Niet voor God en niet voor het Vaderland. Linkse soldaten, matrozen en hun organisaties tijdens de mobilisatie van '14-'18

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Summary

World War One changed world relations drastically and triggered enormous social and political upheavals. Prior to the conflict, European nations had dominated the globe. But the mass slaughter on the continent saw the start of the rise in power and influence of the USA. Huge political changes occurred in countries that lost the war. The monarchs in Germany and Austria-Hungary fell. The Czarist regime in Russia was toppled and replaced by the young Soviet government.

People also fought for radical political and social change in the Netherlands — and the country was rocked by soldiers' uprisings in 1918 — but they did not succeed. Eventually the status quo continued, although the government's pace of reforms was quickly stepped up.

Despite its neutrality, the 'Great War' was the spark that led to an attempted revolution in the Netherlands, in the opinions of some participants, or a push for radical social change, according to other players. The Dutch army was mobilised for four years but it did not take part in the conflict. Nevertheless this situation was to have serious consequences. After three and a half years military service many soldiers suffered from low morale. At the end of October 1918 a mutiny broke out. The leader of the Sociaal Democratische Arbeiderspartij (SDAP — the Social Democratic Labour Party), P.J. Troelstra, saw this event as evidence that the soldiers no longer had confidence in their superiors. In late October and early November, there were enormous tensions within the Dutch armed forces. This was pregnant with big social and political consequences. But eventually this intense mood petered out.

Despite the relatively brief period of crisis in the armed forces many issues arise from this situation. What were the causes of the tremendous stresses in the armed forces? Were the soldiers a potential revolutionary factor in Dutch society? In late 1918, were the army and navy reliable pillars for the state any longer?
Army policy

During the armed forces mass mobilisation, between 1914 and 1918, the Dutch army grew to around 200,000 to 250,000 soldiers. This was a far greater number of people under arms than ever before. Previously the armed forces had mobilised on a large scale only during the 1870-1871 Franco-Prussian War, but proved to be from far from a success. Although the mobilisation as such went according to plan, the experience was none­theless traumatic: decades of cutbacks on defence spending had resulted in an undersized obsolete and unprepared army with a low morale.  

In the lead up to the Twentieth Century, the Netherlands attempted to keep pace with other European countries that were professionalising their armies. Gradually officers evolved from privileged members of a class into military art specialists, who primarily made plans for defence against out­side attacks. As with the rest of continental Europe, compulsory military service was introduced, which created mass armies. The implementation of this service was closely linked to population numbers, military power and international political influence. There was a great deal of discussion in society on the relationship between the army and society. National econo­mies went into service for war preparations. The progressive mechanisation and specialisation in the army and navy strongly contributed towards the socialisation of the armed forces and also the militarisation of society. It was this, along with improved military technology and changed war strate­gies that led to the mass slaughter of the First World War.

During this military build up across Europe the term 'total war' came into usage. Many politicians across Europe advocated it. But The Netherlands, unlike other countries, did not have offensive warfare as an instrument of policy. Society was therefore less militarised than in other countries. For the Dutch governments in the period leading up to World War One the most important military aim was to keep the country out of a new conflagration.  

In fact, the Netherlands succeeded in doing so. The mass slaughter of Dutch soldiers was avoided. Yet the country was by no means free of the consequences of the war: the results of the military mobilisation policy were disastrous.

During the first days of the war, in August 1914, the Dutch government mobilised according to the military plan big parts of the population con­sidered able to carry arms. The plan was to have these forces in place until the neighbouring conflict was over. This was considered a short-term pol­icy. Indeed, most people in the Netherlands, and across Europe, thought the war would last a short time. The warring armies strove for quick and decisive battles. They envisaged the war lasting only a few months.
When the Western Front became bogged down into a war of attrition, of fortifications and trenches, and the conflict was clearly going to last much longer than had been expected, the Dutch government found it was in a situation it had not prepared for. The government was faced with some stark choices. Should mobilisation plans be continued until the bitter end of the war or would it be possible to make do with fewer military forces?

There were other international examples of countries where partial demobilisation had been introduced. Both Denmark and Switzerland partly demobilised. There were advocates of this policy in the Netherlands, including the social democrats, the SDAP, which called for the government to follow the Danish and Swiss examples.

But the Dutch government probably never seriously considered to take the path of partial demobilisation. Important factors weighed the mind of the government against following Switzerland and Denmark. It feared the consequences of sending troops home. Could it lead to feelings of injustice amongst those still mobilised, leading to a fall in morale? Also, those demobilised would soon find they were joining the already very high numbers of unemployed people. This could have explosive social consequences. At least for as long as they were in the army the mobilised soldiers were employed and had an income.

