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**FROM MILD PRESSURE TO BRUTE FORCE.
FORCED, COERCED, AND VOLUNTARY LABOUR OF
DUTCH CITIZENS FOR THE THIRD REICH, 1937–1945**

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Introduction

In Dutch popular memory, the forced labour of Dutch men in Nazi Germany stands out as one of the major German misdeeds of the occupation years. The infamous “*Razzias*”, massive round-ups of men by the Wehrmacht at the end of the war, are among the most commonly remembered and commemorated episodes of the occupation years. The same is true for the reverse phenomenon; the tens of thousands of young men who went into hiding to escape forced labour also play a large role in popular memory. The scale of German campaigns to force Dutch men to work in Germany explains why the impression on the Dutch was as great as it was. At least 400,000 men were coerced to work in Germany, sometimes under dismal circumstances, out of a population of some ten million. It is not, however, the whole story.

Seasonal and permanent labour between the Netherlands and Germany had been common for centuries. During the crisis of the 1930s the Dutch government started to actively pressurize unemployed men to accept jobs in Germany, mostly by withholding benefits and placements in relief works for those who refused to go. For much of the occupation period, these practices continued, albeit on a much larger scale. Forced labour after mass arrests was typical only for the final two years of the occupation period, but the level of coercion gradually increased.

In retrospect, German efforts to recruit labourers in the Netherlands forcibly were an economic fiasco. Although hundreds of thousands worked across the border, especially in the Rhineland, a greater number of (young) men went into hiding or clung to inefficient or unnecessary jobs. The loss of productivity in the Dutch economy, and the consequently lowered contribution it made to Germany and its war effort, in all likelihood far outweighed the benefits to the German economy of the relatively small numbers added to its industrial workforce.

Before the occupation: sending the unemployed to Germany

The Netherlands in the first half of the twentieth century can be characterized as a small, open economy, highly dependent on international trade, and with a comparatively low level of industrialization. The openness of the Dutch economy not only resulted in the movement of goods and capital, but also to the easy movement of people across both the southern and eastern border. Labour migration, often but not always seasonal, was a common feature of the Dutch economy for centuries, usually from east to west.¹

After the industrialization of the *Ruhrgebiet*, the direction of labour migration reversed; far more Dutch workers went to Germany than the other way around. Before the First World War, well over 100,000 Dutch workers were employed in Germany annually. Certainly in the border

¹ Jan Lucassen, *Naar de kusten van de Noordzee: trekarbeid in Europees perspectief: 1600–1900*, Gouda 1984.

areas, cross-border labour was normal and often crucial to local economies. Only during the brief period between the end of the First World War and the early 1930s did greater numbers of German workers travel to the Netherlands than in the opposite direction. German hyperinflation, which made wages paid in Dutch guilders particularly attractive to German workers, was in all likelihood the main reason.²

This brief period was, however, highly untypical. Throughout the early twentieth century the Dutch labour force was characterized by low wages, exceptionally high productivity, and the almost complete absence of industrial action. The comparatively low average age of workers contributed to these circumstances. The plentiful supply of young, recently trained workers accounted for the high competitiveness of the Dutch economy, which it achieved in spite of relatively low levels of mechanisation. During the crisis years, real wages increased slightly, but not nearly enough to bring them on par with the surrounding countries. For many Dutch workers, working in Germany was simply more lucrative than working at home.³

The Great Depression affected the Dutch economy strongly in the period from 1929 to 1936. The stubborn refusal of the Dutch government to follow the example of other countries and devalue the guilder left the Netherlands' economy woefully uncompetitive until The Hague finally relented in 1936. Unemployment was high, compared to other European countries, a problem that was aggravated by the fact that the Netherlands had experienced rapid population growth in the previous decades. As employment opportunities plummeted, the labour force expanded rapidly as more people reached working age. Through relief works and unemployment benefits, the worst consequences were mitigated somewhat, but unemployment remained a serious social problem for a relatively long period.⁴

