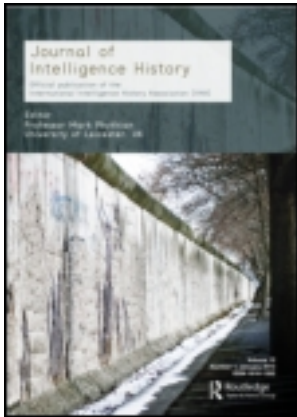


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A spy's paradise? German espionage in the Netherlands, 1914–1918

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During the First World War The Netherlands were extremely important for espionage by the warring states. They used the neutral territory as spring-board for infiltration and propaganda, but they were interested in Holland itself too. This article deals with German espionage related to The Netherlands. German agents were active both to gather information on the Entente and to know more about the Dutch defence and the Dutch political and military intentions. The Dutch Military Intelligence used the police to observe and stay in touch with foreign spies. Through these channels information was exchanged, as it was also in Dutch interest to inform the warring states that the country would never choose sides and their defence was credible. Also, the Dutch wanted to avoid possible dangerous political complications as a result of foreign activities on their soil.

Keywords: Netherlands; neutrality; First World War; espionage; GSIII; Rotterdam, Nachrichtendienst

Introduction

During the First World War German espionage in the Netherlands was extensive. It is well known that the German Navy and Army used the neutral territory of its small neighbouring state to collect information and to send both agents and documents to and from the Entente powers. In particular, the ports of Rotterdam and Flushing were bustling with all kinds of information gathering activities, targeted at ferry-boats and travellers able to pass the front lines into belligerent England. This article will focus on the Dutch perspective. Were the Dutch authorities aware of these German activities, how did they respond to them and in what ways did the Dutch General Staff and municipal police interact with German spies? The interest of the Netherlands was clear: no activity on its soil should violate neutrality in any way and none of its belligerent neighbours was to be given any pretext for violent action against the country. As long as a continuation of neutrality was deemed to be beneficial to both Germany and England, this would be to the advantage of the Dutch. Fortunately, this was the case, but it involved a delicate balancing act for all parties concerned. The Netherlands needed to gather reliable information on the military intentions of its neighbours and behind the scenes contacts could contribute to it. The belligerents, on the other hand, needed to know whether they could trust the Netherlands to remain strictly neutral and, at the same time, benefit from it economically and militarily. They also needed to know if their opponent was planning any violation of Dutch territory. What the Dutch could do was to express their sincere desire for neutrality and act accordingly. Militarily, this translated into credible, and visible, defence of the land and sea borders, and behind the scenes it meant staying informed of foreign planning and opinions.

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The Dutch GSIII

Just before the First World War broke out, the Dutch General Staff set up a new department, GSIII, whose goal it was to analyse foreign armies systematically, based on public sources. It was a one-man show by lieutenant Han Fabius (1878–1957). This choice proved to be a fortunate one when the war came and the Dutch mobilized their 200,000 strong Army and Navy on 31 July 1914, and Fabius quickly became the pivot of Dutch military intelligence. His department grew from one to 25 staff members, some of whom were academics, and worked in close contact with both GSIV – which among other things was tasked with censorship and decrypting foreign telegraph messages – and the military and municipal police forces.

What main sources did GSIII have at its disposal to analyse the war? First of all open sources. The neutral Dutch press was at liberty to publish extensively on all warring parties and could publish more and be less ‘one-sided’ than the belligerents’ newspapers. Hence, for the Dutch themselves, as well as for the warring parties, the Dutch press formed a valuable source of information. Dutch journalists were also working in most belligerent capitals and some of them even observed the actual fighting and talked to prominent generals. A number of these journalists reported back to Fabius.

An even more informative source was the military attachés that the Dutch government had dispatched to Paris, London, Berlin and Berne. Although they had only been sent out in 1916, after much pressure from the General Staff, they proved to be useful informants. The attachés were instructed not to form spy rings but to use open sources and personal contacts to inform GSIII on military policy as well as new tactical and technical developments. From 1916 onwards they sent a steady flow of reports to The Hague, from literal translations of foreign military manuals to impressions based on personal contacts. A special activity was the front visits to which the attachés of neutral countries were invited. As a result, Dutch officers saw all major European fronts, on both the German–Austrian and the Allied sides. From the Baltic to the Piave front in Italy impressions were dispatched to Fabius and the Dutch supreme commander, including sometimes-verbatim transcriptions of conversations with leading Allied or German generals. The attaché in Berlin, Luitenant-Kolonel Theo Muller Massis (1866–1948) was the most enthusiastic traveller of them all; he undertook eleven front tours between September 1916 and October 1918.

Of a less structural nature were the reports of Dutch officers who visited Germany on private business – but were told to report their impressions back to GSIII – and those who went to Germany officially. Two officers were sent to military courses in Germany (on aviation and on hand grenades) and one, in 1916, to the Thyssen plant in Mülheim an der Ruhr. That same year two Dutch officers visited the *Ausstellung für Kriegsfürsorge* in Cologne. Both trips resulted in observations on the shortage of food in Germany, on the hatred the Germans cherished for Britain and on the German appreciation of Dutch neutrality. August Thyssen himself is reported to have said that the only thing that could make the German Army invade Holland was a British attempt to land on the Dutch coast and establish airfields for air raids against the industries in the Ruhr area.

Another source, which needed some more organisation to make it effective, was the interrogation of deserters. During the war many thousands of German deserters managed to enter the Netherlands. Fabius recognised their importance and arranged for systematic questioning on their reasons for deserting, material and morale conditions in the German Army, location of units, use of modern tactics and weapons, etc. Unfortunately, the reports have not been preserved, although similar reports on German deserters to the Netherlands are known to be in the French military archives in Vincennes. The Dutch allowed Allied

officials to interview German deserters when they were held in Dutch internment camps.¹ Not all deserters were caught or held in camps. Many roamed the streets looking for work and were an easy prey for spies who were looking for men willing to make some easy money. The problem was most acute in Rotterdam. For the Dutch authorities the deserters were, like the many other foreigners swarming the country, a reason to strengthen legislation on registration of non-Dutch nationals. The military police became the national authority to check and control foreigners.