Of course the government could not say this openly. It was not possible in a society divided on questions concerning the armed forces. The government feared giving extra ammunition to the Left in its campaign against militarism. The socialists and the Liberals were against using the army as a way of dealing with unemployment. So the government decided to keep the policy of mobilisation and argued it was in the interests of the nation's security.

The military had its own reasons for keeping the army at full strength. The Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, general C.J. Snijders, wanted mobilisation to be continued until the end of the war. He may well have changed his plans if he had known how long the war would last. But of course no one knew this in advance. Instead predictions of the 'end' of the conflict were changed constantly. As we know, the war lasted for more than four years and three months.

There were other factors that gave the Dutch government good reason to change its policy. For a long time, the military had suffered from the lack of cadres. This was made much worse by the time nearly 200,000 to 250,000 men were under arms in the army and the navy. Attempts at recruiting suitable new people failed: subsequently there were less skilled officers and non-commissioned officers to lead the forces.
Discontent

As well as this, there was a structural problem. Many soldiers did not want to serve, although they were in a relatively privileged position, at least compared to the unemployed. They had better food and more of it, and they were better off financially. But they were little motivated to carry out their duties. This meant the military were often not very popular amongst the general population, which even the threat of war did not change.

At the same time, the military were not happy with the poor conditions under which they sometimes served. Soldiers complained openly about many of their conditions, including lodgings and food, and how their superiors treated them. Sometimes they rebelled, as was the case in Utrecht, Apeldoorn and Tilburg, in 1915. The rebellions, which can be considered mutinies, always had a spontaneous character. They were not overtly political acts. A comparison with mutinies in the British and French armies holds good, although the rebellion in the Dutch military was on a much smaller scale.

Non commissioned officers in the Netherlands campaigned for their demands, for a 'people's army', by setting up a political party called Het Verbond tot Democratisering der Weermacht (The Alliance to Democratise the Forces). This political organisation won a seat in the Tweede Kamer (The Second Chamber) in 1918.

The number of conscripts in the navy was small in comparison to the army. The navy personnel were certainly not happy with their serving conditions but this had also been the situation before the war.

Nevertheless the Dutch government was aware that it had to try to keep up the morale of the troops. It brought in changes in serving conditions that, to some extent, met the demands of the soldiers. The government twice raised family allowance. The furlough (leave of absence) legislation, introduced in 1915, was the most important reform, however. Furlough became a right for troops and no longer just a favour. With this act, the government was able to ease a significant cause of discontent. After that the number of disputes in the armed forces lessened. The government also attempted to lessen tensions in the army by means of its relief policy. In this respect, the extension of the Landstormwet (The Last Reserves of the Army Act) in 1915, was the most important measure.

However, despite these government concessions disgruntlement did not end in the armed forces. The older reserves had always thought they should never have been forced into the army and now they were being conscripted. Food supplies remained better in the armed forces than in society as a whole, but still worsened. Improvements in lodgings for soldiers came slowly.
Discontent in the armed forces appeared to reflect structural problems. This had already been noted by the higher ranks of the army. A government inquiry established during mobilisation came to a similar conclusion. It said that many of the soldiers' complaints were legitimate. This showed how the government and military high command had not been prepared for a long period of mobilisation and had also underestimated the effects of this policy.

In the long run, morale amongst the troops deteriorated. Discord in the ranks persisted and commentators at the time referred to a fading of ‘norms and values’. Of course, the military had always had to deal with this phenomenon. Young men left their homes and parental control and were put into the hands of the army. For the Left, this was characterised as putting mental handcuffs on the new, young recruits. Some on the Right of politics also attacked the way conscription was carried out, describing it as a source of ‘people’s cancer’.

During the mobilisation soldiers were away from their homes for longer than before. On top of this, the social and economic situation in the later years of the mobilisation was poor. The rise in allowances was not enough to compensate for the increased cost of living. This led to a rise in criminality, in alcohol abuse and in prostitution. Soldiers were less inclined to comply with the traditions and cultures of the Churches, political parties and the organisation of the army. There was a dramatic increase in desertions from the army and acts of insubordination. From this it is clear the armed forces could not be considered as reliable as before.

The Left and the armed forces

No solutions were put forward to stop this discontent that was acceptable to everyone. The SDAP proposed partial demobilisation but this did not fit in with the government’s policies.

