\textsuperscript{44} Martin Conway and José Gotovich, \textit{Europe in Exile: European Exile Communities in Britain, 1940-1945} (Oxford/New York: Berghahn, 2001).
entitled to take the lead in the reconstruction to come. During the winter of 1944, the Dutch military administrators recruited new personnel mainly from the ranks of the former resistance, while the Allied authorities brought together veterans from the armed resistance, the Forces of the Interior, as auxiliary forces in light infantry battalions. This created new opportunities for former resisters to exercise agency and, at the same time, disciplined them, so that the most suitable persons were absorbed into the structures of government and administration, both at the local and at the central level. Consequently, potential leaders of autonomy-minded grassroots organizations became socialized into the politics of responsibility. Many other activists felt outmanoeuvred and complained that ‘the regular resisters’ had been forgotten.45

When, in April and May 1945, the eastern and northern provinces of the Netherlands were liberated, followed by the western heartland, the question of how to control resistance activism turned into the question of how to ‘demobilize’ resistance as a movement. The fear of a socialist revolution was soon overcome. The Dutch Communists had been a strong presence in the resistance, but the underground party had lost many cadres to ruthless German persecution. In the liberated south, the communists were much weaker than in the other regions. Upon arriving in the east and north, the Allied Civil Affairs and NMA officers discovered that the resistance in these areas was more moderate and responsive to authority than their counterparts in the south. After the exhausting final winter of occupation, sentiments were more oriented towards pursuing reconstruction as normalization. In the industrial centres in the west, however, the left-wing resistance kept up a strong call for social and political change. When Gerbrandy returned to Amsterdam in early May 1945, he noticed the display of red flags and muttered ‘Amsterdam has grown quite red!’46

The liberation of this potentially more radical part of the country, however, coincided with the beginning of the restoration of the central state.

After the liberation, Gerbrandy relinquished the mandate of his Cabinet, and within a month, Queen Wilhelmina inaugurated a ‘national cabinet for recovery and renewal’. The moderate socialists Willem Schermerhorn and Willem Drees led the government, which was essentially a coalition of centrist reformers, ready to implement emergency measures in order to work towards normalization. This transitional government, which remained in office until the first parliamentary elections of May 1946, identified with

45 Romijn Snel, streng en rechtvaardig, pp. 257-258.
46 Quote Gerbrandy in Böhl and Meershoek, Bevrijding van Amsterdam, p. 15.
the grand ideals of the resistance. The Communists and the conservative Protestant party ARP did not get Cabinet posts, even though their membership had been over-represented in the resistance movement. In absence of a regular parliament, the Grand Advisory Council of the Resistance convened to discuss the needs of the day, starting with purges and reconstruction. Although inherently critical of any kind of compromise, the GAC leadership entered into a dialogue with the government. The Council membership encompassed a broad spectrum of political tendencies, all of which called for negotiations to define their collective political position permanently and made it impossible for the left-wing members to dominate this body.47 The Left, moreover, more than the Right, identified with the new government and expected it to fulfil the ambitions of the resistance. Prime Minister Schermerhorn publicly cultivated his personal identification with the resistance movement by claiming that his Cabinet was the ‘Central Assault Squad’ of the Dutch people. Behind closed doors he said something quite different: ‘the main thing is to demobilize resistance, that is, to make sure that they will not be an independent force in politics’.48 By means of this approach, during the crucial first month of the reconstruction, the new government turned the GAC into a loyal, if critical partner, instead of a contender for power.