The global economic crisis led both the Dutch and the German governments to introduce restrictions on foreign workers, which caused the numbers of Dutch workers employed across the border to drop significantly. It is not clear, however, exactly how significant the decline was, not least because of the irregular, undocumented nature of migration and cross-border labour in the border regions. In any case, the period of restricted labour migration proved brief in practice and free movement of labourers continued mostly unabated.⁵

² Angela van Son, *Between tradition and coercion: Dutch workers in Germany and Belgium, 1936–1945*, in: Bernhard Chiari (ed.), *Forced labourers and POWs in the German war economy = Lavoratori coatti e prigionieri di guerra tedesca*, Bologna 2002, p. 488-498.

³ Jan Luiten van Zanden, Ed Lof, *Een klein land in de 20e eeuw: economische geschiedenis van Nederland 1914–1995*, Utrecht 1997, p. 106-110.

⁴ Jan-Willem Drukker, *Waarom de crisis hier langer duurde: over de Nederlandse economische ontwikkeling in de jaren dertig*, Groningen 1990.

⁵ Son (note 2), p. 489-494.

In the light of the severity of unemployment in the Netherlands, and the sense of urgency this caused among the Dutch civil service, it is unsurprising that the rise of a new economic order in the east sparked an exceptional interest. Nazi Germany was considered by several leading bureaucrats to offer an example of an effective labour market policy. Many more at least saw rising demand for labour in Germany as an opportunity to offload some of the burden of mass unemployment in the Netherlands. Authoritarian policies to alleviate unemployment were normal, and the authoritarian nature of the Nazi government was apparently not considered particularly problematic. Dutch unemployed were to be made to accept work in Germany, whether they liked it or not.⁶

In December 1936, the Ministry of Social Affairs decided that unemployment benefits could be withheld from people who had refused an offer for work in Germany. They were also to be barred from placement in public relief works. Ben Sijes, among others, has shown that the effectiveness of this type of coercion depended strongly on the local willingness to enforce the policy. In practice, this meant that in the southern provinces Zeeland, Brabant, and Limburg coercion was strong, whereas it was weak or absent elsewhere. Why these specific provinces show a divergent pattern is unclear.⁷

Although the Dutch economy expanded from 1936 onwards, unemployment remained high, as did cross-border labour migration. Up to this time, labour migration had taken place without any explicit government support and in many cases even illicitly. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, both the Dutch government and various German authorities, often collaboratively, actively supported and at times tried to enforce labour migration into the Reich.⁸

The early occupation years

When the Netherlands mobilized in 1939, primarily because of the perceived risk of a German invasion, efforts to make unemployed men travel to Germany quietly ceased. Mass mobilization in any case mitigated the problem of unemployment considerably.⁹ I have not been able to establish to what extent mobilization in the Netherlands caused migrant Dutch workers already in Germany to return home, or whether Dutch authorities either in the Netherlands or Germany in any way attempted to bring about their return.

The invasion and occupation of the Netherlands took place swiftly. On 15 May 1940, five days after the invasion had begun, the Netherlands surrendered. On 18 May Arthur Seyß-Inquart

⁶ Ben A. Sijes, *De arbeidsinzet: de gedwongen arbeid van Nederlanders in Duitsland 1940–1945*, The Hague 1990.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁸ Son (note 2), p. 497.

⁹ Son (note 2); Sijes (note 6), p. 664.

was appointed *Reichskommissar* for the Netherlands. After brief negotiations with Seyß-Inquart, and in accordance with the pre-invasion instructions of the now exiled Dutch government, the civil service by and large continued to function as normal. The heads of departments of the pre-war ministries, known as Secretaries General, became the main indigenous political authorities.¹⁰