Pre-war policies did not prevail either. The social democrats and the Liberals had both advocated a ‘people’s army’ before the war. This was a call for a more democratic force. But they could not give this idea any content. It was a theory with which they disassociated themselves from the current situation. The army reorganisation of 1912 and 1913, with the implementation of compulsory military service, saw the ideal of a ‘people’s army’ come a step closer. It led to a militarisation of society. In Left circles this was unpopular. The outbreak of the war put an end to the hopes of a ‘people’s army’, especially given the mass slaughter across the Dutch borders that was carried out by mass armies. Peace in the Netherlands allowed the ‘peo-
people's army' to be still advocated by some but the actual war in neighbouring countries really closed the discussion about its viability.

Anarchists, syndicalists and revolutionary socialists in the Netherlands were passionately anti-militaristic. They refused to co-operate with the government or to support military mobilisation. They began a struggle against war and in favour of complete demobilisation. This policy appeared to be swimming against the stream in society. In fact, the revolutionary left suffered setbacks in the climate of mobilisation and war. They hoped that 'workers in uniform' would avoid fighting in the war by refusing to engage in military service. The revolutionary left also hoped that if war did break out it would quickly be converted into a civil war between labour and capitalism — a class war. This turned out to be an illusion.

Due to its origins, the Sociaal Democratische Partij (SDP — which split in 1909 from the SDAP and was the forerunner to the communist party) had the demand for a 'people's army' in its programme. The SDP stuck to this part of its programme during the mobilisation although it remained a theoretical demand and was not pushed.

The outbreak of war provoked a huge crisis within the left internationally. All over Europe, nationalism was rampant and several socialist parties supported their countries' participation in the war. The socialist Second International threatened to fall apart under the pressure.

The moderate SDAP in the Netherlands had to try to explain to its supporters, as a party founded on anti-militaristic principles, why a policy of militarisation was necessary to maintain Dutch neutrality. The SDAP made political peace with all the other parties in the Chamber until after the war. The greater part of the SDAP supporters stood with the party's policy, including sympathising soldiers. Indeed, soon after August 1914, branches of the SDAP started 'mobilisation clubs' which aimed to keep ties between troops and the social democratic movement.

The SDAP party executive however did not initiate this link. This was not surprising given that the party leadership had never supported pre-war soldiers' organisations. The party never had formal ties with the powerful Bond voor Minder Marine Personeel (BVMMP, Union of Lower Navy Personnel). The reason given for this was that the party did not want to be involved in politics in the barracks or on navy vessels. This would only bring these organisations into trouble with the authorities, it was argued. As was well known, the army and navy chiefs had little time for social democracy. Another reason for the SDAP leadership's position was that according to the state's constitution anyone could start an association but it was outlawed to form a union in the military (although in practice they existed). The SDAP did not want to get into further conflicts with the authorities by
supporting such unions and organisations. In the Second Chamber the parliamentary SDAP restricted itself to opening discussions on abuses in the army and navy. This was the party’s policy before the war and during the mobilisation. When clubs in the armed forces requested funds from the SDAP in 1917 the party only reluctantly paid up. But the SDAP leaders told the soldiers’ representatives there could never be a formal tie. They were afraid the soldiers’ organisations could go in an ‘undesirable’ direction. Would the clubs and associations organise radical activities?

There were no grounds for these fears, however. Originally, the clubs only aim, based on social democratic models, was to offer its members recreational and educational evenings. Later the clubs came to organise union actions. Petitions and public addresses were sent to the Second Chamber where the SDAP representatives would look after soldiers’ interests. The army clubs never supported radical resistance in the armed forces, such as riots or mutinies. But these events did have a dramatic effect. It is striking that after initial repressive measures, the Minister of War and the army authorities accepted the existence of the soldiers’ organisations.

The existence of the troops’ clubs became a welcome development for the SDAP. It meant that soldiers were not lost to the party. The clubs were able to win troops to their social democratic ideas. The SDAP paper, Het Volk (The People), made room available for articles from troops.

Due to the party’s call for partial demobilisation the SDAP and the clubs became more popular amongst troops. However the gains for the social democrats were lost as it became clear the SDAP could not deliver on this demand. The sum of the SDAP’s work in the Second Chamber was not impressive.

Another issue caused the party to adopt a change of course. In June 1918, for the first time, elections to the Second Chamber, with universal male suffrage, took place. Those lower than the rank of officer in the army could now vote. Therefore votes were to be fought for in the armed services. However the SDAP found that it was a struggle to motivate many of the soldiers to vote. Besides the last reserves had their own politically ‘neutral’ soldiers union (although with social democratic leaders).