**Soldiers and Civilians**

The impact of the Allied presence did not remain limited to administrative matters or the politics of transition. The ‘human factor’ is essential in the relationship between any occupying army and the civilian population. It would be too simple to expect the happy days of liberation to continue endlessly. In fact, there were many constraints in the mutual understanding between Allied soldiers and Dutch civilians, beyond the existence of a language barrier. A Canadian Civil Affairs officer articulated the loss of normativity at stake:

> The Government is going to find that the people are not easy to deal with and that their morals have suffered severely during the past five years. It is hardly to be expected that a people who have been taught for such a long period to cheat a foreign administration, to steal from it, lie to it,

47 Romijn, *Snel, streng en rechtvaardig*, pp. 256-266.
48 Quotes Schermerhorn in Romijn *Snel, streng en rechtvaardig*, p. 256.
falsify reports, and to work for it as little as possible will quite suddenly turn around and become amenable to governmental decrees.49

On the other hand, the Allied troops endangered this mutual understanding through their large-scale looting and vandalizing. SHAEF recognized complaints, but the only remedy – repressive action by military police – did not materialize.50 As Prime Minister Gerbrandy discovered during an inspection tour of the liberated southern provinces late in 1944, complaints about the misconduct of the liberators were widespread. In private homes and town halls, particularly in evacuated areas, safes were broken open, or blown up, and plundered. Local authorities and NMA found it almost impossible to convince Allied commanders to persecute such behaviour.51 SHAEF sent the Brigadier General Oliver L. Haines, Theater Inspector General US Army, to liberated Nijmegen in order to find out more. Haines denied that looting was a general practice of the American troops and blamed British and Polish troops and Dutch civilians for stealing from empty houses and public buildings.52 Only after Germany’s surrender was SHAEF prepared to reverse priorities and issue more forceful rules against ‘looting by individuals, or bodies of individuals’, threatening to court-martial all those who of contravened the order.53

In fact, the occupation produced an intense social interaction. The soldiers from afar took the war to the homes of the Dutch. They brought food, stories, and a large variety of consumer goods, sources of excitement and imagination. The occupied society had endured years of increasing austerity and sheer poverty. Commodities deepened the importance of civilian-military relations, both materially and psychologically. Cigarettes in particular, but chocolate and gasoline as well, became alternative currencies. Nylon stockings were the novelty of the day, conveying the promise of a more glamorous way of life and restoring sex appeal. New business opportunities arose, as the rationing of food and many other provisions had been in force as early as 1939. Mounting shortages had given rise to

50 Schoonoord, Circus Kruls, p. 380; compare for liberated Belgium: Schrijvers, Liberators, chapter 6 (‘Currents of Discontent’), pp. 144 and further.
52 Schoonoord, Circus Kruls, pp. 384-385.
53 Bossenbroek et al., Oranje Bitter, p. 30.
large-scale bartering and a black market. Starving people from the urban areas in the western part of the Netherlands in particular had swept over the countryside in order to trade their valuables for potatoes, corn, meat and the like. Bands of racketeers had started to operate black markets under the guise of resistance. Such activities found new incentives with the arrival of the Allied forces.

Austerity remained in force for quite some time and kept the unofficial economy booming. Persecution of economic criminality by Allied personnel remained strictly within the jurisdiction of their operational commanders. Dutch military and civil administrators could only complain, and for obvious political reasons they were reluctant to do so.\(^5\) The presence of Allied forces in the Netherlands also created an improvised, but rapidly expanding service industry. During the German occupation, the Germans had requisitioned indigenous labour. Since early 1944, they had unsuccessfully advertised ‘a fair daily wage, soup and well-prepared sandwiches’ for those who appeared for work that was considered dangerous and unpatriotic. Now, in contrast, tens of thousands were magnetically drawn to the Allied forces, their money, cigarettes and status. Farmhands, mechanics, cooks, translators, clerks and many others found temporary employment on such a scale that the Dutch authorities worried that not enough rural labour would be available for collecting the harvest of 1945. This withdrawal from the primary sector of the economy was stimulated by the importation of corn, as well as other food, and was reinforced by the attractions of better paying administrative, technical and military jobs.\(^5\)

Especially during the first stages of occupation, when the central state was still in the possession of the enemy, and subsequently, when it had to be reconstructed before it could function properly, the Civil Affairs branches relied on the support of well-motivated local men. Allied operational commanders adopted units of the Forces of the Interior, the armed resistance, as auxiliary troops. Young men in particular were able to share the golden glow of victory. They wore the modern and attractive military uniforms well and drove trucks and jeeps. Thus, the most vital elements of the liberated population were not just disciplined but also socialized into the military structures of the new rulers. The pragmatic methods by which the Allies connected to the newly occupied society contributed to the empowerment


\(^5\) Weekly Reports of the NMA, in Archives NIOD Institute for War-, Holocaust- and Genocide Studies, Amsterdam, no. 260: Collectie Militair Gezag.
of a younger and more vital part of the population and at the same time endangered the position of the traditional elites.