The military police were also the main organisation for reconnaissance across the border. Even before GSIII was established, the Dutch government had instructed the military police, together with border officials and reliable citizens, to report any activity of military relevance across the border in Germany. It did not amount to much in terms of meaningful results, nor did it produce any important information during the tense period of July–August 1914. As an extension, the government could also send officers, in civilian attire, to the main cities in western Germany to report on any relevant activity. This had been done in 1906 to with respect to Aachen (First Moroccan crisis), and in 1911 (Second Moroccan crisis) to some cities along the Rhine. In 1914 two officers had revisited the Rhine area. On all occasions the results were modest, which was one of the reasons why the General Staff urged sending permanent military attachés. During the war Fabius wanted this reconnaissance service to produce more results, and it did. The military police, stationed all along the border, collected as much data as they could from different sources: from local newspapers to the interrogation of smugglers and spies, as well as from their own local intelligence gatherers. It paid off. The reports of 1917 are still in the Dutch archives and they reveal how detailed the information was, and, more importantly, it was generally accurate. It enabled the General Staff to plot German defence works exactly on the map from the *Hollandstelling* south of the westernmost part of the Belgian–Dutch border, via defence works near Turnhout to German field fortifications in the Reichswald. Moreover, the movements of German units are mentioned in detail, as well as their strength, equipment and sometimes even their morale. Units positioned in northern Flanders and western Germany were identified and increases in strength were reported. With the Dutch and British services exchanging information on a regular basis, it is not unlikely that part of this information came from British intelligence officers gathering and dispatching it from Belgium.

All the information collected in all those different ways led to a comprehensive, and sometimes very detailed picture of the war, its progress and the nature of its tactics and techniques. GSIII published its findings, without any sensitive material, of course, in the major military monthly *Militaire Spectator*. In this way all Dutch officers were informed of the main military developments. Fabius also generated general overviews of the strengths of the different warring states and the organisation and equipment of their armies, which were only sent to high military officials. As far as the German Army is concerned, until September 1918 Fabius warned against believing Entente-propaganda on its likely sudden collapse. Until the spring of 1918 Fabius even believed the U-Boot war and the peace in the East could still result in German victory, despite the heavy losses the German Army was suffering. He estimated the losses of the German Army to lie at 100,000 per month until December 1915; 70,000 per month from December 1915 until June 1917, rising to 110,000 per month after June 1917 and 122,000 per month in the first half of 1918. Estimates like these were made for all major warring powers from early 1915 onwards. From that moment onwards the Dutch General Staff clearly saw the war as an attrition battle, whose outcome was based on population figures and economic performance.

Fabius did not want to deal with the representatives of the belligerent powers in The Hague himself. He appointed liaison officers, who would cultivate a relationship of trust with, for instance, the military attaché of a foreign power or other key figures, and exchange viewpoints and information that way. For the Germans the liaison officer was George Henry James Gijsberti Hodenpijl (1871–1949), who, despite his English sounding first names, was an officer who held the German Army in great esteem. He had even served, quite uncommonly for a Dutch officer, in the *Königin Augusta Garde Grenadier Regiment* (1899–1901), and he was also a regular traveller to Germany during the war years. Moreover, he had befriended duke Adolf Friedrich von Mecklenburg-Schwerin, brother of the consort of the Dutch Queen. Hodenpijl reported directly to Fabius, who then formed the supreme commander.

Another interesting liaison between GSIII and the German Army was Louis Constant van Panhuys (1869–1949), a high official at the Ministry of Colonies, who was known for his pro-German sympathies. Through him Fabius could contact the German intelligence bureau in Wesel easily, which enabled him to make a better judgement on how to interpret the public utterances of the German government or military leadership.

War breaks out

Holland set its mobilisation procedure in motion very early. The General Staff had always emphasised that in the event of war a rapid mobilisation of the Dutch Army and Navy was vital to safeguard neutrality in a credible way. In July 1914 luck was on the side of the Dutch. Already, on 25 July 1914, a Dutch reserve officer, working in Germany, cabled privately to the Staff in The Hague that war could be imminent.² This resulted in a Dutch general mobilisation on 31 July, in advance of those of Germany and France. The newly appointed Dutch supreme commander, Cornelis Jacobus Snijders (1852–1939) was satisfied that this goal had been reached.

Still lacking military attachés, from 27 July until 1 August the Dutch did what they had done before and sent plain-clothes officers to cities in western Germany. This did not lead to much and it was one of the reasons Fabius insisted on a better organised intelligence service.

On 4 August the German Army invaded Belgium, meticulously respecting Dutch neutrality and making that country at the same time an important, more or less safe, base for intelligence operations. As soon as the war broke out German Naval and Army intelligence services became active in The Netherlands. Of course they did not begin from scratch, but German espionage in the Netherlands does not appear to have been very extensive prior to August 1914. In the archives of the Dutch General Staff only the suspect behaviour of a German reserve officer in the Amsterdam Fortress in 1897 is mentioned.³ The Dutch were probably not aware of the plans made by the German *Admiralstab* that very same year for a possible invasion of Great Britain via Dutch and Belgian ports. This plan contained a thorough analysis of Dutch defensive capacities.⁴ What they did notice were frequent visits by German warships to Dutch ports⁵ and the building of extensive marshalling yards, just across the border near the small towns of Dalheim and Kaldenkirchen.⁶ The Dutch General Staff was very keenly aware of the possibility that, in the event of a next Franco–German war, the German Army would use Dutch railroads, an eventuality that featured repeatedly in Dutch *Kriegsspiele*.

German interest in Dutch territory had become apparent by the end of the year 1910–1911. The then Dutch government announced the building of a massive fortress on the mouth of the Scheldt river, near Flushing, which caused international uproar. The French, Belgian and British press accused the Dutch of obliging the Germans. Such a fortress, it

was claimed, only served German interests because it prevented British military aid to Belgium via Antwerp and it would make Flushing an attractive base for possible German attacks on Britain. The Dutch held a completely different view. All they wanted was a credible military defence of their neutrality. The Dutch field Army protected the land borders, but the coast still lacked any credible protection. Although the international fascination for a Dutch defence project took the government by surprise, it went ahead with it anyway, proclaiming again and again that its sole interest was neutrality.

