

I. Heading into war

The Netherlands was a peaceful place to be in the 1930s. The country shared a 300-kilometre border with Germany in the east and had open access to the North Sea in the north and the west. The Netherlands had been neutral during the Great War (1914–1918) and many people thought that the country lived on an island of peace, even though in the east a dictator had come into power and was expanding his armies.

In retrospect we can clearly see what Adolf Hitler's intentions were, but at the time most of the Dutch population did not want to believe that the Netherlands was no more than a stepping stone for Hitler on his way to Great Britain and France.

Just as in Germany the economic crisis had been a cultural medium in which to grow anti-democratic sentiment, so did such attitudes develop in the Netherlands, in a more moderate way. Even in the small village of Laren, not far from the German border, propagandists were busy trying to convince the local population.

Hendrik Jan Koeslag and his wife, Dina, led a life of faith in the village, totally unaware of the events that would change their lives forever.

A propagandist in Laren, May 1934

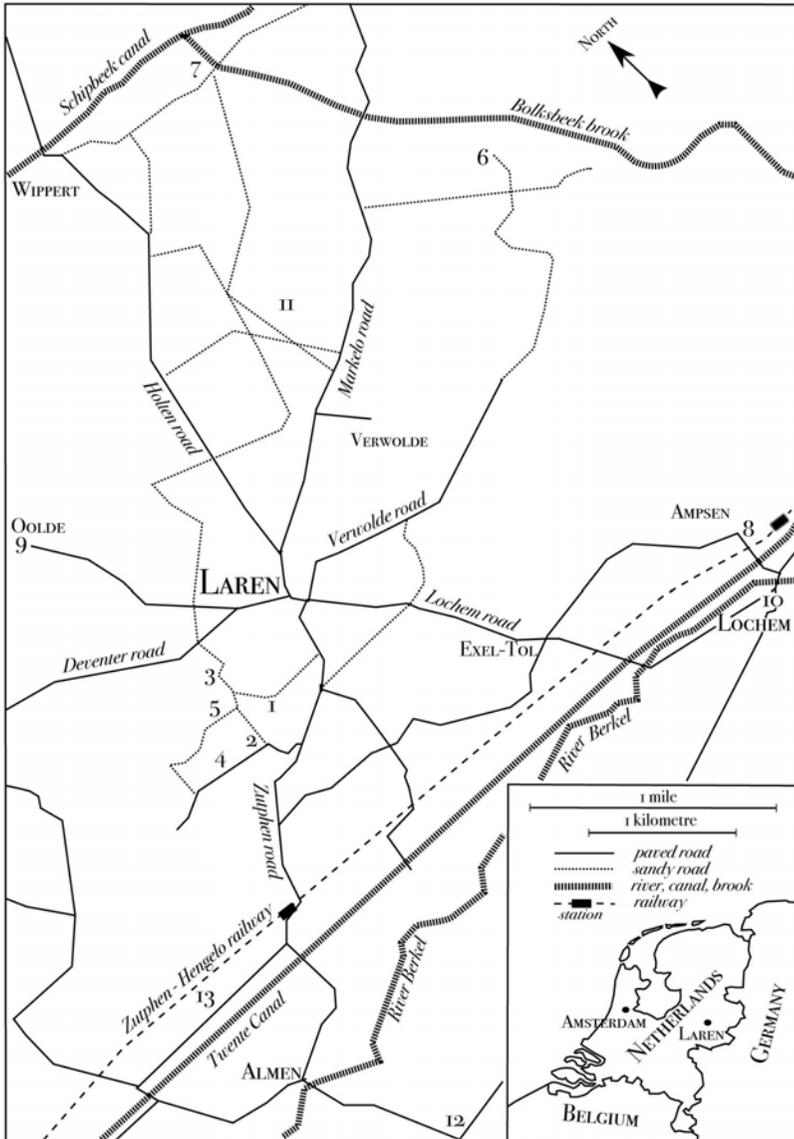
Although war seemed a long way off in the spring of 1934, the spectre of Adolf Hitler's national socialism was already haunting Europe.

The emergence of the Nazi party in Germany was followed by a rise in national socialist movements elsewhere in Europe, including the Netherlands. Somewhat complacent and reasonably prosperous, the Dutch had been neutral during the Great War. An important trading partner for its eastern neighbour, thanks to its unique location and large sea port at Rotterdam, the Netherlands in fact had strong ties with Germany. The Dutch head of state, Queen Wilhelmina, was married to the German Prince Hendrik, and their only daughter, Crown Princess Juliana, had her eye on a German man: Prince Bernhard zur Lippe-Biesterfeld.

The Dutch National Socialist Party, the NSB, wasn't very influential at this point. The party held only four of the hundred seats in the national parliament. In some towns, however—especially out in the countryside—the National Socialists were gaining support.