The Social Democratic Mobilisation Clubs, in the meantime organised at a national level, and The Bond van Landstormplichtigen (the Union of the Last Reserves of the Army) realised they had to try to work together but the effort did not get off to a promising start. Two issues stood in the way of co-operation. Firstly, both leaderships disagreed over whether the new organisation should have a neutral or ‘red’ character. Secondly, the various soldiers’ organisations had different views on what army personnel should be relieved first. On top of these disputes, the leaders of the Union of Social
Democratic Mobilisation Clubs and the leaders of the Union of the Last Reserves of the Army could not work together because of personal conflicts and opposing ideas.

However the SDAP was keen to win as much as possible in the elections and indicated it was prepared therefore to change its position. They agreed sit at the negotiating table and to agree a merger of the soldiers' organisations. Together with the small Bond van Militairen met Klein Verlof (Union of Soldiers on Short Leave), the Union of Social Democratic Mobilisation Clubs and the Union of the Last Reserves of the Army founded the Bond van Nederlandsche Dienstplichtigen (BVND - Union of Dutch Conscripts). But there was no policy change by the social democrats. Once elections were over the SDAP showed little interest in the organisation, although there was a formal tie now. The attitude of the SDAP towards the newly formed BVND remained the same as towards the previous clubs and the union of sailors BVMMP.

In the navy, the BVMMP was loyal to the social democrats and agitated in the same moderate way as the army associations. The board in Den Helder was nevertheless worried about the sailors' organisation and tried to block radical movements, such as the Dutch Indies section of the union.

The sailors union wanted to have better relations with the Minister of the Navy who, before the war, had forbidden union activities on board navy vessels. He was especially hard-line concerning the armed forces in the Dutch Indies. Like the army conscripts, the navy union wanted to conduct some political activities, such as drawing up an election programme.

The sailors were divided into two organisations. The BVMMP consisted entirely of professional navy personnel and was a permanent organisation (which outlived the demobilisation). The conscripts were organised in the Bond van Zeemiliciens (Union of Navy Recruits). The SDAP did not have a formal relationship with either organisation. The conscripts organisation was too small to be a partner in the negotiations for the new national union of soldiers. As far as the SDAP was concerned all the conscripts clubs were emergency organisations for the duration of the mobilisation only.

For the parties to the left of the SDAP the issue of the armed forces and representation was problematic. These parties were small and divided. To distinguish themselves from the rest of the labour movement they presented opposing ideas and programmes. They attacked the SDAP for having made a political truce during the war, of dropping socialist principles, and called it treason. The 'modern' SDAP supported the credits, which were voted for in parliament, needed for mobilisation. The radical left considered this as a betrayal of anti-militaristic principles. They demanded: 'No man and no penny'.
But these slogans did not meet the views of the Dutch people. The majority were convinced that due to the mobilisation the country had been spared involvement in the war. This meant it was very difficult for the radical left to build a mass movement in opposition to the mobilisation.

Of course, the radical left appealed to the conscripts, just as the SDAP did. But they found divided opinions amongst their supporters. Some wanted to build organisations that would not shrink from disobeying orders, if they felt it necessary. And they did not rule out violence as a political weapon. Others believed in a personal response – of an individual refusing military service. Young people who considered themselves revolutionaries, and who had played an important role in soldiers’ organisations before the war were especially keen on refusal to serve as a demand. They adopted a pacifist stance.

Another point of controversy was over whether organisations should act as welfare advocates for soldiers. Many in the National Arbeids-Secretariaat (NAS – the revolutionary syndicalist National Workers’ Secretariat) supported this policy, as far as conscripts were concerned. The NAS did not want to work with professional soldiers, even if they were radical. Like the social democratic Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen (the Dutch trade union movement) the NAS wanted to maintain ties with their members in the forces. Other political activists objected to this policy. They argued that it was counter productive to improve the conditions of the soldiers, as this would blunt their willingness to resist the authorities.

Thus most of the radical left in the Netherlands made little effort to appeal to all ranks of soldiers. But by doing so they ignored the example of the revolutionaries working in the Dutch Indies. The conditions in the colonial Dutch Indies were more extreme in all ways. But the revolutionaries there had closely identified with the interests of the professional soldiers and sailors. The local BVMMP increasingly moved away from the union leadership’s policy in the Netherlands and became more radical. This meant greater successes for this organisation. For example, once the Soldiers’ Union was founded in the Royal Dutch Indies Army it found widespread support amongst the European soldiers but had difficulties organising the native soldiers.