Although espionage on their territory was not reported before 1914, the Dutch were very much aware of the strategic value their outlying provinces of Limburg and Zeeland had for the Germans. Via Limburg, the German advance into Belgium and France would be significantly shorter and easier, and Zeeland was the key to the port of Antwerp, the Belgian *reduit nationale*. The German decision-making process on Limburg has been dealt with extensively in many studies.⁷ Zeeland turned out to be much more crucial for the German war effort when the front stabilized at the end of 1914 until 1918. With Belgium occupied, the Flanders coast strengthened with impressive coastal fortifications, Zeeland protected the flank of the German Army in Belgium and could never be allowed to fall into British hands. This would become the main concern and motivation for German espionage activities in the Netherlands. But in August 1914 this still lay in the future.

The vital link: the municipal police

As soon as war broke out, GSIII made use of the municipal police forces in the main Dutch cities to supervise, infiltrate, analyse or in any other way contact the foreign spy rings that flourished so abundantly in Holland between 1914 and 1918. Spying in the Netherlands during this period can be divided up into activities of the warring powers directed against each other, activities by any of them directed against the Netherlands, and counter-espionage to disrupt or infiltrate the enemies' networks. From the Dutch perspective the second was the most dangerous. It was a violation of article 100 of the penal law and it could bring the country into grave peril. The other two activities may have been less hazardous, and, because of Fabius' pressure on the Justice Department, not punishable under penal law, but they could be disruptive anyway. The Dutch interest was to get a grip on these foreign activities, analyse them, stay in contact with the main players, and prevent excesses. In no way should one of the belligerents have the idea it was at a disadvantage compared to its opponent. As long as they remained in contact with Dutch (police) authorities and refrained from activities that would endanger Dutch neutrality, it was a case of 'live and let live' to an extent.

Fabius was particularly content with the decision not to prosecute espionage among the belligerents. Consequently, in his opinion, the Dutch authorities were able to penetrate and analyse the international networks on Dutch soil. Another reward was information. On several occasions foreign agents reported cases of anti-Dutch espionage to the Dutch authorities and even cooperated in the prosecution.

From the outbreak of the war, the police commissioners in the main cities appointed police detectives to monitor foreign agents. Two of these police detectives turned out to be extremely successful: François van't Sant (1883–1966), head of the river police in Rotterdam and police commissioner in Utrecht from the end of 1915, and the Amsterdam police detective Karel Henri Broekhoff (1886–1946), who later in the war specialized in infiltrating radical left-wing groups. Broekhoff and Van't Sant became the most prominent policemen, dealing with foreign agents of all sides on almost a daily basis. Rotterdam was beyond doubt the 'spy capital' of the Netherlands. Its port, regular

shipping to England and large German community made it a very interesting place for any exchange of documents or people. Similarly, but on a smaller scale, was the spying activity in Flushing, which was also connected by regular ferry services to England and closely located to occupied Belgium, and in the southern city of Maastricht. This city was full of Belgian, French and German agents. The border was patrolled by units of the military police, whose main task it was to catch smugglers, but who were also active in information gathering and arresting and questioning alleged spies.⁸

First German activities

In the early months of the war, German intelligence operations in the Netherlands were led by the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle* in Wesel, directed Oberleutnant Teschemacher and from 1915 by Hauptmann Freyer. Wesel reported its findings to Major Paul Stotten, head of intelligence on the western front and to the *Admiralstab* in Berlin. Early 1915 the *Admiralstab* took this *Stelle* over from the Army. Using Dutch newspapers and agents, Wesel was able to report, from the middle of August 1914 onwards, on the British transports of troops and war materiel to the continent. It also reported, but much less extensively, on the Dutch mobilisation. The first mention of *Vertrauensmänner* dated from September and came from Flushing. Two other players also came to the fore in September 1914, the German military attaché in The Hague, Oberstleutnant Ronald Ostertag⁹ – posted in London until the war broke out – and the consul in Rotterdam, Carl Richard Gneist (1868–1939). Ostertag was called by the French ambassador in The Hague ‘le grand chef de l’espionage de cet empire’¹⁰ and the *New York Times* of 25 June 1915 reported that Ostertag ‘is said to be in reality one of the most efficient and useful leaders of the German intelligence department,’ monitoring all communications between Holland and England and Holland and the United States and interested in the Dutch troop dispositions on the border. Despite the praise for Ostertag’s intelligence activities in the Entente-press, he did not deliver sufficiently to please the German military authorities on the western front. He probably worked too much in isolation. This seems to have been at least one of the reasons why Oberstleutnant Martin Renner, who had also been his predecessor, replaced him in June 1915. Stotten himself had intervened to get a better relationship between the attaché in The Hague and IIIb in Berlin. After a meeting in Brussels on 21 July 1915 between Stotten and Renner, the latter was provided with ample means to gather information and uphold a network.¹¹ Renner and the naval attaché, Korvettenkapitän Erich von Müller, proved to be very useful when the German Navy and Army prepared contingency plans for an attack on the Netherlands.

The consul in Rotterdam, Gneist, was a diplomat who had been stationed there since 1910. Heinrich Alfred Bosenick¹² succeeded him in 1916. Both were crucial figures in the German spy networks in the Netherlands, as the Dutch authorities quickly found out. This, of course, was closely related to the extreme importance Rotterdam held for German imports of goods and foodstuffs.¹³ In a way, Rotterdam replaced Hamburg as the port of entry for many essential imports.

The Dutch authorities were quick to realise that the warring parties practised spying activities on a major scale. But they were also aware they were, in general, not directed against the Netherlands itself. The Germans were especially interested in getting spies into Great Britain via Rotterdam and Flushing, and were trying to form networks of informants, preferably of crew working on ferryboats, shipping companies and traders who travelled to England regularly. The pivotal role of the Rotterdam consulate was also quickly known, as was the *Commandantur*, as the Dutch called it, in Wesel.