Cheering Dutch greeted the Allied troops as heroes. In occupied Germany, the soldiers were under orders not to fraternize with German civilians, but in the Netherlands, signs along the main highways told the soldiers: ‘Remember: the Dutch are our allies, treat them kindly’. That treatment the Dutch intended to return. Nevertheless, incidents with locals occurred, especially when big leave centres were created, where Allied personnel stationed in Holland and Germany could spend time with local girls. Cases of rape were documented more than incidentally, but silenced in the chain of command and not addressed by the Dutch authorities. An often-quoted opinion of a Canadian officer indicates the mood of the military: ‘Children here behave like beggars, men like thieves, and women like tarts’.56 The soldiers’ presence provoked a public discourse of moral concern, focused not on the behaviour of soldiers, however, but on female sexuality. For obvious reasons, the moralists found it more appropriate to address the women than to target the soldiers. Dutch authorities warned their Allied counterparts that several of the women meeting allied personnel were known to have previously engaged with German soldiers before. During the occupation, an unknown but large number of Dutch females had established relationships with German men, most of them military. Between 12,000 and 15,000 children had been born out of these relationships.57 The conquered nation had perceived its honour trampled by their behaviour. When the liberation came, those who had been humiliated took their revenge by means of a wholesale humiliation of implicated women. Like elsewhere in Western Europe, a tidal wave of shearing followed closely behind the passing Allied armies.58

The problem now was that the men involved were no longer enemies, but allies. At the same time, the liberation once again opened the public sphere to clergy, authorities and other opinion makers who wanted to vent their concern. Expressions of joy for the liberation, including public dancing, drinking, and, of course, sex, all collided with restrictive Dutch

social values and lifestyles. In the summer of 1945, the editor of a left-wing periodical came under attack for his suggestion that Dutch girls should be given prophylactics when meeting Allied soldiers. Soldiers were issued brief vocabularies of Dutch terms, in which words and phrases related to socializing appeared frequently, and families invited them as guests. At least 2,000 Dutch women became engaged to Canadian soldiers and emigrated over the course of 1946. Many of the Canadian troops were from British Columbia and the Prairie Provinces and had rural backgrounds. This made them relatively acceptable as in-laws, as their lifestyle and prospects were considered to be in harmony with those for which Dutch parents would hope. Meanwhile, the soldiers had to remain in the Netherlands as long as troopships for transporting them home were insufficiently available. For months to come Canadians in particular would be deployed for reconstruction projects, like bridges, roads and rubble clearing, a form of forced labour which has been lost to public memory.

Evaluation: The Impact of Military Interim Rule

At the end of the German occupation, many political and civil leaders warned that the ‘war is not over’ and that the ‘peace still has to be won’. Nevertheless, as soon as the war was over, a psychological change occurred, as General Charles de Gaulle describes in his war memoirs: ‘No sooner had the sound of gunfire faded than the world’s appearance changed.’ What applied to liberated France was also true for the Netherlands: as soon as the Axis powers had been defeated, the combined forces and sentiments of the peoples were no longer mobilized for warfare. Now the liberated nation was challenged to construct the future political and social order. Even though the political rhetoric of the reconstruction at the time was very much oriented towards the future, the process of ‘seeking peace in the wake of war’ nourished essentially conservative reflexes. In a way, the magnitude and nature of the problems of the time determined the solution: restoration. The cooperation between the Civil Affairs units and their Dutch

60 De Liagre Böhl and Meershoek, De bevrijding van Amsterdam, pp. 83-90.
61 http://www.refdag.nl/oud/bin/001109bin05.html.
partners, the NMA, constituted a provisional regime. Before the liberation began, the Allies saw the central government as the self-evident partner in the creation of a legal framework for civil affairs on the foundation of international law.