With a new political structure in place, labour migration as a policy to alleviate Dutch unemployment continued as it had before. Labour migration was still seen by both Dutch and German authorities as an effective, and cost-effective, way of relieving the high unemployment that continued to affect the Dutch economy. Still, work across the eastern border was not necessarily or even predominantly coerced. There remained, throughout the period at hand, a steady campaign to entice workers to take up work in Germany voluntarily, which was not entirely without success. It is noteworthy that there was no significant public or political resistance to labour migration to Germany in the period May 1940 up to late 1941, even if this migration was to a considerable extent coerced. Only the Communist party and some others on the radical left were outspoken in their opposition.¹¹

Another consequence of the establishment of a stable occupation regime was the almost immediate release of Dutch POWs, who were consequently demobilized. This was the initial reason, or perhaps rather the initial pretext, to introduce a new type of labour service, the *Opbouwdienst*, more or less analogous to the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* in Germany. The primary task of the *Opbouwdienst* was to employ the thousands of demobilized troops from the Dutch armed forces. About 1,000 commissioned officers, 1,500 non-commissioned officers, 800 reserve officers, and about 900 other career soldiers voluntarily joined and came to fill cadre functions. 60,000 conscript soldiers were gradually demobilized and forced to join the *Opbouwdienst*, although in practice many never did. J. N. Breunese, a Dutch officer with connections to the Dutch national-socialist movement, headed the organization, but ostentatiously strove to keep it nonpartisan. The work ethic of the former soldiers in the *Opbouwdienst* was reportedly abysmal. The work they were supposed to do, often in land reclamation, was neither pleasant nor particularly useful to either the Dutch or German economy.¹²

Early in 1941, the *Opbouwdienst* was discontinued and replaced with the *Arbeitsdienst*. Initially, the programme continued on a similar footing, though on a considerably smaller scale. Like its predecessor, the *Arbeitsdienst* was expected to provide organized labour for young people, either for the “public good” of the Netherlands, or for the Reich, to take place within the occupied

¹⁰ Louis de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* [wetenschappelijke editie], Leiden 1991, book 4, part 1, p. 127-141.

¹¹ A. J. H. Bauer, *De openbare arbeidsbemiddeling gedurende den bezettingstijd (1940–1945)*, Leiden 1948.

¹² Netherlands Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide studies (NIOD), 249-0530 – Dossier Nederlandse Opbouwdienst.

Netherlands. The Secretaries General were not as such opposed to the introduction of the *Arbeidsdienst*, nor to the mandatory nature of the organization. Indeed, they drafted legislation for the establishment of the organization and for the conscription of young citizens (18 to 24) to serve in it. Nevertheless, their effort was dismissed by German commissar Seyß-Inquart, because the draft lacked any ethnic criteria for enrolment. Since the Secretaries General refused to cooperate with legislation that discriminated against people of Jewish descent, legislation was eventually introduced without their involvement by an executive order of Seyß-Inquart on 23 May 1941. Jews were excluded from the *Arbeidsdienst*.¹³

Although the *Arbeidsdienst* was conceived as a mandatory labour system, based on conscription, up to April 1942 enrolment was voluntary only. It had been stipulated early on, that even in the case of mandatory work in the *Arbeidsdienst*, women were to remain exempt. They were welcome to join, as thousands of young women of national-socialist persuasion indeed did, but conscripting women into a mandatory labour service was clearly considered beyond the pale by both the Dutch and the German authorities in the Netherlands.¹⁴

This aversion to forcing women to work remained throughout the occupation years. That said, rumours did circulate at the end of the occupation that the German authorities were planning to introduce mandatory labour service for young women, but even if true these plans never materialized.¹⁵ The *Arbeidsdienst* was open to female volunteers between 18 and 25 (the same age group as for men), and forcible conscription of women was legally possible as of 23 May 1941. However, in stark contrast to the practices relating to the European peoples considered racially inferior to Germans, forcing Dutch women into work, let alone work typically associated with male workers, was clearly considered inappropriate.¹⁶

At the other end of the Nazi racial spectrum, Jewish citizens remained excluded from all voluntary and forced labour within the *Arbeidsdienst*, as well as all other organizations discussed here. That is not to say that Jewish civilians were never made to work, indeed the opposite is true; but their forced labour mostly took place in concentration camps far outside the Netherlands, and in the final years of the occupation period in the concentration camp in Vught.¹⁷ Forced labour in concentration camps, however, falls outside the scope of this paper. Other than the exclusion of

¹³ Jong (note 10), book 5, part 1, p. 124.

