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‘A Newspaper War’?

Dutch Information Networks during the South African War (1899-1902)¹

VINCENT KUITENBROUWER

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The South African War (1899-1902) caused a stir in the Netherlands. The Dutch public overwhelmingly supported the Boers in their struggle against the British. To support the ‘kinsmen’ in South Africa several organisations in the Netherlands embarked on an international propaganda campaign. This article considers the involvement of Dutch journalists in the pro-Boer agitation. They were confronted with a dilemma because as a small country the Netherlands officially was neutral and did not possess strong international lines of communications, which made it difficult to distribute information in other countries. This problem raised moral and practical questions about the Dutch press and its position in the world. Using concepts from the historiography on the media of the British Empire, Kuitenbrouwer analyses the Dutch press system around 1900.

The South African War was headline news in the Netherlands. Between October 1899 and June 1902 the Dutch press devoted many pages to the conflict between the British Empire and the Boer republics. The majority of Dutch journalists supported the Boers from a sense of racial and cultural kinship, called *stamverwantschap*, which came from an idea of shared heritage. In the mid-nineteenth century the Boer republics were founded by descendants of VOC colonists who had settled at the Cape of Good Hope in the previous centuries. Moreover the official language of the Boers still was High Dutch, although in daily life they started to develop their own grammatical conventions. As a result of the Transvaal War (1880-1881), the interest of the Dutch public in their ‘cousins’ was aroused. Several organisations in the Netherlands promoted plans to strengthen the ties with the republics in order

to develop a sphere of influence in the region. This can be seen as an ‘informal’ and ‘cultural’ form of imperialism.²

Historians have struggled with the question of how to assess the historical importance of the Dutch pro-Boer sentiment. In secondary literature it is argued that there were several limiting factors, the most telling of which was the policy of neutrality of the government. The Netherlands could not afford to risk a conflict with its mighty neighbour over South Africa, as statesmen feared that the British would annex Dutch colonial possessions in Southeast Asia in retaliation.³ From the primary sources however, it appears that despite the neutrality contemporaries sought ways to mobilise public opinion for the Boer cause, not only in the Netherlands but also in other Western countries. Dutch agents played a pivotal role in the European propaganda campaign for the republics, publishing material that reached them from the war zone in South Africa.⁴ As a result the contemporary debate about the South African War touched upon wider questions about the Netherlands and its position in the world as a small nation with large overseas interests.

In this article I will explore how this dilemma affected the involvement of Dutch journalists in the propaganda campaign for the Boers. By doing so, questions about the nature of the press in the Netherlands are raised. In theoretical literature on mass communication a distinction is made between communication, aimed at informing the public, and ‘propaganda’, which is intended to manipulate. This idea, which emerged in the 1920s, has stimulated the view amongst scholars that journalism should be independent.⁵ Looking at the historical context however, such a stance is problematic as the situation was often more complex. Journalism and propaganda in the Netherlands were not strictly separated during the South African War. I will argue that the goals of some Dutch journalists and pro-Boer propaganda organisations were similar, making information coming from the Boers known to the world in order to counter British views. Indeed, several journalists were leading members of propaganda organisations. This suggests that in order to fully grasp the press coverage of the South African War, historians must look beyond newspapers and also take into consideration networks that facilitated the flow of information abroad.

1 I would like to thank the editors of *BMCN- Low Countries Historical Review* and the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments on previous versions of this article.

2 G.J. Schutte, *Nederland en de Afrikaners. Adhesie en aversie* (Franeker 1986) 41-42 and 205; M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst van het moderne imperialisme. Koloniën en buitenlandse politiek 1870-1902* (Amsterdam 1985) 129-130.

3 M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 204 and 107-209.

4 J.J.V. Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words: Dutch Pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War (1899-1902)* (Amsterdam 2012).

5 For an overview of the debate about the definition of propaganda see: G.S. Jowett and V. O'Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion* (Fifth edition; Thousand Oaks 2012) chapter 1.

On the following pages the meaning of the Dutch information networks will be analysed using primary source material in which contemporaries reflected on the nature of these lines of communication. It will be shown that despite their awareness of the official policy of neutrality and the limits it imposed, Dutch opinion makers pro-actively tried to influence public opinion at home and abroad. As such, the campaign for the Boers spurred initiatives to promote the interests of the Dutch 'race' in the international media. This case shows that issues connected to Modern Imperialism had an impact on the press system in the Netherlands, a topic that has not yet received much attention from historians. Recent historiography about media within the British Empire provides several interesting prisms through which we can view the Dutch situation. I will begin by assessing some of the concepts that have been put forward in this literature.

Historiography

It is a well established idea that the wave of globalisation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought about great changes in international information exchange. The improvement of steamboats and railways and the advent of intercontinental telegraph lines enabled a larger and faster flow of information between different parts of the world. This development was connected to the emergence of mass media in Western countries where the market for cheap print material expanded rapidly due to technological innovations and lower taxes. The media became a powerful instrument to stimulate nation building, both in European countries and their colonies.⁶

This thesis is an important premise of the concepts forwarded in the New Imperial History, which constitute the point of departure for this special issue of the *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review*. One of the main ideas in this field of research is that information from overseas territories that reached Europe had an impact on metropolitan identity formation.⁷ First of all, the overseas information networks transferred material that generated moral issues affecting the self-image of countries in Europe. In historiography much emphasis is put on the representation of the 'civilised' western colonisers versus the 'uncivilised' indigenous populations in the periphery. In Britain

6 B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Second edition; London, New York 1991).

7 See for example: J.M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of the British Public* (Manchester 1984); C. Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge 2002).

such imperial themes were popular in the emergent mass press.⁸ In addition there was a great deal of 'othering' amongst European powers themselves in order to spruce up national prestige by showing that their own empires were better than those of rivals.⁹

Although he does acknowledge that these imperial connections are relevant, Simon Potter points out that one has to be careful with these claims of the New Imperial History. In his work he asserts that the improving infrastructure between Britain and its overseas territories had great significance for the way in which the imperial press was organised. Media in all parts of the British Empire were connected and Fleet Street in London became the undisputed information hub.¹⁰ But Potter warns against anachronism too. The global means of communication in the late nineteenth century were not as democratic as they are in the twenty-first century. Because of the commercial and strategic interests powerful institutions regulated these networks and access was limited. The most obvious example is the intercontinental telegraph lines that were constructed after 1870. News agencies, of which Reuters was the most important, dominated this market and newspapers depended on them for the latest information from abroad. Potter argues that in the late nineteenth century British Empire such institutions were strong, providing a rigid 'system' of information exchange. To assess the meaning of imperial press networks, one has to take into account these mechanisms and the way they were discussed by contemporaries.¹¹

In times of crisis, such as a large-scale war, the workings of the intercontinental lines of communication became urgent as the flow of information was restricted. The South African War, the largest conflict the world saw in between the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and the First World War (1914-1918), generated much debate amongst contemporaries about the British imperial press system. In this sense it can be seen as the first modern 'media war'.¹² Potter shows that Reuters played a crucial role in the coverage of events, owning the monopoly on telegraph lines between South Africa and Europe.¹³ Moreover, British officials actively tried to manipulate

8 C. Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India, c. 1880-1922* (Manchester 2003); S.J. Potter (ed.), *Newspapers and Empire in Ireland and Britain: Reporting the British Empire, c. 1857-1921* (Dublin 2004).