How did they find out? The main source of information was probably interrogations of foreigners acting suspiciously conducted by Dutch police authorities. Information from one interrogation led to new suspects. The first German to be apprehended was Friedrich Wilhelm Schliesser,¹⁴ as early as October 1914. He had fled German military service to fight in the Boer War in South Africa, lived in Mozambique and had arrived in Rotterdam in 1906. He settled as a chemist. When, in 1914 the German authorities pardoned deserters, he became active for Wesel. The authorities noticed his frequent trips between Zeeland, Flushing in particular, and Rotterdam. He was suspected of establishing a German spy network between the Netherlands and England, as ordered by Wesel. He denied this, but his name popped up again in 1916, when he was accused of trying to establish a German information bureau in Zeeland. In fact, Dutch suspicions were accurate he was an agent of the Wesel office. Because Schliesser recruited Dutch citizens to collect military and maritime information on Zeeland, he was expelled from the Netherlands in 1918.¹⁵

Schliesser's statements drew attention to another German, who in fact also was an agent for Wesel, and even considered to be *unbedingt zuverlässig*: Dr Johannes Wilhelm Brandt.¹⁶ Brandt travelled regularly between Flushing and Rotterdam and was in contact with Wesel, both directly and through the consul in Rotterdam. Moreover, he traded in copper, a strategic material for munitions production. He was not prosecuted, probably because his actions did not endanger Dutch neutrality directly. Police investigations like these helped to give the Dutch authorities an insight into the workings of foreign agents. The Rotterdam police were the most active in trying to unravel the spy networks.

Their first detailed analyses date from May 1915. After hearing Schliesser, the police considered Paul Ernst Vollrath¹⁷ to be the leader of the main German spy ring. He had been active in the merchant marine and was now acting as correspondent of the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt*. He employed Dutchmen to infiltrate shipping companies and get information on ships' departure times for England. That information was sent, via the German consul in Rotterdam, to the *U Boote*. All the Dutch authorities could do in the end, was expel him from Flushing and the province of Zeeland, because it was under state of siege (a form of martial law). However, the port of Rotterdam was not, although the Dutch high command advised the government several times to do so. Dutch police authorities were particularly concerned about the involvement of Dutch citizens, the danger to neutral shipping and to public order. They recommended extraditing him, along with several others, from the Netherlands, but this did not happen.

The most prominent German agent early in the war was Hilmar Gustav Johannes Dierks¹⁸. After serving in the German Army in 1914, Dierks had been recruited by the Wesel *Stelle* for spying against England, but his attempt to cross the North Sea failed. In December 1914 he was posted in Rotterdam to assist consul Gneist with the recruitment of agents against England. Under the alias Richard Sanderson, tea merchant, he became very successful in assembling a network of spies around him, both Dutch and German. He also established a number of *Deckadresse* in Rotterdam, The Hague and Flushing, used for exchange of information. He focused on people involved in shipping on the North Sea and on merchants.

Both the Dutch police in Flushing as well as the French secret service got wind of Dierks' activities. He was arrested in June 1915, and released three months later pending his trial, but he fled the country and was never imprisoned, although the court in The Hague sentenced him to one-year's imprisonment for endangering Dutch neutrality. This was one of the very few spy trials mentioned in the Dutch press.¹⁹

Dierks' agents were active for many years. To give just a few examples: Paul Eduard Daelen,²⁰ editor of the *Kölnische Zeitung* and later in the war an important contact of the Amsterdam police; Ernestus Augustus Jurtz, who was arrested in 1916, on accusations of

planning to blow up ships sailing from Rotterdam to Britain, by order of the German secret service in Antwerp;²¹ and thirdly two Dutchmen, hanged in the Tower of London in 1915. Dierks provided the cover for Haicke Janssen and Willem Roos, who travelled to Britain as ‘cigar merchants’ but were exposed as Dierks’ agents. Before he was hanged, Janssen told the British authorities all he knew about the German secret service in the Netherlands. Finally, Arie Hoogenboom, a Dutchman, was one of Dierks’ agents who had been recruited to travel to England. The Germans arrested Hoogenboom after he had betrayed Dutchmen working in Britain on behalf of the Germans. The Dutch consul interrogated him in Werden, near Essen, where he served his sentence. His statement was very clear about the way the German secret service in Antwerp trained Dutchmen serve as agents in Britain.²²

Kriegsnachrichtenstelle Antwerp

In November 1914 the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle* Antwerp was established under Hauptmann Kiefer. It focused on obtaining information from France and Britain, with a special department for the training of agents. In 1915 Antwerp employed around 50 agents (10% of whom were Dutch), more than double the number of Wesel. The Dutch authorities learned about this through interrogations of suspected spies. Arthur Claren, a Belgian driver and mechanic, gave one of the most detailed descriptions of the workings of the Antwerp office. He had been recruited in 1915 in Belgium to spy for the Germans in France, Britain and Holland. In his statement to the Dutch police he explained in detail the workings of the training for spies in Antwerp. In his words:

I was brought in an automobile, with closed curtains, to a beautiful and large house²³ with an extensive German staff both in civilian dress and in uniform. I was welcomed by a German lady who spoke French fluently,²⁴ and a man in civilian clothes who they called *Hauptmann*.

The Germans asked Claren if he would agree to become a spy; he would make a lot of money and he would serve his fatherland. It was not dangerous and he would get addresses in Folkstone, Calais, London and Roosendaal (Holland) of German agents. While he thought the offer over, he was treated very well. After a few days he accepted because, as he told the Dutch police later, he was planning to betray those German agents to the Allies. After he had agreed he was taught to write with invisible ink, both with water and with lemon juice. He observed another method in which a kind of white substance was used – Claren described it as similar to starch – on linen, which was laid on marble stone and made visible by ironing over it. After a few days he was sent to Holland as agent nr. 15 with the order to go to England to get information on a forthcoming gathering of prominent Allied generals. In fact, Claren wrote two bogus letters from Holland, back to Antwerp in the hope of getting the promised details on the Germans agents. After that he visited his wife, who lived in Holland, and he was arrested by the Dutch police.²⁵ On this occasion, the Antwerp *Stelle* yielded no results, but in general 1915 was quite a successful year. Through analysis of open sources, questioning of travellers who came from Entente countries and smuggling soldiers’ letters, the Antwerp *Stelle* proved its worth. It was in close contact with Gneist in Rotterdam, as well as his successor Bosenick who could use telegraph cables to inform Wesel. The Dutch authorities could listen in on those messages.

