Gemeentebestuur in oorlogstijd: De stedelijke overheid van Breda onder Duitse bezetting

Bakker, J.J.

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On May 13, 1940, the third day after the invasion, the town of Breda situated in the south of the Netherlands in the province Noord-Brabant (North Brabant) was occupied by the German troops. From that moment on the municipal authorities had to take into account not only their own provincial and national government but also the demands and wishes of the occupying forces. All the administrators and civil servants had to face the decision in how far they were to go along with the execution of the usurper’s enforced measures at a certain moment. This thesis wants to investigate how administrators, civil servants and police officials reacted to the occupation each in their own way and whether or not they came to the decision to draw their own boundaries that were not to be crossed in their cooperation with the occupying forces.

The ultimate purpose of this investigation is to contribute to reducing the arrears that local and regional historiography has in many ways over the national historiography on the Second World War.

The most important person in this research will be the mayor of Breda who, according to Dutch polity, plays a central part in its municipality. After a career as an army officer and as a governor of Curacao, B.W.Th. van Slobbe was appointed mayor of Breda at the insistence of Prime Minister Colijn.

Breda had about 45,000 inhabitants at the outbreak of the war. Together with the surrounding villages the town formed an agglomeration of about 72,000. Between the First and Second World War the number of employees in industrial companies had grown considerably in proportion to the number of employees working in agriculture.

The political balance of parties in the town were and remained clear as in more cities in the Southern Netherlands. The Rooms-Katholieke Staatspartij (Roman-Catholic National Party) was the biggest party by far in the town council and without interval supplied all the aldermen for the administration.

Two subjects got great attention from the new mayor from the start. First he devoted himself to the extension of the town’s territory at the cost of the surrounding villages, which extension he deemed necessary. By extending the town’s territory he hoped to make local government more efficient. Secondly, he was extremely worried about the growing threat of war by National Socialist Germany. Proposals by the government to raise the expenditure of defenses and modernize the armed forces of which he had been a member for years, had his obvious support and sympathy. With great diligence he devoted himself to establishing and extending the distribution service and the air raid protection service required by the government for the whole country. At his own initiative he established militia groups and a corps of female volunteers to support these services.

Moreover Van Slobbe made a municipal Distribution or Evacuation plan in order to be prepared for possible calamities in case of war. The basic assumption was that in the circumstance of an invasion the military situation might make it necessary to spread part of the population or its entirety over the surroundings of the town. In the opinion of the mayor this situation occurred in the early days of the war when Breda was in danger of becoming a war zone between the invading Germans on the one hand and the French who had come to assist the Dutch on the other. This led to a chaotic flight southwards of a great part of the population, which turned out not to have been necessary after all. In this book I will show that Van Slobbe, though he was accountable for the decision taken, was unjustly blamed for the ‘De Vlucht’ (The Flight) in the perception of the citizens. The return of the citizens of Breda and other Dutch refugees who had ended up as far as France, was taken care of by the German occupier under guidance of a Breda businessman J.M. Meeus who became an alderman later during the war.
The German occupational government of the Netherlands had an ambiguous character during the first year and a half. On the one hand the Germans had the intention to obtain the co-operation of the Dutch authorities that had stayed behind, the population and the business circles by their benevolence. At first Dutch authorities and other people thus got the impression that to a large extent, they would be able to continue as usual. That willingness to co-operate may be summed up as ‘Wait and See’. On the other hand the occupier hoped and wished to assimilate the related ‘Nordic-German’ population of the Netherlands into the German Reich. That would put an end to any form of independence and reduce the Netherlands to a German province. When in the course of 1942, it became clear that neither the authorities nor the population were keen on such a development the totalitarian character of the occupying regime rapidly increased and changed character. The supervisory government, Aufsichtsverwaltung, soon became a regime of oppression.