9 J.M. MacKenzie, 'Introduction', in: idem (ed.), *European Empires and the People: Popular Responses to Imperialism in France, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Italy* (Manchester 2011) 9-10.

10 S.J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (Oxford 2003).

11 S.J. Potter, 'Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire', *Journal of British Studies* 46 (2007) 621-646.

12 S. Badsey, 'A Print and Media War', in: C. Wilcox (ed.), *Recording the South African War: Journalism and Official History* (London 1999) 5-16.

13 Potter, *News and the British World*, 53-54.

news agencies and newspapers to promote information that was considered to be beneficial for the war effort and hold back the information that was considered to be harmful. Although such machinations were far more intrusive during the First World War, Jacqueline Beaumont argues that the South African War was the first conflict in which the British administration systematically tried to control information coming from the war zone.¹⁴

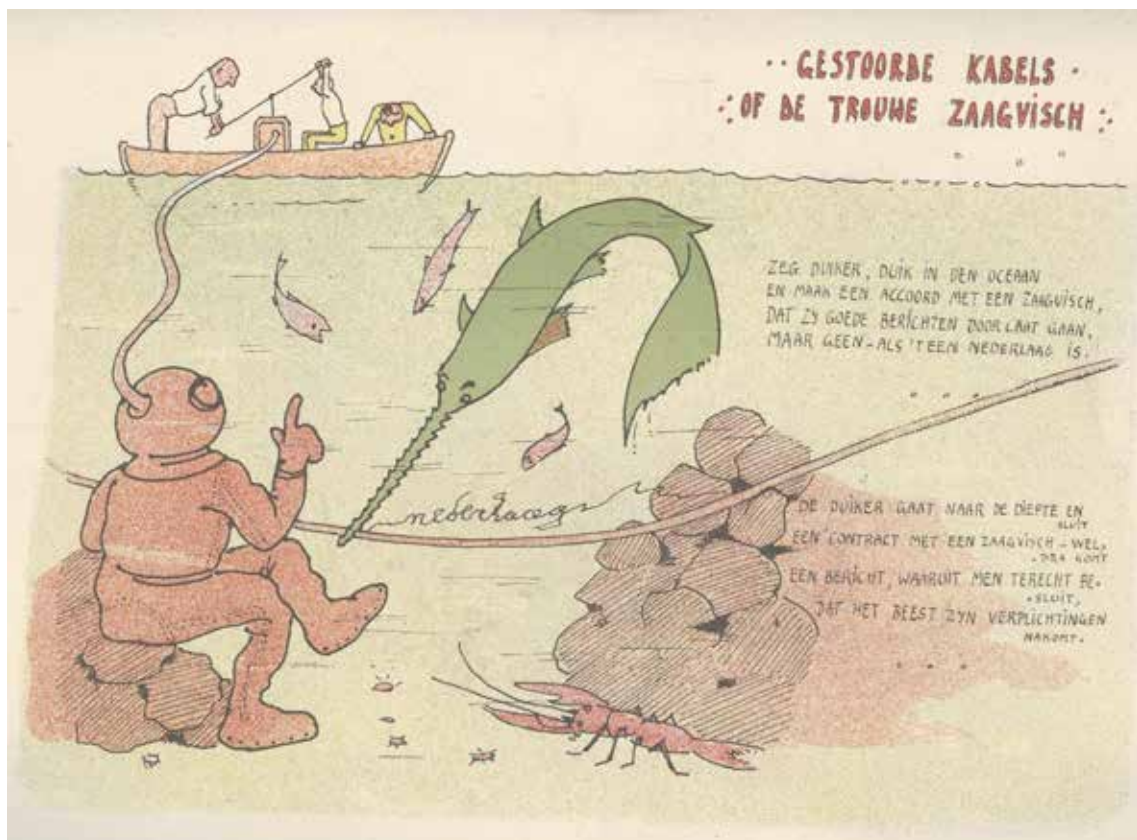
The historiography of the British imperial press system is relevant to the study of the Dutch coverage of the South African War. Firstly, the conflict raised moral questions for journalists in the Netherlands. To many opinion makers the unequal fight between the mighty British Empire and the small Boer republics showed the corrupt nature of the imperialism of great powers in contrast to the righteousness of the overseas ambitions of the Dutch race, which was trying to forward the cause of civilisation across the globe. In this context the term 'pro-Boer' cannot always be taken literally, which shows the different motives for groups in the Netherlands to support the republics. As well as the feelings of kinship, the coverage of the South African War also affected the self-image of the Dutch nation – a small power in the European state-system with large overseas interests.

This complex position caused other dilemmas. Several scholars have pointed out that the improving lines of communication between the continents had a significant impact on the press in the Netherlands during the late nineteenth century. This was most obvious in the coverage of the Dutch East Indies as the Suez Canal and telegraph cables facilitated a far more efficient flow of information. However the international status of the Netherlands also caused problems in this respect. The Dutch did not possess a network of transcontinental telegraph cables and newspapers in the Netherlands depended on foreign agencies.¹⁵ In addition, the policy of neutrality set limits because too outspoken opinions could provoke hostile reactions from the great powers. In these ways the Dutch press clearly was affected by the international position of the Netherlands. To stick to Potter's terms, the Dutch did not possess an information system as well organised as that of the British.

In addition to these considerations, the comparison between the British imperial press system and the Dutch press networks has direct historical relevance. The South African War confronted Dutch journalists with the fact that their lines of communication were less developed than those of the British. In the war zone the British media was represented by a small army of correspondents and the authorities in London were able to censor all

14 J. Beaumont, 'The British Press and Censorship during the South African War 1899-1902', *South African Historical Journal* 41 (1999) 267-289.

15 Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 199-205; J.M.H.J. Hemels, *Een journalistiek geheim ontsluiterd. De Dubbelmonarchie en een geval van dubbele moraal in de Nederlandse pers tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Apeldoorn 2010) 37-38.



▲
Dutch cartoon depicting a diver bribing a sawfish
to stop telegraph-messages about British defeats in
South Africa.