In the first years of the war the Dutch anti-militarists, anarchists and syndicalists scored few successes. With the NAS they created ‘mobilisation clubs’ in imitation of the social democratic labour movement. Most of these clubs were small and not viable. But the activities of their members in places like Leiden and Tilburg struck terror into the hearts of the authorities. The authorities responded with repressive measures that eventually
led to the clubs being destroyed. After the government extended the Landstorm Act a ‘Manifesto for the Refusal of Military Service’ was launched, with the Christian Socialists taking a main role. This marked the beginning of a new movement. Many signed the Manifesto and were won over to its pledge of individual refusal of military orders. But the leaders of the SDP most associated with the idea of a ‘people’s army’ did not agree with the tactic (although they paid attention to the refusal policy because it had appeal amongst some young members of the SDP). The SDP tried to influence the armed forces by establishing an organisation of their own amongst the rank and file soldiers. This was not successful because the SDP was too small and failed to make a wide enough appeal.

Soon however the events of 1917 gave the revolutionaries a new impetus. On an international plane, the overthrow of the Tsarist regime in Russia gave hope that the capitalist system was vulnerable and that revolution was possible. The example of the creation of soldiers’ councils (Soviets) during the revolution was especially important for the radicals in the armed forces in the Netherlands. At home, what became known as the Amsterdam ‘Potato Riot’, and the refusal of some soldiers to repress it, proved very important for the working class movement.

The Russian soldiers’ councils were soon emulated by the Dutch troops. The newly established councils however reflected the divisions within the revolutionary left. Two types appeared. Anarchists formed the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils, which did not shirk from violent actions. On the initiative of the SDP, and in collaboration with revolutionary syndicalists, the Soldaten-Tribune (Soldiers’ Tribune) was launched. They formed their own ‘Tribunist’ Soldiers’ Councils to build a larger movement of troops.

However all the councils remained small and there was no strong umbrella organisation to unite them. Unlike in Russia there was not one example of where these councils were elected by the armed forces’ rank and file. The councils in the Netherlands really operated as secret soldiers’ committees. There was a lack of interest shown towards the councils by the mass of soldiers. This was based on many factors. Apart from the repressive attitude by the authorities towards councils, the committees could have grown much more if they had taken up the improvement of the conditions of soldiers as a key objective. But the councils never adopted this policy. Neither was there any attempt to successfully co-ordinate activities. This gave the clear impression that the revolutionary left in the Netherlands was more about words than deeds.
By October and November 1918 few expected that a revolution was possible in the Netherlands, or even localised radical actions. Even less did anyone expect that a moderate competitor to the revolutionaries, the SDAP, would take the initiative when there was social unrest. The end of October saw a mutiny at the Harskamp and at a few other places in the Netherlands. The situation in many parts of Europe was pre-revolutionary or revolutionary. But the circumstances inside the Dutch armed forces did not lend themselves to explosive political movements. For a start, there was no revolutionary party with large-scale support in Dutch society or inside the armed forces. The small social democratic union in the army, the BVND (with approximately 7,000 members), had called for demobilisation but now was in support of the cancellation of soldiers’ leave due to the critical international situation. The organisation even boasted that its members would not be involved in social disturbance and riots. The union complained that the government should have listened harder to the demands of the rioters.

Besides the BVND, the anarchist and Tribunalist councils of soldiers were very small and appeared unviable. Their formation and collapse occurred simultaneously. Only a handful of the councils were involved with the riots. Furthermore, it was not their aim to be party to these social explosions (although they tried to make use of them). The SDP and other radial groups described the Harskamp mutiny as a revolutionary event. Without doubt, the SDP made this claim for purely propagandistic reasons, although they dearly would have wished for much more. It did not describe the real situation in the Harskamp.

The sailor’s navy unions were not involved in the riots and did not support them. As far as is known, there were no councils in existence on navy vessels although there were certainly radical sailors. The situation seemed revolutionary only in the Dutch Indies. So much so, the colonial authorities found it difficult to maintain order in the army and the navy. The situation was very serious for the Dutch ruling class. The army and navy were very important in maintaining order in the colonies. To make matters worse for the authorities, the moderate social democratic leadership of the union lost its influence amongst the rank and file in that region. But only the Dutch soldiers and sailors were involved. The native population was hardly integrated in the revolutionary movement. So the revolutionaries did not have a ghost of a chance.