From the very first day the town was occupied, the municipal government, the public servants and the police were aware of the necessity to co-operate with the occupying forces; this did not only go for the town administration, the civil servants and the police force but for the inhabitants as well. The question was how far this co-operation was to go. International law, as laid down in the Landoorlogreglement (Rules on Land War) and on the basis of which the Dutch government had issued the Aanwijzingen (Instructions) in 1937, provided rules in cases like this. Those were not interpreted in the same way by each person in authority. At the end of May and the beginning of June 1940 this became apparent in Breda among other places, when a discussion arose about the repair works on Dutch airfields. The Breda employment agency had mediated in the appointment of labourers for work at the airport Gilze-Rijen which was of great importance to the Germans to continue their offensive war. Mayor Van Slobbe did not think these works were permitted and neither did General Winkelman, commander-in-chief of the Dutch forces. They were in conflict with the Rules of Land War and the Instructions. The Royal Commissioner of Noord-Brabant Van Rijckevorsel and the secretary-general of the Ministry of Home Affairs Frederiks, both told him that the work on the airfields was permitted. Fear of unemployment and of forced employment in Germany played a part in this. The had to submit and the occupier forced Winkelman to limit his involvement to the demobilisation of the army units. In many other cases in which the occupier demanded goods and services from the administration and inhabitants a similar discussion took place to define the boundaries between co-operation and collaboration.

A second important question posed immediately after the capitulation of the Netherlands was in how far the institutions and plans could be continued under their own guidance. To what extent would the occupier intervene in the day-to-day existence? At first they seemed to behave in a correct way and restrict themselves to the afore mentioned supervision at a distance. In the beginning the idea of many Dutch was that if they co-operated loyally with the occupier the interests of the country and its inhabitants would benefit from that. In reality it soon became obvious that the German supervision meant more and more interference and had the German interests at heart. The first examples were the appointment of German Fachberater or ‘advisors’ in the municipal employment exchanges and the obligation to allow the German security police access to card catalogues and other data systems.

For a short while it seemed possible to converge German National-Socialist wishes with the Dutch wishes and innovations of society. The short history of the Nederlandse Unie (Netherland Union) and the Winterhulp (Winterhelp) during the war show how the German occupier tried to control social structures and how much resistance this caused. In the spring of 1941 the new catholic Noord-Brabantse Bond van Heemkundige Studiekringen (Association for Studies of Local History of North-Brabant) was immediately sidetracked and discarded by the Bond voor Heemkunde (Association of Local History). The latter was openly supported by the occupier and commanded in Breda by J.C. van der Aa, a member of the NSB (National Socialist Movement), and future alder-man and acting mayor of the town.
The Breda chapter of the history of the Nederlands-Duitse Kultuurgemeenschap (Dutch-German Cultural Society), further referred to as NDK, shows how the German occupier tried to use the cultural affinity as a preliminary stage of and a preparation for a political absorption by national-socialist Germany. Notwithstanding efforts to hide the German character of the NDK-organisation in the beginning, its true purpose was soon obvious. A nationwide study into the NDK will shed more light on the history of this National-Socialist movement.

On the other hand the occupation seemed to make possible matters which had encountered all sorts of formal obstacles and delays in the pre-war democratic existing order. Mayor Van Slobbe thought that he could continue with the extension of the territory of the city, according to the plans, drafted long before May 1940, by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the provincial authorities. He regarded this as an affair of the Netherlands and Breda only. He was, however, mistaken in the extra susceptibilities connected with the ‘annexation’ matter ‘in wartime’. He had to experience during and after the occupation that many citizens and fellow-mayors blamed him in this.

The ‘soft hand policy’ of the German civil administration, commanded by Rijkscom-missaris (Reich-commissioner) Seyss-Inquart, had been meant as a temporary condition by the occupier. As soon as Germany would definitely have established its supremacy in Europe a start would be made with the Nazification of people and society. The idea of the Dutch that things did not seem so bad rather was rather a case of wishful thinking than insight in the real intentions of the occupier. From the beginning of the occupation numerous actions, regulations and measures were enough indication to the wise for the direction the German authorities wished to take. It started immediately after the invasion with the running in of political opponents. This concerned curate A. van Lierop and journalist H. Hoeben in Breda in June 1940. In that same month a start was made with the ruling out of the democratic institutions of the country by closing down the States General and the Provincial States. This also happened somewhat later to the town councils on September 1st, 1941.