In their policy for the Netherlands, the Allies followed the functionalist logic of military occupation in general as formulated by the Dutch sociologist Cor Lammers. He holds that securing collaboration in an occupied society will be most successful when the occupier engages with the indigenous authorities at the highest level. Working through a national government and benefitting from its authority is the best lever for implementing specific measures without having their legitimacy perpetually challenged. On the contrary, seeking collaboration at lower levels, including the local, carries an imminent danger of entangling the occupiers in the mudflats of internal discord. While preparing their military administrations, the Allied planners had already considered these matters. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Western Europe, SHAEF opted for a pragmatic policy of cooperating with indigenous societies, where it best served their operational interests. For them, ‘getting out of the war’ included holding the reins as well as delegating responsibility to those who could manage their own affairs.

The Allied liberators temporarily supervised a liberated country without a central government. In doing so, they had to decide for themselves, at the local level, how to deal with looting or lack of provisions. In the long run, this might have seriously damaged civilian-military relations and thus have had a political impact on the transition. After the German surrender, when a new government had been formed, the Allies helped restore its authority and gradually build its legitimation. Crucial plans were restorative in nature: they sought to consolidate their monopoly on violence and aimed to re-establish public order, food security, infrastructure and the administration. The establishment and enforcement of a monopoly on violence was of crucial importance to both the Allied forces operating in the liberated area and to that area’s own government. The Dutch government had cultivated a fear of independent action by the armed resistance. It had prepared the military and political structures to subordinate the resistance for the purpose of preventing such a development. Even though grassroots

64 Coles and Weinberg, Soldiers Become Governors, pp. 821-832.
activism of the former resistance remained strong, the men and their leaders quickly complied with the Allied authorities, who offered certain degrees of participation and agency. In the course of the process, this attitude of compliance was gradually transferred to their own Dutch authorities. The NMA played an intermediary role, first by securing the support of the organized resistance in the matter of the arrest and purging of collaborators, and subsequently by absorbing the most able and influential persons from the resistance to strengthen their own ranks.

Once military interim rule was established in the whole of the liberated Netherlands, the central state was best able to benefit from the material support needed to advance its goals. The Dutch authorities begged and borrowed a number of resources from the Allies: relief goods, uniforms, arms, office equipment, Bailey bridges, and transport, to mention only a few. In liberated Holland, roads, railway tracks and river crossings had been heavily damaged. Traffic had largely come to a standstill, and only military transports moved over longer distances. The Allied authorities put cars, trucks, and airplanes at the disposal of the central government. This enabled officials to connect once again with local authorities, reprimand or dismiss those who had failed, and encourage those officials who were charged with implementing national policies. When, for instance, the governor of the Province of Frisia received a telegram from the Minister of the Interior telling him that he was suspended from office in order to have his behaviour towards the Germans scrutinized, the senior official felt insulted and refused to leave his office. The Allied transport pool lent Minister Beel an airplane to see the reluctant official in person and to tell him to leave his post. The minister managed to neutralize the mounting tension in the province between those who sympathized with the governor and those who wanted to get rid of him, thus underlining the authority of ‘The Hague’.

The politics of transition took the shape of continuous challenges to the legitimacy of the interim authorities – of the exiled government and the NMA, of incumbent local administrators, of those who were put in place after the purges, and in the end, even of the national organizations representing the resistance. Owing to the policy of indirect rule, the Allied Civil Affairs units largely managed to keep away from the heat. When the situation gradually normalized after the war and the German occupation had come to an end, the Chief of Staff of NMA, General Kruls, said that the best thing the NMA could do for the government was to be an interim
administration: in this respect, it could draw all possible criticism and then disappear.65