At the beginning of November, Troelstra thought that the revolution that was taking place in neighbouring Germany ‘would’ so to speak ‘not
stop at Zevenaar, a village near the Dutch-German border. But he over-estimated the degree to which soldiers and sailors wanted to make a revolution in the Netherlands, at this stage. There were soldiers that supported Troelstra's point of view at public meetings, but both they and civilians awaited instructions from the official tops of the labour movement. The call never came.

Complicating matters further were the different problems soldiers and civilians faced. Civilians had to survive on almost starvation rations. The troops yearned for leave from army life. And although during the entire mobilisation Dutch civilians had sporadically supported soldiers' resistance there were seldom any joint actions.

The leadership of the BVND read too much into the disaffection of the soldiers, who longed to go home. They stated the army was no longer a reliable tool for the Dutch ruling authorities. The growing influence of the social democrats inside the army and government concessions to the troops were taken by the BVND to mean that the revolutionaries had a powerful hold in the forces.

Troelstra hoped for a peaceful transition of government power to social democrat hands. He did not care for spontaneous actions by soldiers, sailors or workers. He feared radical movements would go too far. This was a common attitude in SDAP circles, which held a groundless fear that the revolutionaries were waiting and able to take advantage of radical actions by the armed forces. The SDAP and Troelstra feared that councils elected by soldiers could go beyond their influence. So worried were they, the party leader considered it extremely important that the leaders of the BVND, which was closely connected to the SDAP, should form a 'supreme council of workers and soldiers'. The BVND, which was always opposed to soldiers taking radical actions, assumed they had enough influence in the army to carry out Troelstra's wishes. The BVND local sections were instructed to create local soldiers' councils. They were to use these bodies to control the anger of the soldiers. Ironically, therefore, the BVND was attempting to form councils at a time when many soldiers appeared unwilling and incapable of forming these representative bodies.

The same attitude existed within the BVMMP, the sailors' union. This organisation was not under the influence of Troelstra in the same way as the BVND, however its leaders were similarly concerned whether they could keep a hold over the sailors should a social democratic government be brought to power. But the BVMMP had an important organisational advantage over its cousin in the army: the BVMMP was a permanent union for sailors, with all the power and influence means, while the BVND was only working with army conscripts. There was also an important disadvantage. The board of the BVMMP never prepared its members for a revolution.
Those organisations on the left that had always campaigned for a revolutionary situation inside the forces were now, during the radical months of October/November 1918, most down beat about the possibility of real change taking place. Consequently the ‘Red Week’ of revolutionary action found little success.

No organisation to the left of the SDAP was actually preparing for a revolution. Given the times, their activities were routine: calling demonstrations, agitating against the slaughter of the war and putting out only general and abstract propaganda for revolution. The sort of organisational measures needed to make a decisive break with the capitalist system were not in preparation. As well as this, many workers on the left still trusted the social democracy, therefore leaving the revolutionary left with minority support.

Yet the radicals found they had to do something when the SDAP took the initiative and instructed the BVND to create new soldiers’ councils. In many areas of the Netherlands mass meetings were held that included many soldiers and sailors. The revolutionary groups knew they would lose credibility if they just stood back and declared a revolutionary situation in society was not coming soon. So, around this time, the ‘Revolutionary Councils of Workers and Soldiers’ distributed 5,000 pamphlets addressing soldiers.

Also, members of the SAR (Soldiers’ and Workers’ Council) were involved in an incident on 13 November 1918, in Amsterdam, when 400 soldiers tried to force the main gates of the cavalry barracks. One SAR member drew his revolver at the soldiers guarding at the gates. He then threw a hand grenade, which, however, failed to explode.

But mass support from the soldiers for the revolutionaries failed to materialise. The government’s sudden announcement of demobilisation satisfied many immediate complaints by the soldiers.

Yet the government’s proclamation was a clear indication that the authorities at least had realised the risks in the radical months of October and November. The decision to demobilise was taken quickly and on Armistice Day, when the international situation was still far from stable. Furthermore, the government ordered the disarmament of the warships of the fleet in Den Helder, which they considered a ‘red’ force – a clear sign that the naval tops and ruling parties considered the professional sailors as unreliable.

The Dutch government’s swift actions came as a surprise to the soldiers’ and sailors’ unions leaderships. They reacted by making renewed demands for better conditions of service for the armed forces. This was as far as their aims went; they hardly thought of a possible revolution.