In July 1940, shortly after the German invasion, a start was made with the systematic removal of Jewish citizens from political and social life. The very first step was to prohibit Jews from being and becoming a member of the Air Raid Defense in that same month. Numerous and ever more severe measures followed. Jewish citizens were no longer allowed to enter public places and institutions. The introduction of the Star of David in May 1942 openly declared them as different from their so-called ‘Arian’ countrymen. Because of its relatively small number of Jewish citizens (a little over 200) the first measures were hardly noticed in Breda. Only with the deportation measures in 1942-1943 it occurred to the Breda population that the situation was serious. The physical removal from Breda society mainly took place at two moments: at the end of August 1942 and in April 1943. Of the more than two hundred Jewish inhabitants of Breda almost half managed to survive the war. This remarkably high number of survivors, as compared to those in other places is certainly owed to the Chairman of the Jewish Council of Breda, Henri Samuel. Even before the first deportation in August 1942 he had already advised his people to go into hiding. Other factors which had been mentioned but can not always be proved are the small number of Jewish citizens in Breda, their being warned by individual policemen, the opportunities to go into hiding, and the assistance in doing this from parish priests and ministers.

The remodeling of the Opbouwdienst (Reconstruction Service) dating from 1940, into a voluntary and later obligatory Nederlandse Arbeidsdienst (Dutch Employment Service) only signified a preliminary stage of the Arbeitseinsatz, the obligatory employment programme of the Germans for the benefit of the occupier and its war industry. Originally the Opbouwdienst was meant to take care of unemployed demobilized military and illustrates the gradual transition of what seemed a voluntary cooperation to a forced one.
After the summer of 1941 it became even more clear that the Germans really meant to remodel the political and social order in The Netherlands. From September 1, 1941, democracy at a local level was ended by ruling out the Municipal Executive (Mayor and Aldermen) and the town councils. The mayors were promoted to authoritarian leaders of their municipality but at the same time their powers were more and more limited. Against their will, moreover, aldermen from the Dutch National Socialist Movement were thrust upon them. In Breda J.S. de Groot was appointed in Breda in June 1942. He was little to be feared, however, because of his tolerant character. His fanatic replacement (July 1943) and his successor (December 1943) J.C. van der Aa encountered a lot more resistance. De Groot replaced A.A.M. Struycken who had found a place in the lee with an important company in town. After the forced resignation of alderman Van Mierlo because of his anti-German attitude, Van Slobbe succeeded in finding a trustworthy replacement in J.M. Meeûs (July 1942) who had recalled the fleeing Breda citizens and other persons from France in cooperation with the Germans. Although the aldermen had been degraded to civil servants in the new order, consultations and decision making were continued in the same way by mayor and aldermen.

A rigorous limitation of the power and authority of municipalities with a police force of their own was formed by the reorganization plans of the occupier with regard to the fragmented Dutch police forces. NSB (National Socialist Movement) members among the more than one hundred Breda policemen numbered thirteen at the most during the war. Thus one could hardly speak of Nazification of the local force but as a whole the force was mistrusted as a means of exercising power in the hands of the occupier. There was certainly no question of open resistance of the force as a whole or of individual members. After the war records about some ten members were found mentioning ‘some’ to ‘very active’ resistance. The great Nazification of the police organization was finalized in the spring of 1943. The municipal police forces were united into one State police under the Ministry of Law, controlled by the occupier. Instead of the old indications of ranks, military grades were introduced.

In the course of 1942 – 1943 the occupying forces on the one hand and the Dutch people and their authorities on the other, confronted one another a number of times. The introduction of forced labour, the Arbeitseinsatz, led to the first open conflict. As in Breda most managers of the Regional Labour Exchange refused to carry out the order to appoint labourers for work in Germany. Subsequently mayors refused to order the police to arrest those who refused to carry out work. One of them was Mayor Van Slobbe of Breda. It was reason for him to threaten secretary-general Frederiks with taking his leave for the first time.

A long controversy arose between the occupier and the Dutch authorities about the mayors assigning and appointing their own municipal employees for work in Germany. The Breda refused to co-operate too. After the war, however, one of the most important accusations addressed to Van Slobbe was that he had done just that. In reality the lists of names had been made but never sent off by order of the mayor.