From the first half of 1915 onwards it was obvious to the Dutch military and police authorities that serious spying was taking place, especially in Flushing and Rotterdam, to get information on North Sea shipping and British military transports and other activities.

Dutchmen were recruited on a regular basis, but so were, on an ever-increasing rate as the war progressed, German deserters. Rotterdam, in particular, became a centre for former German soldiers looking for some easy money and being recruited by agents from all sides, including the Dutch themselves. The main German agents, either from Antwerp or from Wesel, were involved in commercial activities and journalism as covers. Certain restaurants, run by Germans, were well known for gatherings of German agents. In Rotterdam, for instance, it was Restaurant Fürstenberg, run by Friedrich Carl Wilhelm Müller.²⁶ The nodes in all these activities were the German consuls in Rotterdam and, to a lesser degree, Amsterdam (Carl H. Cremer, merchant from Bremen), which was even publicly known. Olphert Jan van Beresteijn (1872–1919), editor of the pro-Entente *Gazette de Hollande* for instance sent the Dutch Foreign Office in November 1914 an extensive document that explained the workings of the German spy rings. It was sent to the Rotterdam police, which traced the comings and goings of German spies. Apart from Schliesser, this involved Paul Ernst Vollrath²⁷ and Friedrich Carl Hemmann,²⁸ the latter already having been arrested and interrogated in Flushing in May 1915. In May 1916 the Amsterdam pro-Entente newspaper *De Telegraaf* published an overview of German spying in Rotterdam. The paper praised the efficiency and quality of the German spies. It told its readers that the Germans gathered information by establishing contacts with hotel porters, pub visitors and employees of shipping companies. Even women were supposedly used to seduce possible informants.²⁹ The paper estimated the number of German spies to be 142 men and 62 women. The liberal and neutral *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* published on the same subject a month later. It named Franz Peter Caesar Schmidt and Hans Hermann Hirsch³⁰ of the Holland–American Import and Export Company in Rotterdam as owners of a safe house for recruitment and information exchange. It was located a mere 700 metres from the main British spy bureau. The paper explained correctly that behind this ‘front’ it was the German consul who was the main spider in the web.

Finally some German agents actively sought contact with the Dutch police. They were assigned to counter-espionage activities and hoped they could exchange information with the Dutch police. Von Behr, a police detective from Berlin, led German counter espionage in Holland from the end of 1915. He informed the Dutch police on British and French espionage activities. In Arnhem Albert Wolters³¹ led German counter espionage. It is unknown whether the Dutch authorities gave them information, but they did tail them.

A ‘special relationship’

Dutch police detectives were in regular contact with agents from all warring parties. Van’t Sant, mentioned above, maintained very close contacts with the British in Rotterdam, but also with the Germans, although less is known about that.³² More is known about the Amsterdam detective Broekhoff, whose reports on 1917–1918 are still available.³³ Broekhoff was in contact with agents from all sides, but developed a special relationship with a prominent German spy. But before that happened he had discovered a German plot to blow up essential bridges in Holland, should the British invade. Anton Vogels³⁴ was a German deserter who lived in 1916 in Utrecht (Holland) as a chauffeur. He re-established contact with his former employer, Dr Carl Kraus from Düsseldorf, who came to visit him in Utrecht. A regular visitor to the Netherlands, it was easy for Kraus to gain Vogels’s trust and he wanted to recruit him to blow up the Moerdijk bridge, a vital link between the northern and southern part of the Netherlands, in case of war. Vogels played along. They visited the site and even experimented with explosives in the dunes near The Hague. Vogels accepted money from Kraus but told Broekhoff he had never intended to act against the Netherlands. He went to the Dutch police and told

everything. Broekhoff trusted Vogels so much, he subsequently used him as an informer, as did Van't Sant.

In October 1917 Broekhoff came into contact with a certain Dr. Bohrmann, an agent from the *Stelle* in Antwerp who told him he would inform Broekhoff of any relevant information on the British. He also informed him of the existence of the war plan *Fall K*, the German attack on the Netherlands in case of a British attack on the Scheldt river, Flushing and Zeeland. This plan will be dealt with in greater detail below. In December 1917 Bohrmann opened up even more to Broekhoff. He said his real name was Leonard Franz Maria Balet,³⁵ a former member of the Dutch clergy who had left both the Catholic Church and the Netherlands around 1905 and had built up a career as an art historian in Germany.³⁶ He openly discussed with Broekhoff how his Antwerp superiors felt about a possible British amphibious landing in Holland and the Dutch reaction in that eventuality. He also gave an insight into the rivalry between Antwerp and Wesel and the German counter-espionage bureau in Scheveningen (The Hague), led by Trützschler von Falkenstein. And through Balet the Dutch learned that the Germans were, in general, content with the way Holland guarded its neutrality. He also told Broekhoff the highest authorities in Berlin approved his giving information from the Antwerp *Stelle* to the Dutch police.

From January 1918 Balet, who had bought a house in Holland, and Broekhoff discussed the coming German offensive in France. The relationship developed into a friendship, both men discussed the prospects of the German offensive extensively and in between Balet gave 'lectures' on art history. Broekhoff, who reported everything immediately to Fabius, said that dealing with Germans was not always easy, 'they showed a limitless amount of arrogance and suspicion that made one dispirited,' but Balet was the decent exception. During the tension between Holland and all warring parties in March–April 1918, Balet informed Broekhoff regularly of the fact that in Antwerp nothing pointed to any preparations for war. In June Balet agreed with Broekhoff that the German offensive in France had failed and he foresaw a crisis in Austria. In August he reported that the Germans no longer expected any British action on the Dutch coast.

Balet was certainly Broekhoff's highest-level informant. This was in strong contrast with Broekhoff's link to the German counter-espionage bureau in Scheveningen: Leendert van Rijn. This Dutchman claimed he had fought voluntarily in the Boer War and upon returning in the Netherlands had fallen into a life of petty crime. He supplied Broekhoff with names of people who were active for the German cause.

