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Lotgevallen: De beleving van de dienstplicht door de Nederlandse bevolking in de negentiende eeuw

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Summary

Fates and fortunes. Perceptions of conscription into military service by the Dutch population in the nineteenth century.

In this study, the author examines perceptions by the Dutch population of the nineteenth century model of conscription; it relies predominantly on primary sources. The core of this study is formed by correspondence between citizens, public officials and administrators which was found in the archives of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and the provincial authorities. Much information on the attitude of the population towards the state-enforced compulsion to enter military service can be found in the numerous applications made by citizens for an exemption, but also in the reports written by lower-ranking officials, who were in direct contact with the population, given the local character of the legislation. The study is structured so as to gain a bottom-up understanding of perceptions of conscription. It is an analysis from below, which seeks not to examine the nation as it was regarded by the political and cultural elite, but rather the population which was the object of the thought and action of that elite. The contents of this work are in line with the modern historical approach of the *New Military History*, a historical movement that distances itself from classic historical writings, seeking to emphasise the civil context of the military. Unique technical elements, such as battle, arms or command, are less important than the context between the military aspects and political, economic, social and cultural developments.

The two most important characteristics of conscription in the Netherlands of the nineteenth century were its limited scope and the possibility to nominate a substitute to undertake the military service. A contingent of conscripts variably represented between one-third and one-quarter of the annual cohort. The state selected conscripts through a locally organised drawing of lots. The men who were selected had the option to have someone else take their place in return for a large amount of money. The Dutch conscription model was similar to that in most countries of mainland Europe and marked a transitional period between standing armies of professional soldiers, which pre-French revolution monarchs used to fight dynastic wars as they saw fit, and the massive armies of conscripts that would shape the image of the First World War. In view of the modest number of conscripts, who could even choose to have someone else take their place, nineteenth century conscription would at first glance appear to have played only a marginal role in the life of society. In personal accounts from the period, e.g. in diaries and autobiographies, but also in biographies of political or cultural figures written later, conscription is rarely mentioned. However, further research shows that there is more to this than meets the eye. Substitution has left us with a somewhat skewed picture. People from better social circles who could write and publish rarely mentioned conscription in their writings, because the substitution option meant that they were not affected by it. However, the perception of this thin upper stratum of the population does not mean that conscription did not affect the lower strata of the population. Although often exaggerated for obvious reasons, the many appeals made to stay out of military service show the far-reaching consequences that conscription had on the daily lives of citizens. Furthermore, although substitution meant that the elite could avoid conscription, the sheer amount of money that they were prepared to pay for substitutions reveals how important it was considered in better social circles to be spared from military service.

In the entire period from 1818 to 1898, the average national percentage of substitutions was 18.9 percent. In 1898, the last year in which substitution was possible, 18.4 percent of conscripts still availed of the opportunity to appoint a substitute. The interest in the substitution system therefore remained strong right until the end. In the wealthier provinces in the west and especially the north of the country, the annual percentages were highest. 'Serving the fatherland' – in the sense of individual fulfilment of military service – was at that time still a meaningless slogan. Protestants in the North and West of the country felt most closely connected to the Dutch state, yet appointed the most substitutes without much conscientious objection. In choosing whether to appoint a substitute, they were motivated by economics and personal circumstances rather than by any nationalistic sentiment. Things were no different in the south of the country. The population in the border province of Limburg, for instance, had little connection with the fatherland – in fact, there was even an active separatist movement for a number of years – yet it was here that the number of substitutions was lowest in relative terms. While they undoubtedly felt a strong need to appoint a substitute, many citizens of

Limburg simply did not have the means to do so. Limburg had the lowest income per head of the population, a small middle class, agriculture practiced primarily by cotters and smallholders.

The percentages show a rather cold attitude nationally towards conscription among the better social circles. The attitude of less well-to-do citizens, who could not afford to use the substitution option, was no different. The dilemma between fulfilling military service for the fatherland and choosing for the interests of your own family, community, profession, study or career was an issue across all strata of nineteenth century society in the Netherlands. Everyone was affected by it regardless of whether they belonged to the elite or were craftsmen, shopkeepers, farmers, labourers or jobless. In the minds of citizens, self-interest was often paramount. Whether they were young, old, poor, wealthy, protestant, Catholic, from Holland or from Brabant, personal circumstances were for many Dutchmen more important than the state compulsion to serve the fatherland. The cause of the negative attitude of the population was attributable to the fact that conscription encroached on the family lives of individuals. In contrast to the twentieth century, ideological or political views scarcely had a role to play.

