

German Resistance in the Netherlands

A Transnational Approach to Resistance in Europe, 1936-1948

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Introduction

During my participation in the Leverhulme-funded research project 'A transnational Approach to Resistance in Europe, 1936-1948', I examined the participation of German migrants in resistance activities in and from the Netherlands before and during the Second World War. In the first explorative part of my research, I mapped the emergence of different kinds of German resistance emerging in the Netherlands. The second part of the research consisted of a case study that focused more closely on the exile of the German Communist Party and its relation to transnational resistance.

Explorative Research: migration from Germany and transnational resistance

Case Study: The KPD in exile, 1933-1945

General Conclusions

Context

After 1933, an estimated thirty thousand migrants came to the Netherlands from Germany, fleeing persecution from the NSDAP. The largest share of these refugees from Germany were Jewish people. About five hundred of the immigrants were political exiles. A small part of these migrants became involved in transnational resistance activities from 1933 onwards.

After the Reichstag fire in 1933 the NSDAP started a witch-hunt on the German Communist Party (KPD). Party members often fled to neighbouring countries, seeking to continue their activities there or simply to go into hiding. The KPD reorganized by splitting up its leadership in several "Abschnittsleitungen". The "Abschnittsleitung West" was installed in Amsterdam in 1933.

How did transnational resistance emerge in the Netherlands?

Different resistance groups emerged out of the migration from Nazi Germany to the Netherlands. Relatively, the share of political exiles becoming involved in transnational resistance was much larger than that of Jewish refugees. Moreover, among the Jewish refugees, it seem to have been predominantly politically active individuals that became involved in transnational resistance.

What is the value of applying a transnational approach to resistance?

Applying a transnational perspective can help in reconceptualising and reinterpreting the phenomenon of resistance. An often made contention is that in order to understand resistance, we need to move beyond the isolated context of the Second World War. A transnational approach can throw new light on how pre-existing institutions and interest groups influenced the functioning of resistance.

What has the value of the case study been in terms of the larger research project?

Research on the network of the KPD shows both the possibilities and problems of the research project. The case study has shown that the communist migration had an impact in the Netherlands, and that analysing the resistance activities of the KPD-exiles can further illuminate the connections and traces that existed throughout the 'landscape of resistance' in Europe. However, the explicit orientation of KPD-exiles towards constructing a new social order in Germany makes it more debatable to what extent it was transnational.



Results

Resistance emerging out of the migration from Germany can be broadly categorized in **three forms**:

1. Resistance that oriented toward assisting the *Widerstand* in Germany itself, 1933-1945.
2. German migrants that participated in Resistance movements in the Netherlands, 1940-1945.
3. Members of the occupying forces that joined or in some way supported the resistance in the Netherlands, 1940-1945.

Another distinction should be made between resistance groups predominantly made up of **religious or of political migrants**. During the explorative research, I have conducted short case studies on both.

Examples of resistance activities include the publishing and distribution of illegal anti-fascist journals in the Netherlands and Germany, the production of illegal documents, organizing escape from concentration camp Westerbork, and calling upon German soldiers to desert.

1. The party leadership viewed emigration as a temporary solution, they kept a strong **orientation towards constructing a new social order in Germany**.
2. For their survival, the communist migrants were dependant on the Dutch branch of the International Red Aid. The organization of emigration and the organization of resistance came to be closely linked. **Especially in the border areas, a wide range of resistance activities developed**.
3. The communist migration also led to cooperation with the Dutch Communist Party (CPN) in the 1930s. It seems that this **cooperation strongly influenced the functioning of the CPN during the war**.
4. Due to different factors a **very small number of Communist exiles survived the war**. However, during the war, the exiles maintained their orientation towards Germany, and a number of them crossed the border in an attempt to rebuild the illegal party apparatus from Berlin.
5. In order to pursue their resistance activities, the **exiles adapted to the policies of the occupier**. Similarly the **German authorities used the international network of the Communists** to their own benefit when they arrested some of the exiles.

Reflection

During my participation in this research project, I learned several practical and methodological lessons. The character of this research project required an approach that alternated between zooming in and zooming out. An inherent difficulty in this was finding a balance between scouting for more relevant information and more sources, or dive into one aspect on a more detailed level. A particularly time-consuming activity was assembling and identifying relevant source material. During the case study, the most important practical lesson I learned was on effectively storing the information I gathered.