The participation of civil servants of Breda in the April-May strike of 1943 was limited and of short duration as opposed to the strike of the personnel of the Breda industrial firms and factories. The enforced statement of names of those civil servants on strike to the Sicherheitsdienst (German Security Service) was one more accusation made, concerning Van Slobbe in the preparation for a possible trial after the war. The list of names that was sent had purposely been made in such a way that it was of little use to the Germans. Reprisals did not follow in contrast with what happened in some other municipalities.

During and after World War II it has often been discussed at what moment a mayor should have resigned during the war. Mayors could and did resign as a consequence of several regulations such as the rendering out of action of the local councils and the Municipal
Executives (1941), anti-Jewish measures (1941-1943), the Arbeitseinsatz (1942-1943), the running in of students and other youths as a reprisal of the attack on General Seyffardt (February 1943) and the April-May strike (1943). A few times Van Slobbe had to make a decision whether to resign or not, but decided not to because of the Aanwijzingen (Instructions) and the influence of secretary-general Frederiks. In early December 1943 he was ordered to supply male workers to build defences by the German Beauftragte or the representative in the province of Noord-Brabant. He refused to execute this order both orally and in writing based on the Aanwijzingen and the Landoorlogreglement. When it became clear that he could not manage to evade the order he sent in his resignation and as a precaution, he took shelter awaiting the reply. He was dismissed a month later.

Alderman and acting mayor J.M. Meeùs had been refused a dismissal as required at the same time. Against his will he had to accept the function of acting mayor and had to make the most of the difficult situation Van Slobbe had managed to evade. He thought he had found a solution by advertizing in the newspaper for workers on the defences. In that way he did not need to appoint anybody himself. After doing that he fell ill and NSB alderman J.C. van der Aa took over the requisitioning without further ado. Most of the conscripted citizens did not turn up however.

G.C. Blom was appointed mayor by the occupier on July 17, 1944 after J.M. Meeùs (from the end of February to the beginning of April) and alderman J.C. van der Aa (from the beginning of April to the second half of July) had been acting mayor. On October 27, two days before the town was liberated, Blom fled to the north because of the approaching Allied Forces. At the start of the Second World War Blom had been a tax auditor in Breda. He joined the NSB and the Dutch/German SS. After passing the course for mayors organized by the NSB in 1941 at the advice of the Germans, he became a leader and instructor of that same course in the NSB district Breda. From April 1942 till July 1944 he was the alderman for finances in Rotterdam where F. Müller was a well-known NSB mayor.

On Sunday 29 October, two days after Blom’s departure, Van Slobbe went to the town center which had just been liberated and was re-instated as mayor by the enthusiastic population. The Miltair Gezag (Military Authority), the transitional authority thought his management during the occupation had been controversial to such an extent that it had to be further investigated, however. That is why he was temporarily suspended awaiting the results of an exoneration.

After the liberation of the south of the Netherlands a new local authority had to be installed as soon as possible. A local authority that would be trusted by the people and that would not harbour any undesirable elements. With a view to obtaining this purpose the Dutch government in London issued many decisions about the trial and purging of undesirable persons. In Breda the purging was very chaotic at first. Because of the close front it was mostly executed by members of the organized resistance but also members of the unorganized resistance took part. Many persons were run in for varying reasons: from ‘treason’ and ‘actively helping’ the enemy to ‘unpatriotic behaviour’ and ‘showing weak behaviour’.

For several reasons compiling and installing the committee of purging in Breda took from January to April 1945. Of the approximately 1500 persons who had been employed either permanently or temporarily by the city, about seventy were indicted by the commission. For some forty of them who were still in service this meant from reprimand to dismissal.

Four of the 108 members of the police criticized after the war, were given a long-term prison sentence by the Special Court of Justice. Sixteen others had to appear before the purging committee of the police. Half of them were not punished or the charges against them were dropped. The other half received a lighter sentence such as a reprimand, a cut in their salary, a transfer or were put on probation.

Beginning December 10th, 1944, Mayor B.W.TH. van Slobbe who had returned on October 29, was suspended on full pay, awaiting further investigation, by the acting Royal Commis-
sioner of Noord-Brabant. The decision was taken on the basis of a preliminary investigation made by a commission led by the district’s military commander (DMC) van Boetzelaer in Breda in November. This summoned contradictory reactions: approval of a part of the civil servants and members of the resistance but also disapproval of numerous citizens of Breda involved in its political and social life.