The conduct of candidates and their parents during the recruitment process shows how intensively citizens were occupied with the question of whether an individual would honour his duty to do military service. There were three stages to the recruitment process: enrolment in the militia registers, the drawing of lots and the sittings of the militia council to decide on exceptions, for instance, on account of a brother's military service, an illness or being too short. The drawing of lots especially – an occurrence whose significance has been forgotten in the past century – brought vast swathes of the nineteenth century population to their feet. When the Netherlands became part of the French empire in 1810 and military service was introduced in the same year by Napoleon, the draws were seized upon by participants and bystanders as a podium for protest against the compulsion to serve in the emperor's army. During the riots, which became particularly intense following the disastrous French military campaign in Russia, there were some deaths. After the early years of revolt, after the defeat of Napoleon, the Dutch authorities remained wary of destruction, fighting and public drunkenness, but later in the century the participants were primarily motivated by amusement. With the exception of some mischief by a number of socialists in the large cities from around 1870, political motives scarcely played a role any more.

Conscripts from the middle and lower segments of society drew their lots in person. During and after the draw, alcohol was imbibed in quantities. According to witnesses and publications of the time, the conscripts drank away their sorrows while those not selected shared their joy with neighbours, friends, family and peers. The tension among the participants and bystanders was great. If a young man drew a high number, not only would he be spared the draft, but he could offer himself as a substitute or, if wealthy, would not need to spend money on a replacement. The alcohol formed the release valve for the tension and was tolerated, because the event had not just developed into an exciting spectacle, but had also become a rite of passage that marked the end of adolescence, the transition from boy to man. Misuse of strong drink and other irregularities, such as fighting or flirting with girls, which emphasised the transition, were accepted more than on other days. In this sense, the draw had almost become a kind of village festival. Through all the excitement, drink and empathy, the day became an annual reference point that interrupted the drab reality of every day not just for the young men themselves, but also for the community.

To better understand how the occasion was perceived, this study paradoxically devotes some important attention to conscripts who did not fulfil their military service. The extent to which they escaped conscription in the course of the century and the methods they used create an impression of the aversion that prevailed to the institute. Poor and rich alike tried to avoid it. Sons of well-to-do parents made keen use of the substitution system. Young men from the lower social strata usually had to try their luck using illegal methods. This form of draft dodging appears to be most widely used during the compulsory enrolment which preceded the drawing of lots. In the nineteenth century, not everyone knew their date of birth or the correct spelling of their name. Furthermore, the registry of births, deaths and marriages was by no means a well-oiled machine in the early decades of the century. Conscripts and their parents saw their opportunity and attributed their failing to one or both of these factors. In 1826, King William I of the Netherlands was unhappy about the slowness in various provinces with which breaches of the Militia Act were brought before the courts. At his behest, the Minister for Justice instigated a national survey which revealed that 113 of the 116 breaches that had occurred in the current Dutch provinces related to non-enrolment in the militia registers. At other stages of the

recruitment process, not so many excuses were available to wrong-doers: they were either caught or they got away with it. During the drawing of lots, commotion – sometimes feigned – occurred, for instance, concerning the spelling of surnames. However, the strict regulations and the many bystanders watching the actions of the participants with the eyes of hawks meant that fraud hardly ever took place at these events on any significant scale. In a century in which superstitions were still widely held, many participants preferred to put their faith in the supernatural. The situation with medical examinations was different again. In the reports of sittings of the examination councils, there were rather many cases where conscripts tried to mislead the authorities by affecting illnesses or influencing their height using trickery.

For the proper implementation of the detailed legislation, the state was to a large extent reliant on the cooperation, organisation and accessibility of the provincial, but primarily the municipal authorities. In implementing the legislation to combat draft dodging, they played a crucial, but vulnerable role. On the one hand, it was up to local officials to ensure that they were not too obviously representing the interests of their own citizens in their dealing with central government. They did have quite a lot of autonomy. A perfect opportunity for influence by public officials was formed, for instance, by the appeals for exemption, which were almost all accompanied by a recommendation from the relevant provincial or local authority. On the other hand, a local authority could antagonise its own population by being overly rigid in its implementation of the regulations.

