De man die de weg wees. Leven en werk van Paul de Groot 1899-1986

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Summary

Saul de Groot (known as Paul) determined the face of communism in the Netherlands for decades. *De man die de weg wees* (the man who showed the way) describes the rise and fall of this controversial and tragic figure.

Paul de Groot was born in 1899 in the old Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, the son of Jacob de Groot, a diamond cutter, and Rachel Sealtiël. Shortly after his birth his parents, like many others, left Amsterdam where work in the diamond industry had become scarce, and moved to Antwerp in Belgium. After leaving school at about the age of 12, De Groot was trained as a diamond worker. When the First World War broke out the family left Antwerp, where normal business life had practically ground to a halt, and returned for a short time to Amsterdam. De Groot found work at a cigar-makers, who taught him the basics of socialism, but in 1915 the family returned to Antwerp where De Groot became a diamond worker and joined the Belgian diamond workers’ union. He also became active in the Socialistische Jonge Wacht (socialist youth guard). Full of zeal following the October Revolution in Russia, he took part as “Paul van der Schilde” in the fierce debate within the Belgian social democracy movement on its position, and argued for immediate peace. Along with the Antwerp youth guard, he was amongst the first to separate from the Belgische Werkliedenpartij (labourers’ party) and to call himself a communist. It was a small and heterogeneous group, in which the admirers of the Bolsheviks were gathered alongside anarchists, Flemish nationalists and Tolstoyans. De Groot opposed with equal fervour the gauchism of War van Overstraeten, who embraced the leftist ideas of Herman Gorter, as extreme Flemish nationalism, while appreciating the struggle against oppression in Flanders. He greeted with enthusiasm the departure from the Werkliedenpartij of the group Amis de l’Exploité (friends of the exploited), led by Joseph Jacquemotte. In contrast to Van Overstraeten and Gorter, Jacquemotte regarded participation in elections and trade union activities as acceptable revolutionary tactics. Representing Antwerp, De Groot took part in the congress in Brussels (3 and 4 September 1921) at which, under pressure from the Comintern, the various communist groups were united into one Belgian
Communist Party. De Groot was elected in the politburo of the party and given responsibility for publication of the Dutch-language paper, *De Internationale*.

In the meantime De Groot had married Sally Borzykowska, a jew from Poland and cigarette-maker by trade, who was two years older than him and had come from Lodz to Antwerp with her family to escape antisemitism and political oppression. On 13 August 1921 their daughter, Rosa, was born.

Owing to his participation in protests against the occupation of the Ruhr region, in which both French and Belgian troops were involved, De Groot was arrested at the beginning of March 1923. On the orders of the King, he was required to leave the country immediately and the family moved to the German city of Hanau am Main, where De Groot found work in the diamond industry. When an armed rising of communist workers was crushed in October 1923, De Groot had to flee once more, having been one of the leaders of the local branch of the KPD (Communist Party of Germany). He sought refuge in St Claude, in the French Jura, also a centre of the diamond industry. From there he returned in the autumn of 1925 to Amsterdam, where, with some help from Dutch friends, he obtained work in the diamond factory of Boas. De Groot transferred from the French to the Dutch communist party.

He immediately became involved in the struggle between David Wijnkoop's supporters and the party leadership backed by the Comintern, in which Richard Manuel and Louis de Visser were leading figures. De Groot was active in the Algemene Nederlandse Diamantbewerkersbond (ANDB, general Dutch diamond workers' union) and watched with regret the party's continuing concentration on the Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat (NAS, a syndicalist trade union), which had been an important source of communist workers since the First World War. In order to offer some opposition, De Groot contributed to the newspaper *Eenheid, propaganda-orgaan voor eenheid in de Nederlandsche arbeidersbeweging* (1926-1928; *unity, a propaganda instrument for unity in the Dutch labour movement*), which was under the editorial control of the leftist social-democrats, Edo Fimmen and Piet Schmidt. The paper called for a united front between the NAS and NVV (Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen, Dutch alliance of trade federations). This aim was strongly supported by Wijnkoop, who hoped that it would help to break the exclusive link of the CPH (Communist Party of Holland) with the overly influential NAS, but equally strongly distrusted by party leaders such as Henk Sneevliet and Bertus Bouwman, who, as leaders of the NAS, feared that the small syndicalist trade union movement would be swallowed up by the mighty NVV. In February 1927, after being involved in fierce arguments with some NAS leaders and when the party leadership continued with its (in his
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eyes) over-indulgent attitude towards the uncooperative NAS, De Groot left
the CPH.