The reaction of the Dutch soldiers and sailors serving in the Dutch Indies was much more militant. They viewed recent events in the Netherlands and Europe as an inspiration to act and spontaneously established councils
that planned a revolt. The leaders of the revolutionary organisations however advised that this action was premature: they were operating in a region isolated from the Netherlands and the integration of the native population into the revolutionary organisations was a long way from being completed. Moreover, they argued, the number of soldiers and sailors taking part in the plans for a revolt were too small and powerless to succeed in their aims. This caution was proved correct. The colonial authorities responded to the rebellious councils by taking strong, repressive actions, including severely punishing leaders of the planned revolt.

Aftermath

There were many losers following the events of ‘Red Week’. Firstly, the government and army command. For more than four years they had stuck to a policy of complete mobilisation while the war lasted. The burning of the barracks in the Harskamp was a direct result of this unyielding position. The ruling administration and military chiefs did not do enough to end discord within the military. Only when events threatened to spiral out of their control, in October and November 1918, did they act to try to undo some of the anger and resentment within the armed forces. And the panicked decision to introduce demobilisation and to disarm the fleet meant a serious loss of face.

Secondly, the leaders of the social democrats also lost out in 1918. Their decision to instruct their allies in the armed forces to urgently establish councils, as a way of controlling the radicalised soldiers, contradicted their long held previous abstinence from organising the troops and sailors in these bodies. Following the end of the most radical phase of the months October and November, the social democrat tops looked like leaders without clarity or principles.

Lastly, the radical left, which for years had agitated for a revolution, and in 1918 had real life examples in Russia and neighbouring Germany, were found too weak and unprepared to take full advantage of the explosive events in the Netherlands.

The October/November events led to strong calls for the army to be modernised. There was a crisis in the government and the army, following the sacking of the Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy, General C.J. Snijders, just before the ‘Red Week’. The underlying reason for this action was the difficult relationship between the politicians and the general during the mobilisation. The Commander-in-Chief had big doubts about the army being able to successfully defend the Netherlands. He believed
that if the country were going to be involved in the war, it would be best to fight on the German side. Given the government’s stated neutrality this opinion of the Commander-in-Chief was abhorrent to the politicians.

General C.J. Snijders was held responsible for all that was problematic in the military and during mobilisation. Many politicians now called for a more democratic army that would pay closer attention to soldiers and give them more of a say at barracks level. Once having dealt with the Commander-in-Chief, the government created committees for soldiers where complaints could be made to their superiors. At a national level soldiers’ unions could now present their grievances to the military high command.

The government and army command intended these concessions as a way to curtail the power of the soldiers’ organisations. The unions would now be partly responsible, along with the military authorities and the government, for the management of the troops. The councils, the authorities envisaged, would become incorporated into the system. To cement this policy further the soldiers’ organisations were carefully monitored by the new intelligence service, which was created soon after the events of November 1918. So, despite the claims, these were hardly steps towards democratisation.

There were also many sections in the military and government that wanted to undermine any moves towards modernisation. These powerful forces succeeded in preventing any changes to the style of military discipline. But this was not only down to the obstacles put by these conservative forces. It also reflected the pacifist trends in society following the horrors of the war. For these people changes in the running of the Dutch army were not a priority. People with pro-pacifist leanings questioned the very existence of the army and were mainly concerned at preventing another European bloodbath.

The SDAP was isolated nationally after the Red Week. However, the BvND, which had publicly linked itself to the SDAP leader, Troelstra, continued to exist after the demobilisation. The organisation even went on to perform an important role at a local level in relation to the demobilised. The authorities tolerated the BvND’s activities. As far as the military hierarchy was concerned, the BvND had acted in quite a reasonable manner during the mobilisation. It was better for them if moderates looked after the soldiers’ interests.

The BvND found another new important task for itself: looking after the interests of demobilised troops. These soldiers often found themselves unemployed when they returned to civilian life. The official unemployment relief organisations carried out their tasks poorly. The BvND took part in relief and demobilisation committees that involved distributing welfare benefits. This activity allowed the union to grow as never before.
This left the SDAP in an awkward dilemma. On the one hand, the leadership wanted to end the party’s association with the BVND once demobilisation was completed. This had always been the party’s attitude. Given that the BVND only organised conscripts, the SDAP leaders would no longer have to be linked to soldiers’ unions inside the military.