Jan Feith and Kees van Ponten, *Pillen voor Joe*
(Amsterdam 1900).

telegraph lines in the region.¹⁶ In contrast, the Dutch press employed only a few reporters in the field and largely depended on haphazard information that reached the Netherlands via mail services that were increasingly disturbed. The uneven situation triggered discussion amongst Dutch journalists, showing that they reflected on their position in the world at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

This international component adds to our understanding of Dutch media history. In the secondary literature on the press there is a strong focus on the domestic situation. In the decades around 1900 journalism in the Netherlands underwent great changes as a result of the expanding market for printed material and the improving social standing of the profession of journalism.¹⁷ In recent literature there is growing attention paid to the coverage of foreign news in the Dutch press. This emerging interest coincides with critical reflections by present day correspondents who complain that they are often dependent on the input of news agencies and official spokesmen.¹⁸ To understand the functioning of the press, one has to take into account the influence of such institutions. Several studies show that the awareness of these mechanisms is not new, but has historical roots.¹⁹ Particularly the First World War is an interesting case as propagandists of the warring nations actively tried to influence the press in the Netherlands, which was a neutral country, causing debate amongst opinion makers and anxiety among government officials.²⁰ Although the propaganda campaign during the First World War was exceptional in its scale, similar concerns were already discussed in the Netherlands during the South African War.

An exploration of this case study leads to relevant insights for the historiography of the Dutch press in another way. Concerns about the coverage of South African affairs must be seen primarily in the context of Modern Imperialism and were connected to the debate about the Dutch colonial possessions. Several important overviews have been published about the news

16 See: Potter, *News and the British World*, chapter 2.

17 J.M.H.J. Hemels and M. Schneider, *De Nederlandse krant 1618-1978. Van 'nieuwstydninghe' tot dagblad* (Baarn 1979); H. Wijffjes, *De journalistiek in Nederland 1850-2000. Beroep, cultuur en organisatie* (Amsterdam 2004).

18 J. Luyendijk, *Het zijn net mensen. Beelden uit het Midden-Oosten* (Amsterdam 2006); J. Boom, *Als een nacht met duizend sterren. Oorlogsjournalistiek in Uruzgan* (Amsterdam 2010).

19 A. Karskens, *Pleisters op de ogen. De Nederlandse oorlogsverslaggeving van Heiligerlee tot Kosovo* (Amsterdam 2001); B. Kester, 'Uit de slaap

gewekt. Nederlandse dagbladen verslaan de oorlog, 1870-1914', in: P. Dassen and P. Groen (eds.), *Van de barricaden naar de loopgraven. Oorlog en samenleving in Europa, 1789-1914* (Amsterdam 2008) 219-228.

20 I. Tames, *Oorlog voor onze gedachten. Oorlog, neutraliteit en identiteit in het Nederlandse publieke debat 1914-1918* (Hilversum 2006); J. Hemels, *Een journalistiek geheim ontsluit. De Dubbelmonarchie en een geval van dubbele moraal in de Nederlandse pers tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Apeldoorn 2010).

press in the colonies by Gerard Termorshuizen (Dutch East Indies) and Angelie Sens (Suriname). They assert that late nineteenth-century developments in the Dutch overseas territories were similar to those in the motherland and that the press became an important factor in public life in the colonies.²¹ It must be remembered however, that the freedom of the press in the periphery was more limited than in the Netherlands, as is also shown by Miriam Maters in a study about censorship in the Dutch East Indies.²² In other words, the understanding of news agencies and government interference is essential in the study of the press in the overseas context. Although the books mentioned in this paragraph provide a good overview of the development of the press in the Dutch periphery, the effects of the international communication-lines on the press in the metropolis are still unknown. The case of the South African War provides an example of how such mechanisms worked.

'A newspaper war'

The interest of Dutch journalists in the Boers did not start with the outbreak of the South African War in October 1899 but can be traced back to the Transvaal War of 1881 when the Boers defeated the British Empire. In the years following, Dutch editors continued to give a great deal of attention to events connected with South African affairs, such as the visit of the Transvaal deputation in the Netherlands in 1884 and the Jameson Raid – the failed coup in the Transvaal instigated by the British South Africa Company in 1896. Although the attention of the Dutch media to South Africa reached a climax around the start of the South African War, it was by no means a new phenomenon.²³



The *Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad*, 9 October 1899, a few days before the start of hostilities in South Africa.

The map provided readers with an overview of the strategic situation and the pictures showed the mobilisation of the Boers in Transvaal and British in Cape Town.

<http://kranten.kb.nl/>.

- 21 G. Termorshuizen, *Journalisten en heethoofden. Een geschiedenis van de Indisch-Nederlandse dagbladpers 1744-1905* (Amsterdam, Leiden 2001); idem, *Realisten en reactionairen. Een geschiedenis van de Indisch-Nederlandse pers 1905-1942* (Amsterdam, Leiden 2011); A. Sens, 'Inleiding', in: A. Sens and Archie Sumter (eds.), *K'ranti!. De Surinaamse pers, 1774-2008* (Amsterdam 2008) 12.
- 22 M. Maters, *Van zachte wenk tot harde hand. Persvrijheid en persbreidel in Nederlands-Indië 1906-1942* (Hilversum 1998).
- 23 J. Geerts, *Verzuiilde Boerenliefde. Een studie naar de berichtgeving over de eerste en tweede Boerenoorlog door De Standaard, De Tijd en Het Algemeen Handelsblad in de periode 1880-1902* (MA thesis history department, University of Amsterdam 2005).

During the last decades of the nineteenth century the majority of the newspapers in the Netherlands propagated pro-Boer views in their editorials – and continued to do so during the South African War, and even for some time after the conflict. The most outspoken support for the ideal of *stamverwantschap* came from Liberal and Protestant journalists. Initially Catholics had more sceptical views on the Boers who were known for their strict Calvinism, but during the 1890s, driven by patriotic motives, they joined the chorus in support of the ‘kinsmen’ in South Africa. The most outspoken critics of the ideal of *stamverwantschap* could be found amongst the Socialists, but even here some opinion makers expressed their sympathy for the Boer cause.²⁴

In general the ties between the press and the most important pro-Boer organisations, such as the Dutch South African Society (*Nederlandsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Vereeniging*, hereafter NZAV) and the General Dutch Alliance (*Algemeen Nederlandsch Verbond*, hereafter ANV) were close. Indeed, several well-known journalists were active members of these societies.²⁵ The leaders of the NZAV were quite satisfied with the coverage of South Africa in Dutch newspapers.²⁶ The views of most journalists fitted the propaganda campaign of the pro-Boer organisations to inform the European public about the republics in a positive way. The publications were meant to provide a counterweight to British propagandists who argued that the Boers were half-civilised and not capable of running their own states, thereby supporting expansionist plans in the region. Dutch authors argued that the Boers were the best ‘race’ to rule the region denouncing the ambitions of British imperialists as ‘perfidious’. This sentiment was partly inspired by self-interest as several Dutch opinion makers hoped that the Netherlands could expand its own influence in the region by strengthening the ties with the independent republics.²⁷