Because of the decentralised nature of the militia legislation, central government and local authorities won support from an unexpected corner in their attempts to combat fraud. The lower strata of the population were involved in the recruitment cycles in all sorts of ways. They not only saw groups of drunken conscripts pass by their houses each year, but in small communities they also experienced the departure of a young community member into military service first hand. Social control was particularly strong in the countryside, and everyone knew who had to do military service and who was to stay at home. It was often the case that the authorities received assistance from community members when men fraudulently tried to avoid the draft. Self-interest was again often an important motive. Many of the objections to an erroneous enrolment, selection or exemption came from parents whose sons had been selected because someone else had allegedly committed fraud to avoid conscription.

The intense sentiments that were observed during the recruitment process and the attempts to avoid conscription during this process were not unique to the Dutch, and the description of these is not intended to add any credence to the image cultivated for a large part by the Dutch media and by academics that the Netherlands is a country with a unique tradition of pacifism and tolerance. The history of the Netherlands is purported to be characterised by consultation, consensus (the ‘polder model’) and a rejection of militarism and military power. Aside from the question of whether this is a myth – since the Dutch Revolt against Spain in 1568 and independence in 1648, Dutch soldiers had fought many wars at home and abroad – the Dutch population’s perception of conscription was by no means unique in Europe. In the territories conquered by Napoleon, but also in his own France, he had encountered protest, fakers and deserters. Later in the nineteenth century, the objections to conscription were universal and citizens in other European countries, including those with a strong military tradition, tried just as hard as the Dutch to find a way out of military service. The situations surrounding the drawing of lots were also repeated in other countries. In neighbouring countries too, conscripts adorned themselves in flowers, garlands and ribbons, and they pinned their numbered lots to their hats before turning to drink. The perception of conscription and the changes that took place in the course of the nineteenth century were not set in the nature of the people, but rather in gradually changing conditions of legislation, which largely were the result of the relationship between the modernising state and its citizens.

The young men who were selected during the recruitment process and who could not afford to pay for a substitute were sent to barracks. The first exercise, the time that actually had to be spent in barracks, was relatively short in comparison with other countries, varying in the nineteenth century from three to twelve months. But this did nothing to reduce the fear of life as a soldier. In the press, literature and brochures, a rather unanimous picture emerges of a rudimentary and monotonous existence in the barracks and poor living conditions. There were scarcely any amusements for conscripts, who were at the mercy and the whims of their superiors. From various political or religious points of view, authors often gave negative accounts of life as a soldier.

The system of substitution came under strong political pressure from around 1870, and both its supporters and opponents used the 'pernicious' life in the barracks to lend extra credence to their arguments. The supporters used this argument to justify substitution for cultured citizens, while opponents used it to argue that its abolition would increase the regard with which society held the army, thereby focusing more attention on the improvement of the rudimentary military life. The lives of conscripts outside the barracks were actually not much better. Here prostitutes and publicans vied for the uncorrupted young men's souls, who sought amusement outside the unhappy existence in the barracks. Testimony from contemporaries is not always reliable, but each account does from its own perspective shed some light on the poor image of life in the barracks. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that a broad population group read these accounts, from a growing number of workers reading socialist newspapers to the bourgeoisie reading liberal periodicals. Brochures and newspaper articles will have done nothing to allay parents' fears of the unknown, corrupt life in the barracks, but actually contributed to maintaining the negative image of conscription.

Conscription did not end with the first exercise in the barracks. Even after service in the barracks, the state continued to emphatically concern itself with the conscripts and their communities. Following release, a militiaman who had returned home would remain in military service, although in a reserve rather than active capacity, for another four years. Military legislation placed restrictions on conscripts' freedoms in these four years across a number of areas of social life. Mobility, for instance, was limited by the use of leave passes and the requirement that reservists on leave remain available for call-up, for annual inspection or for repeat exercises, increasing emigration to the United States was made more difficult, those on leave could not marry without permission and on marriage had to prove that they had discharged their military service obligations. These were inconveniences that did not go unnoticed by conscripts on leave and their families. They tried to find ways around the law, usually without actually committing an offence. For instance, a report by the Minister for War shows that many of the reservists called up for mobilisation during the Franco-German war of 1870-1871 reported sick. But to the relief of parliament, he noted in an otherwise sombre account that only 47 of the 12,500 men on leave had ultimately dared to stay away without a valid reason.