An analysis of the German agents in the Netherlands shows that they were mostly involved in commercial activities or journalism. It was possible they were employed as such before 1914, but it was also likely that these activities were used as covers, because they brought both the right contacts and the necessary means for travel and communications. Apart from those mentioned, further agents are known, such as Paul Scheffer (1883–1963), correspondent of the *Berliner Tageblatt* in The Hague, Willem Nevens,³⁷ owner of a pro-German press agency in The Hague and the Hungarian journalist Niklos Fejervary, who was active in several Dutch cities. In Amsterdam the tobacco trader Johan Hugo Theodor Schultz³⁸ was active as an agent, as was the Oberhausen industrialist Stoffers in Rotterdam. Stoffers³⁹ befriended a journalist of the *Daily Mail* and became a correspondent of the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* himself, producing useful reports about the Dutch situation, the shortage of shipping tonnage on the side of the Entente, British propaganda in neutral countries and the British peace movement.

Although further research is necessary, it seems that the close commercial ties between Holland and Germany formed an important condition for the quick establishment of the German spy network. The fact that the Germans tried to reroute trade from Hamburg to

Rotterdam added to this importance. It was no coincidence that Hamburg ship-owner Albert Ballin (1857–1918) visited Rotterdam, the ‘Hamburg of the War’ during these years.⁴⁰

*Fall K*⁴¹

German espionage in Holland was at first and mainly directed against Britain, but that changed slowly, beginning in 1915 and more so by 1916–1917, when preparations for a possible attack on Dutch territory were gathering pace. Along with Romania, Holland was seen as a legitimate target for spying, which was not the case for other neutrals. The number of German intelligence organisations that focused on Holland increased: a *Kriegsnachrichtendienst im Norden*⁴² was established in Hamburg (*Hauptmann Tettenborn*) and the Düsseldorf Stelle (Major Roepell, who was stationed in The Hague in 1918) got more involved with Holland. Antwerp played a leading role in the development of war plans. In 1918 Broekhoff identified Schultz and Friedrich Wilhelm Brügman⁴³ as the main agents from Düsseldorf and Balet together with Wilhelm Karl Heinrich Düwell from Antwerp.⁴⁴

The first major case of anti-Dutch espionage the Dutch police discovered dated back to October 1915, when Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Nuszholz⁴⁵ was arrested. This engineer and shipbroker, who had lived in Rotterdam for many years, was suspected of delivering military information on the Dutch Army to the Germans. His house was searched and clues were found to indicate that he had received specific military questions from the *Nachrichtendienst*. Nuszholz denied every accusation and nothing is known about a trial. He did seem to be connected to the German consulate, but the Dutch justice authorities deemed it undesirable to conduct searches there.⁴⁶ The following year this kind of espionage became more and more frequent, directly related as it was to the planning of *Fall K*.

Fall K resulted from the German fear of a British landing on the Flemish or Dutch coast. As long as Zeeland, and the Scheldt River, which connected Antwerp to the North Sea, were in Dutch hands, the German position in Flanders was protected along its northern flank. This outweighed the disadvantage of not being able to use Antwerp as a North Sea port. A strong, credible Dutch defence of Zeeland, visible to all warring parties, was essential to the continuation of Dutch neutrality, from which both Britain, but even more so Germany profited economically. Moreover, neither the British nor the Germans were looking for an extension of the western front. Nevertheless, after Gallipoli the idea that a neutral Zeeland could be attacked was on everybody’s mind, including the Dutch, who considered this outlying province the cornerstone of their neutrality. The Netherlands’ interest was to show that its defence preparations were credible, which meant that neither the British fleet nor the German Army could enter Zeeland unopposed.

German war planning with regard to the Netherlands gathered momentum in 1916. It featured in the discussion on the declaration of unrestricted *U-Boot* warfare. In German military circles it was feared that this declaration could lead to a Dutch entry into the war on the Allied side. With the forming of the *OHL* by Hindenburg and Ludendorff, planning became ever more urgent. In September to October 1916 the first detailed plans were made. In case of a British attack on the Dutch coast, or of a real threat that this was being attempted, the German Naval Air Force would bomb Dutch railway infrastructure and the Army would invade Zeeland from Flanders. Especially from March to April 1917 fears of German attack were strong. Ludendorff increased troop strength just south of the Dutch border and assigned divisions for an attack on Zeeland. What was still lacking at the time was detailed tactical information on Zeeland’s treacherous waterways, its infrastructure and the exact deployment of the Dutch Army, Navy and position of mines.

From 1917 German intelligence actively probed for detailed information on Zeeland. The German naval attaché in The Hague, with good contacts with his Dutch naval colleagues, played an important role but the *Stellen* at Wesel and Antwerp collected a lot of information too. One of the sources was Dutch military personnel and their relatives, who were tempted to tell more than they were supposed to. Some were persuaded with money. In 1918, for instance, the Dutch authorities discovered that two brothers, both deserters from the Dutch Army, worked for the Antwerp *Stelle*. Mostly in pubs, the brothers tried to come into contact with Dutch military, billeted in Zeeland or Western Brabant. The moment they found a soldier who was interested in some easy money and with a position close to the paperwork of a relevant commander, they persuaded him to copy military documents. These documents were smuggled across the border to Antwerp. One successful ‘catch’ was the clerk of the commander of all Dutch forces in Zeeland. Via this soldier and the smuggling route, some important plans and documents were taken to Antwerp.⁴⁷

The Dutch police authorities also arrested the Flushing shipbroker Barend Stofkoper (1872–1930), who, together with some accomplices frequented the pubs on the Isle of Walcheren to get soldiers to talk about the Dutch troop dispositions and coastal defences of the island and who also tried to recruit Dutch laborers for the German armament industry. He reported his findings to the German consul in Flushing, including maritime information on the notoriously difficult waters of the Scheldt and all information on the British he could get his hands on. Stofkoper, who had done a lot of commercial business with Germans before the war, was a good acquaintance of Schliesser’s.⁴⁸ Lack of evidence prevented Stofkoper from being imprisoned, but after some diplomatic pressure the German consul, Dr Walther, decided to leave Flushing.