Notwithstanding their confident tone, these opinion makers expressed their concerns about the coverage of South African affairs. Dutch newspapers did not have a network of professional correspondents and depended on random letters from settlers or travellers in the region. As a result pro-Boer activists found it difficult to obtain a steady flow of information and to control

24 For Liberal pro-Boers see: H. te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbef. Liberalisme en nationalisme in Nederland 1870-1918* (The Hague 1992) 78-81 and chapter 6. For Protestants see: C.J.A. van Koppen, *De geuzen van de negentiende eeuw. Abraham Kuyper en Zuid-Afrika* (Wormser 1992). For Socialists see: F.J. Pretorius, ‘The Dutch Social Democrats and the South African War, 1899-1902’, *European Review of History* 6 (1999) 199-220. More general overviews of Dutch public

opinion see: Schutte, *Nederland en de Afrikaners*, chapter 3; M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst*, 118-130 and 173-190; Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 289-207.

25 Te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbef*, 73; Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 292-293.

26 NZAV *Jaarverslag 1888-1889* (Amsterdam 1889) 23.

27 See for example: ‘De Nederlandsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Vereeniging’, *De Gids* 50:4 (1886) 185-190.

the contents of the reports about the situation there.²⁸ In addition Dutch journalists could not access the latest news directly. In the previous decades the news agencies Reuters (Britain), Havas (France) and Wolf (Germany) had built an extensive network of intercontinental telegraph cables and divided the world into spheres of influence in which they controlled the news supply.²⁹ No company in the Netherlands saw any opportunity to enter this market, which meant that Dutch newspapers depended on the supply from foreign agencies. More worryingly, in the context of the growing antagonism between the British and the Boers, all telegraph cables running from South Africa passed through British territory, which meant that all messages could be censored.

Directly after hostilities started in 1899 these problems became urgent. The British authorities stopped all cables coming from the Boer republics at their station in Aden. Censorship was even imposed on telegraph lines from the Dutch East Indies, which were operated by Reuters.³⁰ Dutch journalists were aware of these difficulties. In their editorials they lamented that they depended on London for the latest news from the battlefields. They warned their readers not to believe everything that was published as it came from the British side.³¹ Instead they advised people to wait for reports from the Boers, which they sent via the mail services running from Delagoa Bay, taking about two weeks to reach Europe. Despite this time lapse, newspapers published those documents in full.

Several British critics argued that such publications proved that the continental press had been corrupted by pro-Boer propagandists. These allegations enraged the prominent journalist Charles Boissevain, who was an ardent supporter of the Boers. On Christmas Day 1899 he wrote a pamphlet meant for the British public (but which he also published on the front page of his paper *Algemeen Handelsblad*) in which he argued that it was not the continental press that was corrupt, but the British press itself. For years journalists in Britain had been slandering the Boers, creating an atmosphere of hate amongst the public. 'This war is their war', he proclaimed, 'this war is a newspaper war'.³² He continued, stating that because of its connections with the Boers, the Dutch press was in a good position to show the world how the British imperialists had plotted against the republics. Dutch journalists supported the Boers not only out of self-interest, Boissevain argued, but out of a higher sense of morality:

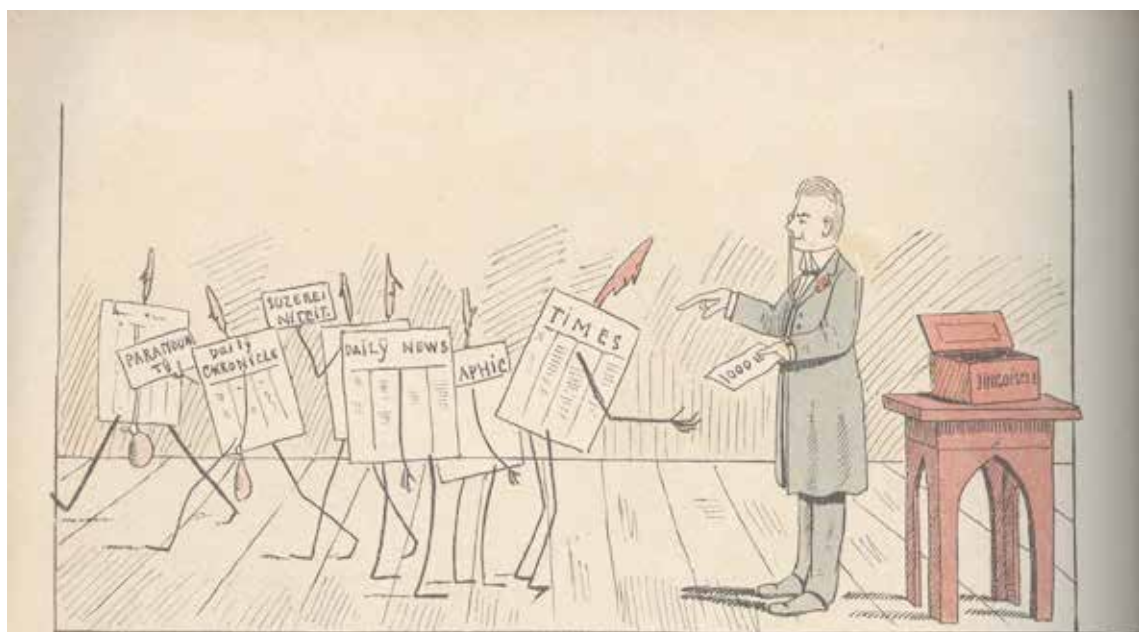
28 *Ibid.*

29 Hemels, *Een journalistiek geheim ontsluit*, 36.

30 Bossenbroek, *Holland op zijn breedst*, 201; K. van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Leiden 2007) 12-14.

31 Kester, 'Uit de slaap gewekt', 223-224.

32 Charles Boissevain, *The Struggle of the Dutch Republics: Open Letter to the Duke of Devonshire* (Amsterdam 1900) 12.



Nu zeide Eénoog: „Wij moeten oorlog hebben met de Boeren om de Chartered Company te redden. Wat schelen ons eenige duizenden huurlingen. Terra Alba is rijk genoeg om zijn soldaten voor ons te laten vechten! En de oudste zoon zei ook zoo.

En Eénoog „bewerkte de publieke opinie“ in Terra Alba en zaaide leugen en laster nit over de Boeren.

▲
Dutch cartoon showing the British Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain (depicted with his characteristic monocle), bribing British newspapers.