On the other hand, many SDAP members were fresh out of the armed forces and faced unemployment. These members needed aid and the party risked alienating itself from its base of support if it was to be seen to do nothing to help the jobless ex-soldiers. The situation facing the SDAP was further complicated by the interest shown towards the demobilised by its competitors, especially from the left revolutionaries and from Catholic organisations. However the SDAP weighed up the pros and cons and decided, after a short time, to get rid of the BVND, despite the meagre results of union’s work for the demobilised. The SDAP did not have to agonise in the same manner over its relationship with the BVMMP: its links with the professional sailors’ union was and remained informal.

Following the demobilisation, the revolutionaries made efforts to pay attention to the views of soldiers – which was a turn around from their previous lack of concern for the situation facing troops. Quite possibly the revolutionary left had learnt that the promotion of a revolution alone does not lead to the desired mass membership of their organisations.

Following demobilisation the radicals adopted a two-track policy. First, they vigorously tried to form soldiers’ councils and to discuss in detail what these bodies should do. They attempted to create ‘red guards’ for defence against right wing paramilitary groups, such as the ‘Citizens’ Militia’.

Second, they paid attention to the material interests of the demobilised. This was quite new. The radicals had not really done this before. The Left therefore established two soldiers’ and sailors’ organisations: The Bond van Gedemobiliseerden (BVG – the Union of the Demobilised) was established to look after the interests of soldiers, while, for a short time, there was also an organisation for the regular navy personnel, the Onafhankelijke Organisatie van Marinepersoneel (Independent Organisation of Navy Personnel).

The revolutionaries hoped that these organisations would improve their preparations in case a new radical movement of troops and sailors occurred. But things did not go that far again. The soldiers’ councils, the ‘Red Guards’ and the BVG all remained relatively small and only existed for a short time. The influence of the revolutionaries and the radical sailors in the Dutch Indies also faded. Government reforms and the exiling of revolutionary leaders, which disorientated the revolutionary groups, were two of the main causes for this fall in fortunes.
Although the events of October-November 1918 did not lead to a revolution in the Netherlands, as Troelstra had claimed was on the cards, they had long lasting results. Legislation enabling universal suffrage and the eight-hour working day was introduced by parliament. Workers were able to win many rights.

But a socialist society was not realised because of the situation in Dutch society. The revolutionary left ridiculed Troelstra's wild assertions that a revolution was impending in 1918, and indeed their perspectives were correct. Nevertheless, the Netherlands had indeed been very close to big social explosions. By the end of October, for example, it was still possible the country could have been drawn into the war by provocative actions of the retreating German army. And there was also domestic unrest. It is probably the case that the Dutch soldiers were not prepared, or capable, of putting down a large-scale revolt of the working class.

Conclusion

This brings us to the following paradoxical conclusion: by stubbornly sticking to a policy of complete mobilisation the authorities were actually undermining the strength of the Dutch armed forces. The army would not have been able to defend the country against invasion. As a result of little hope of winning leave demoralisation affected the troops. If partial demobilisation had been introduced it could have given hope to the soldiers and raised moral, leading to a better-motivated and reliable army. But the government refused to consider these reforms. This ended in disaster for them. The policy of mobilisation ended with the soldiers' revolt at the Harskamp.

The left in the Netherlands was unwilling and unable to take advantage of this radical situation. Leaving aside the subjective weaknesses of the revolutionaries, this had a lot to do with the different circumstances faced by civilians and soldiers. Civilians were hungry while the soldiers were given better rations. The soldiers complained about getting no leave but this was a problem that was little understood or sympathised with in society in general. Therefore to forge a joint struggle of civilians and troops for improvements in their lives and conditions was not easy.

The revolutionary left also had to contend with the fact that the majority of the left, including the SDAP, supported the mobilisation, as did the soldiers' and sailors' organisations, which the social democrats influenced.

During the stormy months of October and November there was no preparation for revolution by Troelstra and the social democrats (or the
peaceful transfer of power to the social democrats, as Troelstra wanted it). Neither did the soldiers' union have mass support and influence.

The minority revolutionary socialists fought the main body of the labour movement with what many considered purist points of view to distinguish themselves. Their ideas failed to correspond with the outlook of the general public. This meant the revolutionary socialists failed to win many SDAP members to their cause and their influence in the military remained too weak to allow them to exploit the situation.

Troelstra was not only mistaken about the relationship between the social democrats and society. He also overestimated the power and influence of the social democrats inside the military. Only a few soldiers were prepared to follow his calls. Due to this lack of political influence, the decline in the fighting power of the army and the general disillusionment of the ranks of the armed forces, the upheavals of 1918 were never channelled into a serious threat to the Dutch State and the establishment.