Without becoming a member of the new Wijnkoop party (established after
David Wijnkoop was expelled from the party in 1926), De Groot consistent-
ly defended a trade union policy aimed at the NVV and supported uncondi-
tionally the policies of the Comintern. Gradually the Comintern itself began
to consider the discipline and propagation of a united front more important
than the maintenance at all costs of the small NAS basis of the CPH.

After the break between the CPH and the NAS, the smouldering conflict
within the CPH on the Russian question came to a head. The sympathy of
Henk Sneevliet and Henriette Roland Holst for the Russian leftist opposition
under the leadership of Leo Trotsky forced the Comintern into more concrete
action. In a tense international political climate and with the party leadership
losing authority, De Groot rejoined the CPH in June 1928. He made a state-
ment in which he admitted without reservation that his departure had been a
great mistake. At the party congress in February 1930, which was totally
controlled by the Comintern, De Groot became one of the party’s leaders. The
old leadership with Richard Manuel and Piet Bergsma was pushed into the
background, and from then on a new set of faces called the shots: Cees Schal-
ker, Alex de Leeuw, Ko Beuzemaker, Paul de Groot and Daan Goulooze. As
a member of the politburo, De Groot was put in charge of trade union work.

After having had to work for an employer since his 13th year, De Groot
now became a paid official of the party. He had many special talents which
helped him not only in his contacts with the so-called party intellectuals but
also with the workers on the shop floor. His travels abroad had broadened his
horizons, he could speak fluently the languages of all the countries in which
he had lived, and he was a well-read man who knew his classical literature.
He was also gifted in the use of words, both oral and written, and innumera-
ble articles and brochures flowed from his pen. In addition he had a great deal
of practical experience, having personally witnessed strikes and an armed ri-
sing. The decline of the revolutionary perspective in the countries of western
Europe, which cut him to the quick, convinced him of the importance of de-
fending the Soviet Union as its last hope. He performed this duty ruthlessly,
following absolutely the changes of direction advised by Moscow. As he was
a relative outsider, with no circle of friends, he was not hindered in his fick-
leness by any notions of “camaraderie”.

De Groot joined the party leadership at a moment when the Comintern
perceived the ripening of a new revolutionary situation in Europe, and social
democracy as the most important force that was preventing the working class
from making a final assault on the bosses and the state. Full of zeal, De Groot
devoted himself to the task of fighting the great enemy, social fascism, as the leader of the Roode Vakbondsoppositie (RVO, the red trade union opposition). De Groot's extreme point of view was not shared by the rest of the party leadership (in particular Cees Schalker) who favoured a more subtle approach. De Groot's attempt, via appeals to the grassroots of the party, to steer the cautious policies of the leadership into a more radical direction finally failed as a result of a veto from Moscow. This experience taught him to keep criticism within the walls of the party offices, and to defend the policies of the party loyally in public, even if he personally had reservations about them. It brought about a remarkable change in the public face of De Groot.

De Groot threw himself zealously into the work of the RVO, which was comprised of both organised and unorganised workers and whose task was to encourage widespread strike action, wildcat if necessary. The result was disappointing. The CPH recruited few new supporters amongst those people with jobs; only amongst the unemployed was there any kind of success. This latter group also produced the new party leaders, such as Lou Jansen and Jan Dieters, who ultimately strengthened De Groot's position in the leadership. De Groot was not immune from attack at first: Cees Schalker, Anton Struijk and Daan Goulooze did not refrain from criticising him and even tried to push him out of the leadership.