Aanleiding tot den Engelsch-Transvaalschen oorlog. Feiten op waarheid gegrond en verzameld door Korp. Achilles, oud-Korporaal b/h Ned. leger (The Hague [1901]).

We know so well how you [the British] drifted into this war [...] we know so well what this cruel unrighteousness means [...] that we could wish for ignorance, so that our eyes might be shut and our hearts hardened. But we cannot [...] we see, we know and we appeal to God Almighty for justice.³³

In other publications Boissevain wrote that the Dutch press had the task of publishing the Boer side of the story so that this information would be preserved.³⁴ A colleague of Boissevain, N. van Harpen of the *Amsterdamsche Courant*, even argued that this would furnish future historians with material that supported the Boers.³⁵ Many journalists took this task seriously and until the end of the war they published sources coming from the Boers. By doing so they structurally created a biased image of events in South Africa in which the heroic suffering of the republics was contrasted with the corrupt efforts of 'perfidious Albion' to add that part of the world to its empire.³⁶

This moralised view of the South African War fitted a patriotic discourse on the Netherlands and its position in the world. One of the reasons of the popularity of the Boers was that they were seen as underdogs, who bravely fought against a much stronger enemy. Such heroism appealed to many people in the Netherlands who feared being overrun by the great powers.³⁷ Moreover, it fitted the national self-image of the Dutch as champions of international law. In this sense there was some ambivalence too. The government had not invited the Boer republics to the 1899 Peace Conference in The Hague because it feared that Britain would boycott the event otherwise. This decision caused some opposition in the press, but in general most editors supported this solid piece of *Realpolitik* from the Minister of Foreign Affairs.³⁸

The South African crisis also prompted comparisons with Dutch expansion in the East Indies. The resemblance to the war in Aceh was particularly striking because the Dutch colonial army fought against stubborn opponents who resorted to guerrilla tactics, just like the Boers. In 1900 and 1901 the Socialist newspaper *Het Volk* attacked Boissevain because he condemned the war in South Africa, while at the same time supporting the Dutch campaign in Aceh. According to the editors of *Het Volk* both conflicts were caused by high level capitalism – making distinctions was hypocritical. In October and November 1901 Boissevain wrote several fulminating editorials to counter this allegation, not only because he was hurt personally, but also to defend the 'honour of the country'. He argued that, contrary to the British

33 *Ibid.*, 9.

34 Charles Boissevain, 'Van dag tot dag', *Algemeen Handelsblad* 9 December 1899.

35 *Nederland - Zuid-Afrika ten voordeele van het Roode Kruis in de Zuid-Afrikaansche Republieken* (Amsterdam 1899).

36 For an analysis of the debate see: J.J.V. Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words*, chapters 5 and 6.

37 Schutte, *Nederland en de Afrikaners*, 205.

38 M. Kuitenbrouwer, *Nederland en de opkomst, 145-146 and 178-180*.

‘servants of Mammon’ who started the war in South Africa against the good citizens of the Boer republics out of lust for profits, the Dutch had been forced to take action after continuous provocations by the indigenous rulers of Aceh who supported piracy and slave trade and had conspired against Dutch rule in the region.³⁹ Such comments show how Boissevain incorporated the South African War into his worldview. For him neutrality towards great power politics was not a problem in this respect, on the contrary it provided the Dutch with the moral high ground.

‘A campaign of the pen’: the ANV press office and Dutch journalism

Apart from these elevated views however, journalists in the Netherlands also lamented the downside to their limited information network. These worries fitted a more general feeling of concern about how Dutch news was presented by the foreign press, which was already present in the newspaper profession in the 1890s. Particularly the coverage of colonial wars in the Dutch East Indies was considered to be harmful. British newspapers for example, had criticised the Lombok expedition of 1894 that caused a numerous casualties among the local population. In 1897 several members of the *Nederlandsche Journalistenkring* [Dutch Circle of Journalists, hereafter NJK] discussed this issue, denouncing the ‘outrageous and most insulting falsehoods’ about the Dutch colonial army that had appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Although newspapers in the Netherlands wrote articles to dispel these reports, they had little influence because the foreign press did not make much use of Dutch sources. ‘The section “the Netherlands” in foreign periodicals is like a clown in a circus’.⁴⁰ Several members of the NJK proposed to structurally monitor international newspapers, using Dutch correspondents abroad as agents.⁴¹

This plan was part of a wider effort to professionalise the NJK and turn it into a trade union. Remarkably one of the fiercest critics of this initiative was Boissevain, who was president of the NJK between 1895 and 1898. He argued that the organisation primarily fulfilled a social function which would be endangered by professionalisation.⁴² These views were not shared by the majority of members who voted in favour of a plan to reform the NJK. After the society’s constitution had changed in 1900 the most significant success was a campaign for better working conditions for journalists.⁴³ To improve the international reputation of the Dutch press, the NJK started to host foreign journalists who came to the Netherlands to cover major events, starting with

39 *Ibid.*, 192-193.

40 *Maandelyksche Mededeelingen van het bestuur den Nederlandschen Journalisten Kring* 8 (May 1897).

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Maandelyksche Mededeelingen* 13 (October 1897).

43 *Wijfjes, Journalistiek in Nederland*, 80.

Queen Wilhelmina's coronation in 1898.⁴⁴ In the years that followed the same happened during other royal events and the Peace Conferences in The Hague. However, for each event a special committee was installed, so these activities remained incidental. Plans for more structural activities to influence the foreign press did not resurface in the periodical of the *NJK*.

This might explain why there was relatively little attention given to South Africa within the *NJK* between 1899 and 1902, although there was widespread sympathy for the Boers amongst its members. During a general meeting in 1900 for example, Boissevain was praised for his articles on behalf of the Boers.⁴⁵ Acknowledging these sentiments, the executive committee reported that it tried to take action on behalf of the republics where it could. In 1899 the *NJK* sent a 'confidential letter' to the most 'influential newspapers' in the Netherlands urging the editors to be careful with publications about possible strategies of the Boers because that information could be used by the British.⁴⁶ In addition, special press cards were issued to Dutch reporters who went to the war zone.⁴⁷ In December 1900, the Amsterdam branch of the *NJK* helped to stage the hugely popular visit of Paul Kruger to the city and published several speeches.⁴⁸ There was a limit to such initiatives however, because the executive committee of the *NJK* did not want to break with 'international courteousness'. In this way it complied with the policy of neutrality of the Dutch government. As a result, a plan to send an official letter of approval to journalists in Britain who supported the Boers (the same people Boissevain praised in his publications) was cancelled.⁴⁹

The neutral position of the *NJK* remained in force throughout the war, as is illustrated by another example. In February 1901 the local branch in The Hague, with financial support from the government, organised the reception of representatives of the foreign press who covered the wedding of Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Hendrik. In the report on this event it was noted how several British journalists had expected a 'boorish' welcome from their colleagues in the Netherlands due to the ongoing war in South Africa. The organisers wrote however, that political issues were avoided and that there was a fraternal atmosphere, which the visiting journalists publicly acknowledged. According to the report, this greatly contributed to the good image of Dutch journalism abroad.⁵⁰ The civil tone was quite different from statements in the

44 *Maandelyksche Mededeelingen* 21 (February 1899).