¹⁴ www.gaberna.nl/sites/default/files/bijlagen/oorlogsgids-vraag10.pdf. NIOD, 099 (Nederlandsche Arbeidsdienst), inv. No. 459. Nationaal Archief, Ministerie van Algemene Zaken: Regestenlijst van de Notulen en Vergaderstukken van het College van Secretarissen Generaal over de periode 17 mei 1940 tot en met 16 september 1943, inv. no. 62, specifically 128-04-1941.

¹⁵ Utrechts Archief, Collectie Utrechts Verzet, inv. No. 58, 63.

¹⁶ www.gaberna.nl/sites/default/files/bijlagen/oorlogsgids-vraag10.pdf.

¹⁷ Marieke Meeuwenoord, *Het hele leven is hier een wereld op zichzelf: de geschiedenis van kamp Vught*, Amsterdam 2014.

people designated as Jews, no ethnic distinctions appear to have been made with regard to either forced or voluntary labourers in and from the Netherlands.

Mandatory labour

From 1 April 1942, the *Arbeidsdienst* became mandatory for males between the ages of 18 and 24 who were either unemployed, (aspiring) students in tertiary education, or employed in government or education. Many, if not most, either refused or failed to show up. A series of measures over the course of the year, all aimed at improving registration and effectively punishing no-shows, eventually managed to increase the numbers of *arbeidsmannen* to reach several thousands, but after September 1944, when the south of the country was liberated, the *Arbeidsdienst* quickly crumbled. In total, the number of people who actually fulfilled the mandatory six months in the *Arbeidsdienst* never exceeded a few thousand. In its labour camps, a half-hearted attempt was made at political indoctrination, but without much zeal or much effect. The work, usually undertaken outdoors under the auspices of the Dutch company Heidemaatschappij, was generally considered unsatisfactory, according to all those involved in organizing it, not least because of the low motivation of workers.¹⁸

Both mandatory and voluntary labour for the New Order, insofar as it was undertaken inside the occupied Netherlands, remained unimpressive in terms of its scale and the performance of the workers deployed. That said, Dutch companies, and their workers, did make a very significant contribution to the German economy and war effort. These workers were not as such coerced, although the threat of being forced to accept work in Germany in case of unemployment did create new pressures on workers to stay in their jobs, binding them to the workplace in ways that would not have been possible before the war.¹⁹

Aside from deploying workers inside the Netherlands, efforts to stimulate labour migration to Germany were stepped up as soon as the occupation was a fact. Until March 1942, work in Germany was not strictly compulsory, although benefits were withheld from unemployed men who refused jobs in Germany and there is at least anecdotal evidence of coercion and threats of coercion. More importantly, Dutch workers were inundated with propaganda seeking to persuade them to take on jobs in Germany. This propaganda claimed wages in Germany were higher and labour conditions generally similar or better. Thousands went.²⁰

¹⁸ NIOD, 099 (Nederlandsche Arbeidsdienst), inv. No. 357. NIOD, 216j, Departement van Sociale Zaken, inv. no. 175.

¹⁹ Hein A.M. Klemann, *Nederland 1938–1948: economie en samenleving in jaren van oorlog en bezetting*, Amsterdam 2002, p. 431-435.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; Son (note 2).

Already in November 1940, however, it transpired that many Dutch workers in Germany felt cheated into work that was either more unpleasant, or less well compensated (or, indeed, both), than they had been promised. This led to the introduction of the *Anwerbebestätigung*, a signed and countersigned document outlining the type of work and the remuneration in detail.²¹ Together with the enlargement of the nationwide network of employment offices this marked a formalization and professionalization of the infrastructure to facilitate and streamline labour migration to Germany.