The political impact of Allied military interim rule was that it facilitated the restoration of the central state. The Allies’ first role was to remain supportive: the Civil Affairs units did not take over the central state, nor did they force the local level ‘out of business’. ‘Back to normal’ implied the restoration of the exiled governments to their legal positions. The withering and partial collapse of the indigenous administrations by the end of the occupation has been termed ‘destatification’ by Martin Conway, referring to the Belgian case.66 In the Netherlands, the phenomenon occurred as well, and lasted longer. It was countered, however, by a pragmatic policy of what may be called ‘restatification’ by the indigenous elites, supported by the Allied military rulers. Despite the fact that war and occupation had disabled and discredited the administration from top to bottom, the state as such had remained the undisputed top level in the political structure. It seemed obvious that the need for relief and reconstruction required a return of the central state, rather than its elimination. The demise of the pre-war political system and its personnel had required an injection of élan from the start, calling for new people who might be able innovatively to reconstruct the liberal-democratic system. The political alternative from the extreme right had been utterly compromised by national socialist rule and terror, whereas the communist extreme left was not strong enough to impose its influence on transition politics.

Part of the effort entailed using public ceremonies as an instrument to claim transition for the central state in the name of the nation. Like General de Gaulle in France, Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Bernhard appeared in liberated towns and were cheered at. During the summer of 1945, public feasting and solemn commemorations went hand in hand, while floats and stadium games consolidated collective experience into national history. Thus, the liberation became celebrated as a confirmation of restoration.67 The central state, when taken back by the patriotic forces, provided a trusted infrastructure for administrating and regulating society. The state was still conceived as the exclusive provider of legal norms, protection, and regulation. Making transition work was seen as identical to making the central state work, taking control over local and regional alternative powers.

65 Beijens, Overgangspolitiek, pp. 210-212.
66 Conway, The Sorrows of Belgium, p. 51.
Making the state operate once more from the top down, and ensuring that the usual authorities were again active and functional made sense to the people at the top. In fact, they made it clear to activists at the lower level that they had no choice but to advance by working within the trusted structures – for instance as aldermen, mayors, or officials in relief and reconstruction agencies. The latter aspired to such prizes and largely refrained from founding the parallel executive bodies that generally characterize revolutionary situations. ‘Demobilizing the resistance’ did not just consist of handing over weapons – it also implied a larger programme of discontinuing its existence as a politically organized movement.

This was not at all a smooth and predictable process. What mattered was that the Allied Civil Affairs officers did not intervene very much in the internal Dutch political struggle. Sometimes they acted in a corrective way, for instance when the cruelties in the internment camps for collaborators became too notorious. Nevertheless, all Dutch competing for power began by seeking connections with them, as sources of power, prestige and provisions. The military element of liberation offered a fresh context: it helped people share in the golden glow of victory and produced a fresh outlook on life after an increasingly bleak occupation by a radical enemy. The associations between military organization and uniforms and images of vigour and agency accommodated the collective desire to solve the immense problems of the day by vigorous means. Relief goods and military supplies established a material relationship between liberators and liberated society. Moreover, the liberators were not only problem solvers – they also produced optimism.

Consequently, even as soldiers, the Allied military brought the promise of a return to peace and normal life – even to a life better than the one before the war. Their image was attractive to those who had lived in the growing claustrophobia of occupation, from which the free and modern world and its enticements had been inaccessible. As Peter Schrijvers points out in Liberators, his book on the Allies in liberated Belgium, the Allied soldiers as rulers were quick to rely on their ‘soft power’ in winning over the liberated society. Interestingly enough, the military element was both a vector of mobilization and demobilization of society. Mobilization is obvious: both the final campaign of the war and the reconstruction were presented as battles to be won. The Dutch transitional government proclaimed the need for the people to liberate themselves from the enemy, from the damage he had done,

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68 Romijn, Snel, streng en rechtvaardig, p. 186.
69 Schrijvers, Liberators, p. 257.
and from the failures of the past. At the same time, the military metaphor of ‘demobilization’ was gratefully employed to promote normalization: members of the resistance were first supposed to integrate themselves into military structures of command, then subordinate themselves to the constitutional government, and finally lay down their arms and behave like responsible civilians once again.