According to Gempp, Antwerp, together with Wesel, established a secure telephone and telegraph network in Holland, in case British troops landed on the coast. From Roosendaal, on the Dutch border, the information was to reach Antwerp within the shortest time possible. Dutch archival sources do not mention this, so it was either very well hidden or never actually tested. The Dutch military authorities closely monitored all telegraph connections and listened in on telephone conversations, based on the state of siege declared in large parts of the country. Even carrier pigeons were used by the Germans: ‘die Probeflüge waren erfolgreich.’⁴⁹

Balet, Broekhoff’s contact, mentioned another method. The Antwerp *Stelle* had recruited two former Amsterdam police officers to spy in ports in Zeeland in order to see how they were defended and if troops could be set ashore. The Dutch police had caught them in 1916. Balet also revealed that military planning in Antwerp was done by General Johann (Hans) von Zwehl (1851–1926) and Major Von Richthofen, which was correct.

Other agents, both from Antwerp and Wesel reported many details concerning Dutch defences during 1917. The reports were analysed and detailed overviews of Dutch defences were made, including estimates of the size of the Dutch Army – deemed bigger than in reality – and the location of mine barrages in the Dutch waters. In August 1917 *Abteilung Fremde Heere* published *Mitteilungen Nr. 1 über Die militärische Lage Hollands*. The author concluded, rightly: ‘The well informed public wishes unconditional neutrality. We can be sure that Holland will oppose any foreign landing or invasion that breaches its neutrality with all its might.’ This was exactly the message the Dutch authorities, especially the military, wanted to spread, it was echoed in all the contacts Dutch officials had with foreign representatives.

In another, undated, detailed analysis of Dutch defences, this was put in perspective. On the one hand, the German analyst overestimated the maximum size of the Dutch armed forces: he calculated that if Holland put all available men in the field, its Army

could muster one million men (in reality 500,000). On the other hand, he did not have much faith in the resilience of the Dutch defences in Zeeland against a British attack:

The defences at the Scheldt are too weak to prevent any serious attempts to land an army. Probably political motivations were decisive when this defence was established. So it is very likely that when the political situation alters, Dutch defensive power, at least at the Scheldt, will not be as strong as it could be in theory.

This was in fact not a bad analysis. The Dutch would try to repel an amphibious landing on the beaches and in the dunes of Zeeland, but not at all costs. The defence of Fortress Holland, the area of Amsterdam and Rotterdam, was more vital for the survival of the state should the worst come to the worst.

Apart from the purely military information, it was also important to know Allied thinking on the war in a more general sense. The Hague was the perfect location and German spies – sometimes American-Germans – frequented clubs and diplomatic gatherings frequently to let the *Nachrichtendienst* know how Allied diplomats foresaw developments.⁵⁰

Analysis: a balancing act

‘The Netherlands were literally packed with German and British agents,’ Boghardt points out,⁵¹ and, from early on in the war, the Dutch authorities were very well aware of this fact. Through contacts on all levels with foreign agents, they tried to keep track of how the intelligence networks operated. There were two important goals to be pursued: getting information on the military plans of the warring nations and preventing violations of Dutch neutrality. Central to both these goals was the sincere wish to remain neutral and to convince Germans and Allies of this. Both warring parties had to be totally convinced that the Dutch would never choose sides voluntarily and that a continuation of Dutch neutrality was in the interests of the warring parties themselves. This message was sent over and over again in many covert and public exchanges.

To keep neutrality intact, contacts with foreign intelligence networks were essential. These contacts yielded important information, and as long as the foreign activities on Dutch territory were not directed against Holland itself, and as long as the services did not fight among each other very openly, the Dutch were more or less content. Two Dutch decisions were crucial: firstly, not to prosecute intelligence gathering that was not directed against Holland itself and did not endanger neutrality, and secondly, to get into close personal contact with foreign agents. This contact proved to be mutually beneficial.⁵² Probably, the Dutch authorities were not aware of all covert activities, that could hardly be expected, lacking experience and a large staff, while being engulfed with foreigners as they were, but what they did know seemed to be sufficient. In some fields they were even very successful, such as deciphering telegraphic codes sent by the belligerents via Holland; and getting German information on how to strengthen coastal defences. In November 1917 Dutch officers were invited to visit the Russian batteries at Ösel, after the Germans had captured the island, and in January 1918 they were shown around the impressive German batteries on the Flemish coast. The information they received was so detailed that the Dutch used it to make plans to strengthen their own coastal defence works in Zeeland. This shows how mutually beneficial sharing of classified information could be. Also, The Hague was well known as a city in which exchange of sensitive information between neutrals and belligerents took place on a regular basis. Behind, but close to the western front, Holland in general was a very useful location for information transfer and covert contacts.

For the Dutch authorities the main goal was to convince the Germans of their sincere wish to remain neutral. The Dutch knew they had to make clear they were serious in defending the neutrality of their country. A certain insight into Dutch military preparations was therefore beneficial and the Dutch authorities actively sought contact with all belligerents. Exchanges of information took place on several levels. It was the maximum a small country could do, apart from profiting from its position between fighting coalitions and providing economic and diplomatic advantages for both. Another Dutch advantage came for free: neither side had enough men to spare to fight in uninviting wet-land, below sea level. Even if the Dutch coast were in German hands, Germany would not improve its maritime position towards Britain fundamentally. Only a pre-emptive strike to prevent Britain establishing air bases in Holland was considered a serious strategic option.