The 7th Comintern Congress, held in Moscow in 1935, was the breakthrough for De Groot. He succeeded above all others in being the connecting thread between Rot-Front radicalism and the new politics of the Volksfront, in which an alliance was sought with social democracy and the bourgeois parties defending democracy. Although he supported the new policies, he was unwilling to follow the trend of retrospectively condemning the RVO as a bad tactic. While his rivals reinvented themselves effortlessly in line with the new attitudes, De Groot maintained an air of independence. It boosted his popularity among members who had come to the party under the banner of the RVO, and who now watched distrustfully as the party leadership bowed to bourgeois parliamentary democracy. He also achieved success in Moscow, where it was noted with satisfaction that this sometimes daring and high-handed party leader had personally succeeded in committing the radical wing to the new policies. In 1936 De Groot became the top man in the secretariat of the party. The fact that he sought for unusual solutions did not make him any less predictable or controllable for Moscow. He had learned to control the impulsiveness which had betrayed him in the past. Two years later he was made political secretary, and during that time he managed to eliminate every threat to his leadership. Cees Schalker, Alex de Leeuw, Anton Struijk and Co Beuzemaker were all successfully marginalised.
At the beginning of the occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940, De Groot reduced the leadership of the CPN (Communist Party of the Netherlands) to a triumvirate of himself, Lou Jansen and Jan Dieters. At first he thought that the Molotov-Van Ribbentrop pact required political caution and left open the possibility of at least partially legal activity. A dramatic low point was reached with the publication in June 1940 of an issue of Politiek en Cultuur (politics and culture) in which De Groot appealed to the readers to behave decently towards the occupying force. However this did not protect De Groot and his party from persecution: a few weeks later the CPN and its publications were banned.

De Groot, his wife and daughter went into hiding at various addresses in Brabant until February 1941. Perhaps he hoped to be able to contact Eugen Fried, alias Clement, the Comintern representative for western Europe who was staying in Brussels. It would have made De Groot more independent of Daan Goulooze, who maintained with comrades the illegal radio contact with Moscow, and with whom he had deep differences of opinion regarding the organisation of underground work.

It was November 1940 before the CPN’s underground newspaper, De Waarheid (the truth), began publication. De Groot wrote the lead stories in which English-American imperialism, the Dutch government and the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP, social-democrat workers party) were held as equally responsible for the war as the German occupying force. In an illegal brochure Vrede door Revolutie (peace through revolution), he argued that the proletarian revolution was coming and an implacable battle must be waged against the Dutch ruling class and its accomplices in social democracy. He was deaf to all appeals for national unity in the struggle against the occupiers. But all this changed with the German assault on the Soviet Union: now the first duty was no longer the proletarian revolution but unity in national resistance.

After the Februaristaking (February strike) in 1941, De Groot and his family moved to the IJssel region where they went underground at various addresses in Zutphen and Gorssel. On the night of 14 to 15 October 1942 the police raided their last address, searching for Jews in hiding. While De Groot managed to escape, his wife and daughter were arrested and taken via Arnhem to Westerbork. From there they were transported to Auschwitz, and gassed immediately on arrival on 3 November. De Groot was overwhelmed by guilt, especially for the fate of his daughter who never got the chance to make any kind of political choice for herself.

Some months later, in February 1943, De Groot escaped arrest once more by the skin of his teeth. The triumvirate, beleaguered by the unrelenting
waves of arrests, had decided to take a back seat and put the leadership in the hands of a new triumvirate, comprised of Piet Vosveld, Jaap Brandenburg and Gerrit van den Bosch. Before they could even begin their work, the Sicherheitsdienst (SD) arrested Vosveld, who promptly revealed an appointment in Apeldoorn with Jan Dieters. Dieters, having been pointed out by Vosveld, was arrested on the street. De Groot, who also had an appointment with Dieters and witnessed his arrest, fled in panic. He was convinced that Dieters was being used as bait to secure his arrest.