45 *Ibid.* 27 (December 1900).

46 This action was taken on the instigation of the secretary of the NZAV. Paul den Tex to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 15 November 1899. National Archives of South Africa (NASA), Pretoria. Collection W.J. Leyds (LEY) 808.

47 *Maandelyksche Mededeelingen* 27 (December 1900).

48 *Ibid.* 28 (September 1901).

49 *Ibid.* 27 (December 1900).

50 *Ibid.* 28 (September 1901).

newspapers. Apparently the interests of the NJK were best served by good ties with their British colleagues and as a result it did not become a propagandistic institution to support the 'kinsmen' in South Africa.

To some extent the dilemma of neutrality was familiar to Dutch pro-Boer organisations. Many members of the NZAV and the ANV belonged to the political and intellectual elites who did not want to embarrass the government (and themselves) by making too radical statements against the British.⁵¹ On the other hand however, propaganda for the Boers remained a priority of these societies. During the course of 1899, this became increasingly important as British printing presses started producing numerous publications against the republics in wake of the war.

In this respect the lack of an institution that could distribute pro-Boer material internationally was clearly felt, for example by Willem Leyds, a Dutchman who was the main diplomatic representative of the Transvaal in Europe. He was a pivot in the European network of the Boer republics and played a crucial role in the propaganda campaign.⁵² As most material appeared in the Dutch language, he needed help to make it available to other countries. In October 1899 H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, the secretary of the ANV, wrote to Leyds about his plans to set up a press office, which were received enthusiastically.⁵³ The ANV press office became an important link in Leyds's international campaign. Moreover it was the first organisation to propagate the interests of the Dutch 'race' in the foreign press.

In its first year the press office published some successful pamphlets (amongst others, Boissevain's pamphlet against the British press that was distributed in Britain and the United States). Initially the organisation was rather *ad hoc*, however. Kiewiet de Jonge constantly complained about a lack of money and human resources. Volunteers worked only briefly for the press office and some of them were completely incompetent.⁵⁴ To some extent these problems were solved in the autumn of 1900 when Frederik Rompel arrived in the Netherlands. Previously this Dutch journalist had worked for *De Volksstem* in Pretoria and left South Africa after the British occupied the town. Rompel wanted to contribute to the pro-Boer propaganda campaign in Europe and

51 NZAV *Jaarverslag 1895-1896* (Amsterdam 1896) 15; W. Otterspeer, 'Boeren en academici. De Leidse universiteit en het enthousiasme voor de Zuidafrikaanse Boeren rond de eeuwwisseling', *De Negentiende Eeuw* 15 (1991) 203-221.

52 L. van Niekerk, *Kruger se Regterhand. 'N Biografie van dr. W.J. Leyds* (Pretoria 1985) *passim*; and Ulrich Kröll, *Die internationale Buren-Agitation, 1899-1902, Haltung der Öffentlichkeit und Agitation zugunsten*

der Buren in Deutschland, Frankreich und den Niederlanden während des Burenkrieges (Münster 1973) *passim*.

53 For an overview of the history of the ANV press office see: Kröll, *Die internationale Buren-Agitation*, 176-196; J.J.V. Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words*, chapter 4.

54 H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge to Willem Leyds, 15 May 1900. Dutch National Archive, The Hague (NL-HaNA), Leyds, 2.21.105, inv.nr. 51.

took over the day-to-day management of the ANV press office. He attempted to professionalise it using his journalistic skills. During the following years Rompel wrote a number of pamphlets and articles that were published in several Dutch newspapers. In addition, he extended the activities of the press office, providing a more systematic flow of information in the form of daily circulars with the most important news about the Boers that were spread throughout Europe in several languages.

In addition the ANV press office established contact with correspondents in several countries. The main focus seems to have been on Britain as propaganda there could have a direct impact on the war in South Africa. From the beginning the ANV press office corresponded with several opinion makers who opposed the war, such as the journalist William Stead, but this only led to incidental projects and publications. Kiewiet de Jonge thought that a more structural network would help to turn the public opinion in Britain against the conflict, which would force the government to pull back the army. In the summer of 1901 he visited London in order to speak to British anti-war activists, among them M. van Beek, a Dutch translator. Van Beek became a liaison of the ANV in London, co-ordinating the publication of Dutch pamphlets in English and reporting to the Dordrecht office about the anti-war campaign in Britain. He was careful however, to keep his affiliation with the ANV secret as he feared that he would become the target of a jingoist mob.⁵⁵

All in all, the ANV press office became a prominent institution within the pro-Boer propaganda campaign and received funding from both the NZAV and Leyds until the end of the war. However it is hard to assess the actual effect of its activities between 1899 and 1902. First of all, the direct impact in the Netherlands seems to have been limited. As has been mentioned, several articles written by Rompel appeared in the national press, but it is not clear how many. There are also indications that on several occasions Dutch newspaper editors declined material offered by the ANV, indicating that they could obtain enough sources themselves.⁵⁶ The international impact is even more difficult to measure. Kiewiet de Jonge was aware of the official Dutch policy of neutrality and as a result he was secretive about his propaganda activities. The press office sent circulars to newspapers with the explicit request to keep them anonymous. Therefore it is hard to assess to what extent this information was actually published. In addition, much of the material that the ANV distributed seems to have been 'second hand', meaning that it was taken from other periodicals.⁵⁷

55 For the extensive correspondence between Van Beek and Kiewiet de Jonge: NASA, LEY 821-822.

56 Editor NRC to [H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge], 10 November 1900; A.G. Boissevain to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 19 November 1900. NASA, LEY 809.

57 Kröll, *Die internationale Buren-Agitation*, 191-196.

All things considered, the ANV press office probably did not have much actual effect. Despite Rompel's hard work funds remained limited, which hampered further professionalisation, and he depended on an informal network of correspondents. Nevertheless, there was a lot of goodwill amongst Dutch contemporaries for the work of the press office, which was meant to fill an important institutional gap in the nation's information networks. In its efforts to bypass the limits of neutrality during the South African War, it made information that would serve the national interest known to the world. In a sense the ANV was doing what the pro-reform members of the NJK had been advocating in 1897. Therefore from the start the work of the ANV was applauded in newspapers, such as in an editorial that appeared in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* that praised it as 'A campaign of the pen'.⁵⁸ Such praise was probably one of the reasons for the ANV to continue with the press office after the South African War ended in June 1902.