One of the many NSB propagandists sent to capture the sentiments of the rural population was Hendrikus Theodorus Roelofsen from Rotterdam. In 1934 he travelled through the Achterhoek, a rural region in the east. Roelofsen was known for his blatant and often flimsily founded criticism of the government, the large slaughterhouses, and the traditional agricultural organisations. He protested against the *Landbouwcrisiswet* (emergency legislation passed in 1933 to control declining agricultural goods prices) that limited the number of animals each farmer was allowed to raise. Roelofsen had the support of the head of the NSB, Anton Mussert, who put him on the movement's payroll. Roelofsen spoke to capacity crowds in the small villages near the German border in the eastern province of Gelderland. In early May of 1934, he spoke in Laren, a village of about 500 inhabitants.

On Tuesday, May 8 at 8 p.m., the local pub called Stegeman was



Laren at the time of the Second World War: 1. Schorfhaar, home of Hendrik Jan and Dina Koeslag; 2. Old Koeslag, home of Albert Koeslag; 3. New Koeslag, home of Hendrik Koeslag; 4. Dennekamp, home of Jan Koeslag; 5. Dijkman farm; 6. Schouten farm; 7. Buisweerd, home of Jan Kolkman; 8. Laren Town Hall; 9. Residence of the mayor; 10. Landwacht Headquarters; 11. Pilots' Lair; 12. Canadian forces' concentration area; 13. Bridge-head over Twente Canal. Map by Jan Braakman.

getting crowded. A 25-cent entrance fee was charged to cover costs, but—as the announcement made clear—the debate was free. Advertisements for the meeting had graced the pages of the newspaper *Lochemse Courant* several times that week. Roelofsen was to talk about the various laws passed by the government to deal with the economic crisis: “So, farmers and shopkeepers, come one and all.” These groups were well represented that evening: local farmers and shopkeepers showed up, joined by more from the surrounding towns of Lochem, Zelhem and Zutphen.

Roelofsen, like a number of others present, sported on his lapel proof of his NSB membership: a black-and-red triangular pin with the initials of the party in the corners and, in the centre, the red, white and blue Dutch flag bearing a lion. As the room filled with the smoke of cigars and cigarettes, the speaker raved about atrocities at county slaughterhouse inspections, in the export of pigs, within the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, and at the Jewish-owned Zwanenberg company to the south, in Oss. He aimed most of his attacks at the *Varkenscentrale* (the Pork Board), established to soften the economic crisis for pig farmers. The *centrale* had taken over a number of bacon factories, which meant that the government took on the companies’ losses. By buying up pigs, the *Varkenscentrale* established a minimum market price. Roelofsen claimed that the pigs bought were then being processed by large slaughterhouses, putting the *Varkenscentrale* in direct competition with the pork farmers. He accused this agricultural organisation of frustrating exports to England:

It should be possible to export 50,000 pigs to England, but the quotas they’re applying will mean economic suicide. We’re seeing a surplus of pigs and it’s causing an enormous drop in prices.

Roelofsen was sure that the *Varkenscrisiswet* (emergency pork act) protected the interests of bacon producers alone. “When this law was passed, those gentlemen celebrated with champagne,” he claimed, furiously adding, “In a hundred years, the history books will reveal the bacon contract as a swindling contract, and it is the directors of your own agricultural organisations who are keeping those swindling schemes going.”

The man from Rotterdam moved on to criticize the export of pigs to Italy. Fifteen hundred heavy sows, already slaughtered, had been sent

across the border to southern Europe, losing the *Varkenscentrale* 40,000 guilders—even though the slaughterers only got 9,000 guilders. In order to restore calm, they were planning to take 300,000 piglets off the market. “Three hundred thousand piglets! That’s a hundred thousand more piglets than last year’s quota, so the *Varkenscentrale* has increased, not limited, the pig surplus,” was Roelofsen’s simple line of reasoning. “Everywhere you turn, you see corruption, swindling and robbery.”

It was the end of the evening before Roelofsen put forth a solution for the corruption: more general acceptance of the ideas of the NSB. Then he added what he called his motto: “Whatever I do, I do honestly.” Roelofsen’s speech was overwhelming and convincing. A few listeners posed questions, and the NSB man promised to advise and help anyone with trouble caused by the economic crisis laws.

As the audience left the hall, they were surprised to find two members of the Laren police force checking them for forbidden insignia. Wearing the NSB pin was illegal according to article 435a of the penal code:

Any person appearing in public in articles of clothing or blatant decorations expressing a specific political endeavour shall be punished by imprisonment for a maximum of twelve days or by payment of a second-category fine.