In the immediate aftermath of the invasion and occupation of the Netherlands, existing policies to stimulate labour migration were extended and intensified. From 1941 onwards, the exploitation of the Dutch economy was stepped up, and efforts were increasingly made to coerce men already in employment domestically to work in Germany. At this point, both the remaining Dutch bureaucracy in the country and the German civilian government, including Arthur Seyß-Inquart, protested against, and in some cases actively sabotaged, efforts to recruit workers.²²

From March 1942, rivalries between German authorities in the Netherlands and those in Germany ended in the de facto defeat of the former. The ascension of Fritz Sauckel led to the introduction in the Netherlands of mandatory labour service in Germany (*Arbeitseinsatz*) and from April 1942 onwards the so-called *Holland-Aktion 1* and *2* began the large-scale forced recruitment of workers. Still, the administration was weak and many people managed to stay out of reach of the *Reichsarbeitsministerium*. It proved difficult to check if the many workers who had been registered as ‘indispensable’ by their employers really could not be missed in their normal place of employment. While many thus escaped the *Reichseinsatz*, the number of workers employed in Germany peaked in 1942 when in total about 162,800 men worked in Germany at least part of the year. It has been suggested that the majority of these workers were either voluntary, or not altogether involuntary, workers.²³

This changed in 1943. Work in Germany became markedly less attractive because of heavy Allied bombardments on German industrial areas. While Dutch willingness to work in Germany plummeted, recruitment and coercion were intensified. From May 1943, the so-called *Jaarklassenactie* was started, requiring a quota of (young) male workers to be recruited from specific birth cohorts. This did succeed to the extent that over 100,000 workers left for Germany, but it also led to thousands of young men leaving their jobs and going into hiding in the countryside. Recruitment did not again reach the numbers achieved in 1942, in spite of much stronger coercion. In 1944, the number of workers recruited in the course of the entire year dwindled to a mere

²¹ NIOD, Generalkommissariat für Finanz und Wirtschaft, inv. no. 1199.

²² Sijes (note 6), p. 264-279.

²³ Son (note 2).

20,000, most of them forcibly arrested and deported to work in Germany. When these raids were intensified by the end of 1944, and especially in early 1945, many more men were transported to (especially) the *Ruhrgebiet*, most of whom returned of their own accord (and unregistered) during and after the demise of the Reich.²⁴

The end of the Reich

There was a clear relationship between the fate of Nazi Germany and the willingness of Dutch men to work in or for Germany. Active non-cooperation with the *Arbeitseinsatz* rose sharply as information about German military setbacks and defeats reached the Netherlands in the course of 1943. Fear of bombardment and other military actions against German industry clearly played a role, but the expectation that German defeat was imminent would likewise have limited enthusiasm for factory work in the *Ruhrgebiet* as well. As the social and economic order began to fall apart, many workers travelled back to the Netherlands of their own accord. There are no surviving administrative records, either German or Dutch, that would enable an estimate of their numbers.

Inside the Netherlands, forced labour was stepped up in the final months of the war. By the end of the occupation, specifically in the period between the liberation of the southern Netherlands (September 1944) and of the rest of the country (April to May 1945), the Wehrmacht frequently used ad hoc recruitment of civilians for a variety of jobs, but mostly for the erection of defensive structures. Civilian prisoners, for example, were removed from prisons and jails to build defensive structures at Hedel in the summer of 1944.²⁵ This type of forced labour, which was organized without the interference of recruitment officers, usually at the behest of local Wehrmacht commanders, has left relatively few traces. It is unclear how often this type of forced labour was used, what the typical duration of these projects was, or how many civilians were involved in them.

Sauckel versus Seyß-Inquart: German interests served?

When he came into office in 1940, Arthur Seyß-Inquart had had the ambition (as well as instructions from the Reich) to win the hearts and minds of the Dutch for the German cause. Consequently, he was generally opposed to any actions that would unnecessarily antagonize the majority of the population. During the first two years of his time in office, it became increasingly apparent that this ambition was unrealistic, but this did not change his attitude to forced labour in

²⁴ Klemann (note 19), p. 435–436.