The ANV London office after 1902

Six months after the Peace of Vereeniging, Kiewiet de Jonge wrote a letter to Leyds in which he explained that he thought that there was a continuing need for his press office, even though the Boer republics had officially been annexed by the British Empire.⁵⁹ Leyds agreed and pledged to fund the office from the remains of the money that he had gathered during the South African War.⁶⁰ Initially the chief priority remained helping the Afrikaners. As their infrastructure had largely been destroyed by the British, Dutch-language newspapers in South Africa could not afford to employ correspondents. Therefore the press office in Dordrecht acted as their liaison in Europe. Rompel wrote weekly circulars about European news for the Afrikaners and reports about South African affairs for media in Europe. In this way he became a pivot in the information network between the Netherlands and South Africa.

In addition, the link with London remained in operation. As the Afrikaners had become subjects of the British Empire they needed press representatives in the imperial metropolis, the ANV argued. Their most important task was to monitor newspapers for articles that could harm Afrikaner interests and to write letters to editors to correct these views. Even though emotions had cooled somewhat after the war had ended, secrecy was still considered to be a necessity. If the London press were to find out that the ANV was paying the correspondents, they probably would refuse their letters.

58 NRC 16 March 1900.

59 H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge to Willem Leyds, 14 December 1902. NL-HaNA, Leyds, 2.21.105, inv.nr.

60 For an overview of how Leyds spent his funds, see: Van Niekerk, *Kruger se Regterhand*, 317-327.

In the course of 1903 the main agent, Van Beek, proved to be increasingly unreliable in this respect. After several public controversies, Rompel terminated all contact with him in November 1905.⁶¹

Despite this disappointing experience, the activities in London were continued. After the Van Beek affair Rompel approached Cornelis Thieme, the correspondent of the Dutch newspaper the *Nieuwe Courant*. It seems that he also did not live up to expectations and, although he continued to do irregular work for the ANV, the press office sought to replace him. In 1907 Rompel came in touch with Jacob Reyneke van Stuwe, just the man the ANV had been looking for. Reyneke van Stuwe had moved to the Transvaal in 1897 and worked for the Dutch railway company. In 1899 he volunteered for the Boer army and initially served as a guard on the railway lines. During the British advance he joined the forces in the field and became secretary to General Louis Botha, whom he served until the very end of hostilities in May 1902. After returning to the Netherlands he started his career as a journalist and, with the help of his famous brother-in-law, the writer Willem Kloos, found work at the newspaper *Het Vaderland*. Reyneke van Stuwe was able to persuade his employers to make him correspondent in London, a position he used as a cover to hide his affiliation to the ANV when he went to Britain.

The arrival of Reyneke van Stuwe had a positive effect on the activities of the London office of the ANV. He started writing regular reports on the coverage of South African affairs in British media – including newspapers and other publications – which Rompel added to his circulars to the Afrikaner press. Reyneke van Stuwe also continued to send letters to British newspapers to provide counterweight to articles that harmed Afrikaner interests. Upon arrival he became member of the National Liberal Club, which, in addition to a good library, provided him with access to a network of politicians and opinion makers, and also an opportunity to strengthen his contacts with the Dutch community in London, many of whom were members.⁶² As with the previous activities of the ANV, it is hard to measure the actual effects of Reyneke van Stuwe's work. In a letter to Louis Botha from October 1908 he wrote positively about his first achievements, boasting that via his informal contacts he was able to exert more influence than would have been possible in an official function for the Afrikaner party.⁶³ Nonetheless Reyneke van Stuwe was involved in the attempts of the ANV to professionalise the press office in order to strengthen the international information network of the Netherlands.

Even before the arrival of Reyneke van Stuwe, Kiewiet de Jonge had started thinking about ways to broaden the activities of ANV agents in

61 F. Rompel to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 14 November 1905. NASA, LEY 820.

62 J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe to F. Rompel, 28 and 30 January 1908. NASA, LEY 806.

63 J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe to L. Botha, 28 October 1908. NASA, LEY 806.



J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe, 1910.

Central Bureau for Genealogy, The Hague.

London in order to serve the interests of the Netherlands. In 1906 he asked Thieme to write some letters dispelling 'nonsense about the Netherlands', such as rumours that fishermen in Hoek van Holland had robbed the body of a woman who had fallen of a ship or that the Dutch were preparing a law to ban foreign hot air balloons from landing on national territory. The private life of Queen Wilhelmina was also a hot topic, as the foreign yellow press regularly reported that her marriage with Prince Hendrik was unhappy – an allegation that the press office wanted to refute. According to Thieme's reports most attention was given to 'nonsense' about the Dutch East Indies. In 1906 he defended the Dutch colonial army after a violent expedition on the island Bali (resulting in a mass suicide of the local prince and his followers), which was condemned as 'barbaric' in several British newspapers.⁶⁴ Reyneke van Stuwe was also involved in writing articles to counter critics of Dutch colonial policy who published in British media, such as J. F. Scheltema, who denounced Dutch rule in the East Indies as exploitative. In 1908 Reyneke van Stuwe and Thieme edited an article by the Dutch journalist H. Doeff who argued against Scheltema and offered it to *The Times*.⁶⁵

Although it remains hard to assess the actual results of these experiments by the ANV, there are indications that they were noted in the Netherlands. On several occasions in the 1900s Dutch newspapers published editorials about 'incorrect' coverage of the Netherlands in the foreign media. Several of these publications praised the ANV press office as the most able institution to solve this problem.⁶⁶ Rompel also received personal letters from journalists expressing their appreciation, such as from Charles Boissevain who wrote that the ANV was doing 'valuable' work.⁶⁷ Aside from these incidental compliments however, there is no indication that newspapers were willing to invest in an institution that could influence foreign periodicals in a sustained way.

There seems to have been more substantial interest from the government. Both the departments of Colonies and Foreign Affairs corresponded with the ANV about its efforts to counter critics of Dutch colonial policy. These efforts were applauded by high-ranking officials such as the Minister of Colonies in 1906.⁶⁸ In 1909 the department for Foreign Affairs announced that it would appoint one administrator to keep an eye on the

64 Zuid-Afrikahuis (ZA), collectie VIII. Persbureau van het Algemeen Nederlands Verbond (ANV), 1899-1914. ANV I; NASA, LEY 816, part I: B.

65 File F. NASA, LEY 816. Apparently, in 1909 an editor of *The Times* promised to publish it, but I have found no evidence that this actually happened.

66 Cuttings from: *De Nieuwe Courant* 17 November 1906; *Algemeen Handelsblad* 26 November 1906; *NRC* 2 December 1906; *Nieuws van den Dag*, 5 October 1907. In: ZA VIII, ANV I (1).