Notes

1. Grant mentioned that the German intelligence service in February 1917 sent Kapitän-Leutnant W. Lechler to Holland to interview U-Boat officers. Also British agents were allowed to interview German deserters in Holland. R. M. Grant, *U-Boat Intelligence 1914–1918* (London: Putnam, 1969), 24, 175–6.
2. See for an extensive description of events H. van Tuyll, *The Netherlands in World War I* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2001), 40–75.
3. Chief of the General Staff to Minister for War, 27 March 1897. Nationaal Archief (NA) The Hague, archive of the General Staff (GS), nr. 173.
4. J. Steinberg, 'A German Plan for the Invasion of Holland and Belgium, 1897,' *The Historical Journal* 6, no. (1963): 107–19.
5. W. Klinkert, *Het vaderland verdedigd* (Den Haag: SMG, 1992), 327.
6. *Ibid.*, 237–8.
7. See H. Ehlert, M. Epkenhans and G.P. Groß (eds.), *Der Schlieffenplan. Analysen und Dokumente* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007).
8. See, on the history of GSIII and Dutch espionage in World War I: D. Engelen, *De Militaire Inlichtingendienst 1914–2000* (Den Haag: sdu, 2000); W. Klinkert, 'GSIII wachter van den staat. Spionnen en informanten in, voor en tegen Nederland, 1914–1918,' in *De Grote Oorlog. Kroniek 1914–1918*, ed. L. Dorrestijn, vol. 23 (Soesterberg: Aspekt, 2012), 31–86.
9. He was a frequent visitor of Hotel De Twee Steden at the Hofweg in The Hague. Police detective Antonius Johannes Sacré followed him constantly.
10. C. Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland*. Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatien, vol. 137 (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1957–1974), 457; Fallon to Davignon 4 May 1915.
11. Friedrich Gemppe, *Records of the Headquarters of the German Armed Forces High Command, 8. Band 8. Abschnitt A*.
12. Born Blomberg 1880.
13. M. Frey, *Der erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), 146.
14. Born in Wolfersode 1875.
15. NA, GS nrs. 93 and 336 and Municipal Archives Rotterdam (MAR), police records nr. 1562a, file nr. 355.
16. Born in Wismar (Mecklenburg–Schwerin) 1872 and married in Rotterdam in 1897 to Petronella Renetta Wijt, daughter of the mayor of the town of Steenwijk.
17. Born in Ratingen 1873, MAR, police records nr. 1561.
18. Leer (Ostfriesland) 1889–Hamburg 1940, see: <http://www.nisa-intelligence.nl/PDF-bestanden/Dierks.pdf>
19. *Het Volk and Tilburgsche Courant*, 25 August 1915.
20. Born Düsseldorf 1880.
21. MAR, police records nr. 1560, file 195. Jurtz told the Dutch police he was ordered to commit sabotage by the Naval officer of the *Stelle* Antwerp, Alfred Lassen.
22. Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Supreme Command, 15 December 1915. MAR, police records nr. 1555, file 71 and NA, GS nr. 337.
23. It was Mechelse Steenweg (Chaussee de Malines) 38. M. Walle, 'Fraulein Doktor Elsbeth Schragmüller,' *Guerre mondiale et conflicts contemporains* 232 (2008): 47–58.

24. Probably Elsbeth Schragmüller, aka Frau Doktor or Annemarie Lesser (1887–1940).
25. 24 May 1915, NA, GS nr. 337.
26. Born Tocksteder Drömling (Rätzlingen) 1881.
27. He was incarcerated for a brief period in September 1916. MAR, police records nr. 1566a doss. 184. Probably this is Captain Vollard, who figures prominently in one of the few books German spies wrote about their activities in Holland: M., *My Experiences in the German Espionage* (New York: Henri Rogowsky, 1916), 23–5.
28. Born at Friedenbruch 1879.
29. The Fraulein Lilly the paper mentioned was in fact Carolina Fritsch, who was innocent according to the Dutch police. The German spy ‘M’ claims in his *My Experiences*, 39, to be the source.
30. Both born in Hamburg, in 1880 and 1890 respectively.
31. Born Vierssen 1881.
32. A certain Körner is mentioned as his contact with Wesel.
33. NA, collection Meijer, inv. nr. 7.
34. Born Düsseldorf 1889. He served with the *Flieger Ersatz Abteilung* in Cologne.
35. Rotterdam 1879–New York 1965.
36. He wrote *Der Frühhollländer Geertgen tot Sint Jans* (1910), *Schwäbische Glasmalerei* (1912) and *Die Verbürgerlichung der deutsche Kunst, Literatur und Musik im 18. Jahrhundert* (1936). After 1918 he remained in Holland. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II he emigrated to New York and taught at Brooklyn College.
37. Journalist, born in 1880, married to the German Mina Emma Schmid. There is a file on him in the National Archives in London, KV 2/1694.
38. Born Hamburg 1873.
39. Led from the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle West* (Düsseldorf), see Gempp 9. Band 8. Abschnitt B.
40. J. Crozier, *Mes missions secrètes 1915–1918* (Paris: Payot, 1933), 118. In Dutch archives I have found no evidence of Ballin’s visits, but he was in close contact with Rotterdam ship-owners during the war; see: Lamar Cecil, *Albert Ballin; Business and Politics in Imperial Germany, 1888–1918* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967).
41. Based on W. Klinkert ‘Fall K. German Offensive Plans Against the Netherlands 1916–1918,’ in: *Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900–1940*, ed. H. Amersfoort and W. Klinkert (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2011), 85–118.
42. Gempp 7. Band 7. Abschnitt.
43. Born Hamburg 1875.
44. Born Cologne 1874, October 1915 expelled from the Nijmegen area, a merchant.
45. Born Deutz 1859.
46. Chief of the General Staff to Minister of War, 23 December 1916 and Public Prosecutor in Rotterdam to Attorney General in The Hague, 30 October 1916. NA, GS nr. 667, and nr. 353.
47. Interrogations by the Dutch military police in Breda, April–June 1918. NA, GS nr. 823.
48. November 1917, NA, Ministry of Justice, nr. 16413.
49. Gempp, 7. Band, 7. Abschnitt.
50. Gempp mentions the successful agents A E 115 and A E 157. The last one was a German-American with important contacts in British circles in The Hague, among them Francis Oppenheimer, the commercial attaché.
51. Th. Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 86.
52. Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser*, 87.

Notes on contributor

Wim Klinkert studied history at Leiden University, specializing in Dutch history. As a result of his conscription period, in which he worked as an ensign and later as a lieutenant at the Royal Military Academy in Breda, he became a military historian. In 1992 he received his PhD from Leiden University. His thesis dealt with Dutch military strategy in the period 1874–1914. Since then he has worked as an associate professor at the Royal Military Academy (since 2005 the Netherlands Defence Academy). In 2007 he also became professor of military history at the University of Amsterdam. His publications mostly deal with Dutch military history in the period 1870–1945 and with military education. He is currently working on two books on the Netherlands during the First World War, to be published in 2014.