An utterly broken De Groot severed all contact with the underground party. Attempts by Jaap Brandenburg, who led the party from 1943, to contact him were resolutely brushed aside. De Groot stayed at various underground addresses in Apeldoorn, Zutphen, Dieren and (from April 1944) at Eke de Jong's house in Zwolle, where she ran a stationers. Eke was the widow of Andries Zegeling and had a son, born in 1935. She was four years younger than De Groot, and a nurse and pharmacist's assistant by profession. After the war she and De Groot lived together, marrying on 6 November 1951.

After the liberation of the east of the Netherlands, De Groot surfaced and took up the editorship of *De Waarheid* in Twente. In its pages he argued for the dissolution of the CPN in favour of a Vereniging van Vrienden (association of friends) of *De Waarheid*, in order to be able to hold on to the supporters acquired during the war, and as preparation for a broad progressive Volkspartij (people's party) in which communists and social democrats would work together. This would be a party of government, not opposition.

On 9 May 1945 De Groot returned to Amsterdam, and there was an emotionally charged meeting of the party leadership the following day. Also present was Wim van Exter, who had already relaunched the CPN in the previously liberated south of the Netherlands. Van Exter demanded an investigation into De Groot's desertion in 1943. With the help of Brandenburg, De Groot managed to give a convincing explanation of his disappearance after Dieters arrest. But although his return to the leadership met with little resistance, it was a different story for his Vereniging van Vrienden van *De Waarheid*. In particular the older activists – raised in the tradition of the Comintern – had great difficulty in accepting the idea of dissolving the CPN. When representatives of the Belgian and French communist parties and instructors from the now-defunct Comintern also pushed for a return of the CPN, De Groot was prepared to admit defeat. The issue was finally settled at the so-called July Conference, 21 to 23 July 1945, where it was also decided to keep De Groot as political secretary, even though Wim van Exter – supported by, amongst others, Daan Goulooze, Anton Koejeman and Ben Polak – mounted stiff opposition. In the coming years De Groot would mercilessly dispen-
se with all his opponents, forcing comparisons with the purges taking place in Eastern Europe at the same time.

Immediately after the liberation De Groot began to work diligently for recognition of the Republic of Indonesia. However, he had to take into consideration the interests of Soviet Union foreign policy as well as the need for the CPN to be a respectable party of government, and it was not easy to find a way through this minefield. The handling of conscientious objectors and the vote for the Linggadjati treaty led to confusion and unrest within the CPN. With even greater circumspection, the CPN worked on supporting the Republic of Indonesia’s communists. Secret activities were aimed, for example, at the political education of the core communist group. They were coordinated by Annie Averink, who was De Groot’s most dedicated confidant for many years.

De Groot’s belief in the Soviet Union was boundless, as was that of all those in the CPN. As the Cold War intensified, this attachment was expressed with increasing fanaticism. Even though there was no longer a Comintern, De Groot allowed himself to be guided completely by Moscow’s interests: if a Third World War had started, the CPN would have welcomed Soviet troops as liberators. Full of optimism, he declared in 1949 that the communists would be in power within ten years. Internally the party also began to take on some of the characteristics of the Stalinistic regime of the Cold War. Opponents were silenced, and De Groot became increasingly the personification of an ideal to be followed and to whom gratitude was owed. He allowed himself to be surrounded by party officials – sometimes much younger than himself – who looked up to him, and he was extolled and imitated. It prevented him from ever having to admit to more than minor errors, or to endure the sharper insights of others. It contributed to the stability of the system.

Although he was a poorly paid official in his own country, during his many trips abroad and to the Soviet Union (in itself unusual in the 1950s) he was given abundant opportunities to profit from the privileges of a respected party leader. The party history was rewritten so that from 1930 De Groot appeared to have been the most popular and foremost leader of the party.