67 Charles Boissevain to F. Rompel, 13 February 1909. NASA, LEY 816.

68 D. Fock to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 19 January 1906. NASA, LEY 816.

coverage of the Netherlands and its colonies in the foreign press. In a letter to Kiewiet de Jonge, Reyneke van Stuwe noted that it was a good plan, but that this task would be impossible for just one person. He argued for a network of Dutch agents in foreign countries and urged the ANV to apply for a subsidy to organise this – he also added that he would be interested in this job as he could use some extra income.⁶⁹

In the years following Kiewiet de Jonge met government officials to discuss this plan at several times, but it did not lead to lasting co-operation. One of the reasons was that the government was reluctant to openly support the press office from fear of compromising Dutch neutrality.⁷⁰ The failure of the ANV to secure structural external funds for its propaganda activities led to financial problems after 1910 when the money it had raised during the South African War ran out.⁷¹ Another blow was the departure of Rompel, who in 1913 returned to South Africa where he became an influential opinion maker. Initially Reyneke van Stuwe took over his tasks but in March 1914 he reported that he could not make ends meet with the money he was receiving from the ANV and he had to look for other jobs as well.⁷² As a result of the financial and personnel problems the ANV press office scaled down its activities on the eve of the First World War.

The demise of the ANV press office however, did not mean the end of attempts to influence the coverage of Dutch and colonial affairs in the foreign press. In his book about the department of Colonial Affairs Bob de Graaff provides an inventory of the (semi-)official bodies that received financial support from the Dutch government for their attempts to improve the international reputation of the Netherlands, the colonial policy in particular, during the interwar years. He considers the ANV press office as the forerunner of these initiatives.⁷³ There seems to have been a significant continuity in the personal involvement of Kiewiet de Jonge as he and his son were commissioned by the government to supervise the activities of a new press organisation that was set up in the 1920s, a bureau ran by F.J.W. Drion.⁷⁴ These semi-official activities came to an end in 1934 with the establishment of a formal public information service (*Regeerings Persdienst*) by the department of Foreign Affairs.

69 J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 17 October 1909. NASA, LEY 816; J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 24 November 1909. NASA, LEY 806.

70 Bob de Graaff, *'Kalm temidden van de woeste golven'*. *Het ministerie van koloniën en zijn taakomgeving, 1912-1940* (The Hague 1997) 577-578.

71 Attempts of Kiewiet de Jonge to obtain funding in South Africa also failed. H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge to the Wallach brothers, 28 November 1913. NASA, LEY 808.

72 J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe to H.J. Kiewiet de Jonge, 27 March 1914. NASA, LEY 806.

73 De Graaff, *'Kalm temidden van de woeste golven'*, chapter 26.

74 *Ibid.*, 584.

Reyneke van Stuwe remained involved in these activities. Apart from his work as literary critic and correspondent for *Algemeen Handelsblad*⁷⁵, he continued to co-operate with Kiewiet de Jonge. During the First World War he analysed articles about the Netherlands in British newspapers and co-ordinated aid to Flemish refugees.⁷⁶ In the 1920s he was connected to the Drion bureau, acting as a 'silent press-attaché' together with the historian Pieter Geyl.⁷⁷ After his retirement as a journalist in 1938 he remained in London and during the Second World War he worked for the Dutch government in exile, co-ordinating war artists.⁷⁸ Journalism and propaganda were inseparable throughout his career.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Dutch pro-Boer propaganda campaign provides new perspectives on the history of the press in the Netherlands. Until now the main focus of historians has been on the domestic aspects of the journalistic profession around 1900. Looking at the reactions to the outbreak of the South African War however, it is clear that journalists also reflected on their international position and were confronted with the fundamental dilemma of the status of the Netherlands as a small nation with large overseas interests. Following the premise of the New Imperial History, this shows that international matters, in the context of Modern Imperialism, had an impact on the Netherlands. In this case it contributed to awareness of the mechanisms of the modern press.

Firstly this was a moral issue. The start of the uneven struggle between the Boer republics and the British Empire provoked outrage amongst a great number of journalists. Charles Boissevain, one of the most active supporters of the Boers, announced that it was his task to make the story of the 'kinsmen' in South Africa known to the world. In the years that followed he and his colleagues published extensively about the heroism of the Boers and the wickedness of the British. This biased view fitted a wider discourse about the reputation of the Netherlands as a champion of international law and a benign colonial power in the Dutch East Indies. The status as a small power provided patriotic Dutch opinion makers with the moral high ground.

75 G. Langendorff, *Brieven van J.E.A. Reyneke van Stuwe (1876-1962) uit Zuid-Afrika* (MA thesis Dutch literature, University of Leiden 2002) 44-45.

76 Reyneke van Stuwe reported about these activities in several letters he sent to Kiewiet de Jonge between 1915 and 1917. NASA, LEY 806.

77 De Graaff, 'Kalm temidden van de woeste golven', 578.

78 W.H. Vroom, "'De overheid geve ook den kunstenaar zijn oorlogstaak'. De war artists van de Nederlandse regering in Londen', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 38 (1990) 99-122.

In addition the South African crisis also put the focus on the disadvantages of the international position of the Dutch press and its information networks. Journalists in the Netherlands noted that they had two problems: they depended on foreign press agencies and had few means to influence foreign newspapers. In the 1890s this situation had prompted a debate within the journalists' union *NJK*, but little was done to address it. After the start of the South African War, the journalists' union stuck to its policy of neutrality. In contrast, pro-Boer organisations set up institutions to form an international propaganda network, such as the ANV press office. Contemporaries in the Netherlands applauded the organisation as the first institution that tried to influence foreign media in a sustained manner. The interwar years saw the establishment of institutions that showed great continuity with the ANV press office, not least because individuals like Kiewiet de Jonge remained involved. Therefore it can be argued that the press office has had lasting effects on the Dutch information networks.

One of the reasons that the ANV press office not has been thoroughly researched by Dutch press historians might be that, apart from words of praise, journalists working for newspapers seem to have been scarcely involved. This however, does obscure the position of people like Rompel and Reyneke van Stuwe. These men, who had a background as professional journalists, were actively making propaganda, setting up transnational networks that facilitated the flow of information that supported Dutch interests. As I have indicated in this article, these activities had an impact on the contemporary debate about the press in the Netherlands. More research is needed to map out the Dutch overseas information networks and to better understand the position of the people who were involved in them. In this respect the metropolitan coverage of the Dutch East Indies looks promising as Dutch opinion makers constantly worried about the reputation of the Netherlands as a benign colonial power. New research can teach us how the Dutch press was affected by the complex international status of the Netherlands as a small nation with a big empire.

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