²⁵ Ralf Futselaar, *Gevangenissen in oorlogstijd*, Amsterdam 2015.

Germany. Recruitment was a sure way of antagonizing the Dutch further and a source of considerable unrest. As discussed above, the pressure of the *Reichsarbeitsministerium* eventually served to overrule Seyß-Inquart. Workers were forcibly moved from the Netherlands to work in German factories.

From a macroeconomic perspective the hundreds of thousands of men who eventually went into hiding constituted a significant loss to the Dutch (industrial) labour force. It is questionable if the addition of some 400,000 temporary workers to German industry outweighed these losses from the perspective of the efficient exploitation of the Dutch economy. It seems likely that it would have been more profitable for the German economy and the war effort to let Dutch companies produce more goods for Germany in the Netherlands.²⁶

The postwar decades: Were workers enslaved or simply employed?

Judging by the publications of former Dutch workers employed in Germany they were almost without exception forced labourers in the strictest sense of the term. Their books, pamphlets and magazines routinely refer to the *Reichseinsatz* as ‘slavery’ and emphasize their forced removal from the Netherlands, the dismal circumstances under which they worked, the dangers of bombardment, the (supposedly) high mortality among workers, and the fact that in many cases wages remained entirely or partially unpaid.²⁷

This view contrasts sharply with that of historian Hein Klemann, who claims that during most of the occupation period possibilities to escape were so numerous that, apart from the minority of men rounded up in raids, labour migration to Germany should be considered as precisely that – the flow of mostly young men seeking work in a neighbouring country.²⁸ The fact that, unlike for example Polish workers, Dutch labour migrants could expect to be paid and treated on a par with their German peers would have contributed to their eagerness to work across the border. Although the supposedly high mortality of migrant workers cannot be entirely dismissed out of hand, because of a lack of reliable data there is little or no evidence to support recurrent claims of mass mortality. Spoerer and Fleischhacker estimate that mortality among Dutch workers was about 10,000 for the entire period; Sijes arrives at a number of 8500. This would mean that some 98 % of workers returned to the Netherlands alive.²⁹

²⁶ Klemann (note 19), p. 87.

²⁷ Nieuwsbrief: officieel orgaan van de Vereniging van Ex-Dwargarbeiders Nederland in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, Bergen 1992–1999.

²⁸ Klemann (note 19), p. 84–86.

²⁹ Sijes (note 6), p. 669; Mark Spoerer, Jochen Fleischhacker, The Compensation of Nazi Germany’s Forced Labourers: Demographic Findings and Political Implications, in: *Population Studies* 56 (2002), n. 1, p. 5–21, here p. 18.

Personal leeway in avoiding work in Germany, and personal perceptions of that leeway, are difficult to investigate. That said, a considerable body of archives, diaries, and other data survives. It is not *prima facie* impossible to know more, but the reality is that there is currently little historians can say on this matter.

Former forced labourers started to self-organize in the 1980s and 1990s. In October 1987, a group of former labourers founded the *Vereniging van ex-dwangarbeiders Nederland in de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (lit: ‘Association of former Dutch forced labourers in Germany during the Second World War’). Until its disbandment in 1999, this pressure group of former forced labourers argued that their members had neither received the recognition they were entitled to in the Netherlands, nor the financial compensation owed to them by Germany. In the following years, many former workers received money from German companies, although it is highly questionable whether the activities and indignation of the *Vereniging* contributed much to this development.³⁰

³⁰ Constantin Goschler, *Vom asymmetrischen Tauschhandel zur humanitären Geste. Die moralische Ökonomie des Auszahlungsprogramms der Stiftung „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft“*, in: Constantin Goschler (ed.), *Die Entschädigung von NS-Zwangsarbeit am Anfang des 21. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 1, p. 32-37.