Although throughout the nineteenth century the loyalty of the average citizen continued to lie with their families, the region or religion rather than with the interests of the state, there were important changes in the relationship between the state and its citizens that served to influence this essentially negative basic stance. In the course of the century, the state and society became more intertwined and the nature of conscription for Dutch citizens also changed in tandem. This process had two sides. On the one hand, the obligation to enter military service meant that the state intruded ever deeper into the daily lives of its citizens. Each year, new cohorts of young conscripts from all four corners of the country found themselves facing up to their obligation, either indirectly through the recruitment process or actually through life in barracks. Although the cohorts were small and the response of citizens to this state intrusion was initially negative, there was a growing realisation among politicians and military commanders that conscription could be an important instrument for nation building, even if the participants themselves were reluctant. They hoped to reduce the gap between the state and its citizens by devoting more attention to the care and education of young, impressionable recruits who were away from home with their peers from other regions, helped by social developments that indirectly affected the lives of the conscripts. For instance, the fear among Catholics and protestants that their young, impressionable churchgoers would lose their faith while in the barracks was converted to active policy. Just as in other areas of social life, such as politics, education and leisure, they established their own organisations. In this case, they were military homes that offered leisure activities within their own church to Catholic and protestant recruits. Furthermore, new technological developments, such as the emergence of the train, tram and bicycle, made it easier to go on leave, and the construction of sewers and water mains reduced the chances of disease epidemics in the cramped barracks.

On the other hand, the way in which the conscription model functioned did contribute to a greater engagement with the state by citizens at grass roots level. The annual meeting between citizens and the state in the various recruitment stages, in the barracks and during periods of leave made the state more tangible for citizens and less of an abstract concept. Furthermore, the top-down reforms that were introduced ensured that young recruits did not simply suffer their time in service, but actually exercised as soldiers in the service of the state. Apart from their daily military routine, they were also

exposed to reading, writing, the history of the fatherland, and were also introduced to other regions and customs. These were skills that they could put to good use after military service in the modernising civil society. In this way, conscription instilled from the bottom up a growing sense of connection with the Dutch state, while the state and the army focused their policies on this from the top down.

In the course of the nineteenth century, things also changed in the marketplace for substitution. In the first half of the century, the market was largely dominated by unsavoury middlemen who matched supply and demand, earning themselves generous commissions. The middlemen had a bad reputation and were known in the vernacular as 'blood traders'. In the final decades of the century, the picture changed as the middlemen professionalised. They organised themselves, worked on their image and were able to operate nationally thanks to changed regulations and nineteenth century innovations, such as the emergence of the national railway network and advertisements in national and regional newspapers, which were now read by an ever greater readership. Their recruitment activities were largely successful among farm workers, who since 1870 had had no or only irregular work due to the agricultural crisis. On the one hand, the professionalisation of the intermediaries meant that farm workers could easily contact militia companies and middle men. On the other hand, access to the countryside thanks to paved roads, railways and other nineteenth century innovations led to a decline in the fear of barrack life in the cities. More and more agricultural workers and skilled tradesmen from the east and south of the country, where employment was low, took the places of better-off citizens from the wealthier northern and western provinces. This was in marked contrast to the first half of the century, when jobless city dwellers took their places.

Besides these developments that came from within the substitution industry, interest was also growing outside in what was to become the substitution question. A national debate erupted on the rights and wrongs of substitution, where not just parliament and the press debated the pros and cons of substitution, but so too did associations that had been especially established by citizens. Social developments as well as ongoing democratisation and the arrival of mass media ensured that there was growing interest among an ever broader public. In the years that followed the abolition of substitution, the politicisation of the fulfilment of military service would grow further among citizens who experienced the military service personally. Not only were pacifism and anti-militarism more often cited as reasons to object to service, but in broader circles a connection was being made between military service and the right to vote. Although the Netherlands was neutral during the First World War, the state still asked its conscripts to make long-lasting sacrifices who all fulfilled their duty, save for the occasional exception of a conscientious objector. A number of years later, universal suffrage was a fact.