Van Slobbe considered the suspension and the long process after that unjustified and humiliating. He actively defended himself. In June 1945 it looked as if the advice to dismiss him, proposed by the local purging committee of Breda and the documentation commission, would be accepted by the Central Body to Purge Public Servants (COZO) and sent to the Minister of the Home Department. The national commission of advice concerning the purging of public servants came to the conclusion that there were no grounds for dismissal. The minister decided that Van Slobbe could resume his work the second part of October 1945.

The investigation into the position of former alderman and former acting mayor J.M. Meeùs led to a process before the Tribunal of Breda in September 1945. Its sentence was remarkable to say the least. He was acquitted of the first accusation: helping the enemy. He was not acquitted of the accusation that he had acted disregarding the interest of the Dutch people but this accusation was not deemed serious enough to sentence him.

It was decided that G.C. Blom the national socialist mayor who had been mayor in Breda for only a short time (July-October 1944) and had been very reserved, would best be prosecuted in Breda for those reasons, rather than in Rotterdam where he had been an NSB alderman. At the end of April 1947 he was sentenced to five years internment, an explicit banning order on holding a public office and disenfranchisement. In the autumn of 1948 he was released because of his positive attitude and behaviour.

NSB alderman J.S. de Groot was sentenced by default to seven years imprisonment in June 1950. In 1953 after his return from Russian imprisonment he received a suspended pardon which became definite a short while later.

NSB alderman J.C. van der Aa was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment for his activities as a spy for the Germans after ‘Mad Tuesday’, Sept. 5, 1944.

In the ‘Summing-up’ I look back on the most important incidents that were notable and specific to the history of the war in Breda. I will mention them hereafter.

The well-meant evacuation plan of the mayor turned into a chaotic flight because of circumstances and contributed to his negative image. The expansion of the town as of January 1st, 1942, after the administrative situation had been changed and the mayor could use this change to obtain his goal more quickly, also made for a negative attitude especially with those inhabitants who had been incorporated. A development that seemed just and necessary to many got a negative charge.

Managed by Van Slobbe, organizations instigated by the occupier such as Winterhulp and the Bond voor Heemkunde (Association of Local history), were kept in control as long as possible.

The NSB alderman they had been forced to accept got little free rein. Van Slobbe succeeded in appointing the trustworthy J.M. Meeùs as a replacement for two pre-war aldermen who had been dismissed.

The trial and purging of the Breda administrators, public servants and police officials led to a great deal of discussion in Breda as well as in other places. Based on the number of National Socialist or pro-German sympathizers employed with the Breda police and the civil service, it is impossible to speak of a corpse or government organization showing National Socialist sympathies or acting as if they had those. Depending on the ideal picture or the view taken it is always possible, however, to place positive or negative comments.

The liberation of Breda and of other municipalities in Noord-Brabant and Limburg took place months before the liberation of the rest of the country and was preceded by a last effort of the occupier to force the population to co-operate in the defense. The town was spared a hunger winter as the west of the Netherlands suffered by its ‘early’ liberation.
The ruling out of the town councils as the local representatives of the democratic government and the demotion of the aldermen to civil servants, gave the mayors a lot of power and responsibility nominally but in practice was limited and checked in all possible ways. The bold personality and the dominant character of the Breda Mayor B.W.Th. van der Slobbe, already obvious before the German change in government, has contributed without doubt to the idea of a part of the Breda population that Van Slobbe had been an extension of the occupier and an willing executor of their wishes. His feeling of responsibility and the encouragement of his official ‘manager’ the secretary-general of the Home Office Frederiks made him accept a second term of office in 1942.

This study about Breda during the Second World War wants to contribute to a more detached, rational and less emotional view of this very important period in the history of the town. It wants to offer an addition and a differentiation to the existing general view of ‘the Netherlands during the Second World War’.

In this framework comparative investigation should be made into more fields of the regional and local events of the war. One of the subjects to investigate might be the role and the part the catholic clergy of the southern provinces played in the resistance against the German occupier. I am of the opinion that this role has been underestimated so far.