The police officers wrote up an official report on ten people present, including one Hendrikus Theodorus Roelofsen, described as a propagandist from Rotterdam. All NSB pins were seized.

Roelofsen had been in trouble with the strong arm of the law before. A week after his speaking engagement in Laren, he was on trial in his native Rotterdam for having insulted the director of the slaughterhouse in Wageningen earlier that year. “Everything this man has said and continues to say about the *Varkenscentrale* is a lie,” asserted the public prosecutor. “Roelofsen makes a profession of saying such things. He is a danger to society.” The continued name-calling directed at politicians and others led the Rotterdam court to sentence Roelofsen to two months in jail.

The opinion of the Rotterdam prosecutor contrasted starkly with that of Roelofsen’s supporters in farming regions. There, the propagandist was seen as someone who dared to take up arms against the ruling class, someone who felt farmers deserved a better future. Though the

NSB and Roelofsen would later part company because Mussert would come to think that the propagandist did his movement more harm than good, a large group—in Laren and elsewhere—first came to stand firmly behind Roelofsen and the National Socialist Party he promoted.

Voting behaviour in Laren during the thirties showed a shifting pattern. Although most villagers were members of either the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* or the *Gereformeerde Kerk*, their religion did not dictate their political convictions, as has traditionally been the case in the Netherlands. In the 1933 parliamentary elections, thirty-one percent of the Laren vote put the Dutch Farmers, Horticulturists and Shopkeepers Party in the lead. Two years later this party's popularity had dwindled; its voters were divided among the two liberal parties and the newly founded NSB, for which the propagandist Roelofsen had been such an enthusiastic advocate at the Stegeman pub. In the 1935 provincial election, Anton Mussert's NSB party captured more than fifteen percent of the Laren vote: almost double the eight percent it got nationally. Most NSB support came from the area bordering on the town of Lochem which, though it formed a separate municipality, was wedged in between the northern and southern parts of the municipality of Laren. Eighteen percent of Lochem's vote, even more than in Laren, went to the NSB. These two municipalities were among the six in the province of Gelderland to vote at least fifteen percent National Socialist. The political divide appeared to be Laren's northern boundary, along two streams, the Schipbeek and the Bolksbeek. By contrast, in the municipalities of Holten and Markelo—in the province of Overijssel—there was less than ten percent support for the NSB. (That striking difference would show up later as well, during the German occupation. There, in the Overijssel districts north of Laren, the Resistance emerged earlier and better structured.) By the time of the 1937 national parliament elections, Laren's support for Mussert's NSB had already diminished to less than seven percent.

Later, sociologists would study the factors that made the NSB remarkably popular in rural communities such as Laren. The focus of Mussert's party on blue-collar workers achieved prominence for the NSB primarily in urban areas—the opposite of the empty landscape of agrarian Laren. It seemed that, in the thirties, a sizeable group of Laren voters had been searching for a new, safe haven. They then reached out, very possibly persuaded by Roelofsen's impassioned arguments, to grab

the lifeline thrown them by Mussert's movement. A large portion of Laren's voters was drifting from one party to another. In that pond of floating voters, the NSB successfully cast its nets.

The scene is set, 1918–1939

Perhaps how Laren voted was also a consequence of economic developments: the Great Depression had arrived, as it had in villages the world over.

Although the years immediately following the First World War had brought some improvement in the economy, that had changed after the 1929 US stock market crash. Unemployment rose sharply in the Netherlands at the start of the 1930s; farmland prices dropped by thirty percent and industrial production collapsed. In 1935, half a million of the eight million Dutch were out of work.

Dutch society was shaped along the lines of affiliations, religious and otherwise, which divided the population. The Dutch have a special word for this phenomenon: *verzuiling*, which translates as “pillarisation.” Although members of the various groups did live together on the same street and in the same village, each group formed its own political and social—and, to a lesser degree, economic—community. Catholics bought bread from Catholic bakers; farmers belonging to the *Gereformeerde Kerk* were members of the *Gereformeerde* Anti-Revolutionary Party; Liberal businessmen sent their children to public schools; and labourers, most of whom belonged to the socialist “pillar,” were members of the *Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij*. Every echelon of the population had its own newspaper, schools, unions, employers' associations and political party. The dividing lines were so sharp that it was obvious who belonged to which “pillar.”

In Laren, the pillarisation was mainly evident in the choice of which church to attend. In the village stood the *Nederlands Hervormde Kerk* building. Those of another faith—Catholic, *Gereformeerde* or Jewish—worshipped in nearby Lochem, each in their own place and in their own building. Most of the residents of Laren were *Nederlands Hervormd*. Some of them were not particularly devout; these were often liberal conservatives, many of whom were well educated and belonged to the middle or upper class. Only a few—mostly manual labourers and farm hands—were attracted to the socialist pillar.