In 1956 De Groot was present with Henk Hoekstra at the 20th Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in Moscow. Although he did not know formally about the content of Khrushchev’s secret speech, he returned to the Netherlands dismayed. Accepting the revelations about the mass terror and extensive crimes of Stalin would mean that he not only had to distance himself from Stalin, but also to live with the dreadful memories of all those comrades who had been sacrificed to his false idol. De Groot was not the kind of man who would willingly admit to having kept his eyes shut.
or to having been involved in dirty work. For him, the party embodied all that was defiant and worthwhile, and gave him the means to ease his guilt from the war. His wife and daughter had perhaps been victims of his recklessness, but they had been sacrificed for a lofty ideal, the defence of the "socialist" Soviet Union. Admitting that a criminal regime lay hidden behind this ideal would destroy the dam holding back the feelings of guilt and helplessness. De Groot did not intend to allow such a calamity to overcome him. And anyone who did could expect De Groot's deepest contempt, as demonstrated by his attitude towards Khrushchev and the party opposition focused around Wagenaar, Gortzak and Brandsen.

The opposition formed towards the end of 1957, called for serious destalinisation of the CPN and securing the existence of the (born in illegality) Eenheids Vakcentrale (EVC, unity trade union federation). The EVC was a milestone around De Groot's neck in his efforts towards trade union work in the NVV. The opposition to De Groot was expelled from the party, or resigned, and gathered around the newspaper De Brug (the bridge). At the instigation of De Groot, Marcus Bakker branded the leaders of the opposition as traitors and English agents and the 1959 CPN Congress approved Bakker's report, known as the little red book. De Groot needed the support of the Soviet Union in his battle with the opposition, so while the relationship between the Soviet Union and China reached a new low, De Groot remained for the time being in the background and continuously proclaimed his unconditional solidarity with Moscow.

This docile attitude disappeared when the position of the opposition weakened. Without openly choosing the side of the Chinese communist party, the CPN broke contact with the Soviet Union in 1963. An important consideration was maintaining a good relationship with the Indonesian communists, who stood closer to Peking than to Moscow in the international conflict. De Groot was now heavily attacked by the Soviet Union, and found himself saddled with a formidable opponent in the shape of Friedl Baruch who was financially supported by Moscow.

Although De Groot also tried to protect his personal integrity through his resistance to destalinisation, he did not ultimately succeed. The past began to rear its ugly head, and he was persecuted by feelings of guilt. Serious health problems compelled De Groot to withdraw from daily politics; in 1966 he resigned his seat in parliament, and in 1967 he stepped down as party chairman and was succeeded by Henk Hoekstra. However, De Groot was named an honorary member of the party leadership, which allowed his voice to be heard at decisive moments. And so it was at his instigation that, at the end of the 1960s, cautious overtures were made towards the CPSU, in the space created
by the destruction of the PKI after the Soehartu coup, the more relaxed relationship between Moscow and Peking, and the so-called Eurocommunist overture.

However it led to renewed contacts only in 1975, De Groot became convinced that a complete restoration of links would not be possible until they had rid themselves of the party leaders and members of parliament who, à la Eurocommunists of Italy and Spain, sought too close a cooperation with social democracy and who distanced themselves from the abuse of human rights in the Soviet Union. Although he abandoned at the last minute a plan to try and dismiss the party leadership at the party congress in 1975, it could no longer be avoided after the party's disastrous showing in the 1977 elections. He wanted to replace the leadership with veteran active members who considered an alliance with the Soviet Union to be the centre of communist policy.

De Groot overplayed his hand. He found himself up against a leadership which, after an initial hesitation, closed its ranks against him. De Groot's role appeared to be finished. He had not fully realised the social and political changes taking place among communist supporters during the previous decade. He lacked not only support among the mostly young and well-educated members, but also from Moscow which was not pleased with a destructive struggle in a party that had been fulfilling such a promising role in the anti-nuclear protests.

In his final years De Groot led a reclusive life in Zeist, and refused to speak to anyone. He dedicated himself to his studies and wrote an extensive essay on Stalin, in which he made no attempt to conceal his admiration for the great leader. Around six months after the death of his wife in September 1985, De Groot died in a Jewish old people's home in Bussum.

(Translation B. Stratton)