



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Een eenzaam staatsman. Dirk de Geer, 1870 - 1960

Kaaij, M. van der

Citation

Kaaij, M. van der. (2012, May 31). *Een eenzaam staatsman. Dirk de Geer, 1870 - 1960*. Uitgeverij Verloren, Hilversum. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19034>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/19034>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/19034> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Kaaij, Meindert van der

Title: Een eenzaam staatsman : Dirk de Geer (1870-1960)

Date: 2012-05-31

Summary

A lonely statesman. Dirk de Geer (1870-1960)

The politician Dirk de Geer lives on in the memory of the majority of Dutch as someone who stood on the wrong side during the Second World War. They see him as a collaborator who was after peace with Hitler. Proof for this *foute* attitude was the fact that he was convicted in a special war court in 1947 during a notorious trial to a suspended sentence of one year and a considerable fine. His age of 76 was seen as a mitigating circumstance, otherwise he would have been sent to prison, the judge declared afterwards.

Prior to this he could look back on a very successful career in politics and public administration. He was born in 1870 in a protestant noble family and had a protected upbringing. After his law study he accepted a job at the newspaper *De Nederlander*. In the mean time he finished his PhD (cum laude). As a teenager he obviously loved to write. De Geer published articles about Dutch politics, one even appeared in the national newspaper *De Standaard*, run by the famous politician Abraham Kuyper. At the age of 18 he wrote, anonymously, a brochure which got good reviews in national newspapers.

At *De Nederlander* he had to work for long hours. In the fourteen years he spent at the newspaper he was in fact the only journalist. Nevertheless, he enjoyed his lonesome work as a journalist. His editor, A.F. de Savornin Lohman, was also leader of a small protestant party which ended up with the name CHU, had little time to help De Geer out. Later in his career De Geer would often look back with some melancholy at his time at *De Nederlander*.

De Savornin Lohman, convinced of his qualities, pushed De Geer into politics. First he became member of the city council of Rotterdam and later, in 1907, of Dutch parliament. In parliament he worked his way up. De Savornin Lohman saw him as his successor as party leader and after the election of 1918 he suggested that De Geer had to become minister. He declined, after a fierce personal attack of fellow party member De Visser, someone he used to have high regards for. A year later De Geer said yes to a request to become mayor of Arnhem, this to surprise and disappointment of colleagues.

After a little more than a year De Geer was asked again to become member of the government, this time as minister of finance. He agreed and had some success. That's why he held his position in the next cabinet with Ruijs de Beerenbrouck as prime-minister. But in 1923 he stepped back because he objected to a very costly plan to revive the marine, called the *Vlootwet*. His resignation was a big surprise to outsiders who concluded that this was a case of desertion from the difficulties he had as minister of finance with balancing the budget.

But evidence shows that insiders such as his colleagues in the cabinet and his fellow party members, knew for a long time of his vast objections to such enormous government spending. De Geer hoped he could convince the protagonist of the *Vlootwet* of the unsoundness of this plan. He was not the only one who thought that this kind of investing in the marine would ruin the country. After the war historians suggested that his objection against the *Vlootwet* was rooted in his pacifism, which was not the case for two simple reasons: he was not a pacifist and he never used these kind of arguments in the cabinet. A couple months after his resignation parliament voted against the *Vlootwet*. A majority agreed with De Geer that the spending of 150 million guilders would ruin the budget.

In 1925 De Geer was again asked to become minister, this time by Colijn, leader of the other protestant party ARP. Within a year his cabinet fell because a majority in the *Tweede Kamer* voted in favor of the cancellation of the legation in Rome. The catholic members of the cabinet resigned. This legation in Rome has always been a political sensitive matter because anti-papism was still wide spread in protestant parts of The Netherlands. For four months several attempts were made to revive the old cabinet. Some politicians also tried to form a new cabinet one. De Geer succeeded at last in forming an extra-parliamentary cabinet, after a short secret attempt. This stealthy attempt was necessary, said De Geer afterwards, because Colijn and his catholic counterpart Nolens did everything to prevent the forming of a new cabinet. They had high hopes to reinstall the old Colijn-cabinet. Colijn could not appreciate De Geer becoming the new prime-minister. It reinforced the conviction Colijn had of De Geer that he could not be trusted.

After three years being prime-minister he became in 1929 minister of finance in the new cabinet of Ruijs de Beerenbrouck. In a few years The Netherlands would also be struck by the world wide economic crisis. De Geer spent most of his time on balancing the budget in order to uphold the golden standard, even when Great Britain gave up this standard in 1931. Afterwards the English step had been the right moment for the Netherlands to leave this standard also, but De Geer refused to do so. The result was growing unemployment and rising government spending. De Geer had a hard time to find the budget cuts and ways to increase the income for the state. A couple of times he had to threat with his resignation in order to make the parliament approve of his plans. A short time before the elections the cabinet fell.

De Geer declined an offer to become the highest adviser of the government – a highly honorable position – because he didn't want to leave active politics. At his 63rd he became the leader of his party CHU in the *Tweede Kamer*, the Dutch parliament. He entered a relative tranquil and untroubled period of his life. During two cabinets of Colijn, which he supported wholeheartedly, his esteem in Dutch politics grew. He was known for his independent but also sometimes unexpected assessment of political situations. The highpoint of his power arrived in 1939 when the *Tweede Kamer* decided to sent home the fifth cabinet of Colijn, after only two days after its installment.

Almost all parties agreed that De Geer was the right person to form a new government. At that time he was seen as a very experienced politician with a good reputation. The only party that distrusted him was Colijn's party ARP. They accused De Geer of being chicanery. They brought back the memory of 1926 when he formed a new cabinet behind the back of Colijn.

Because of the tense international situation De Geer wanted to build a broad coalition. That enabled him to realize one of his old ideals: giving governmental responsibility to the social-democratic party (SDAP). He also tried to get the ARP on board and he even asked Colijn for the position of prime-minister. De Geer thought Colijn's broad international network and experience could be very useful during the years of international strains. Colijn refused because he was convinced that De Geer somehow wanted to play a trick on him.

The Dutch were reasonably happy with the second cabinet of De Geer. The support for his government in the *Tweede Kamer* grew steadily. All went well till the German armies invaded The Netherlands on May 10th in 1940. Within a couple of hours the defense was critically harmed by the fierce attack of the well trained German soldiers. After four days he and his cabinet had to acknowledge that it was a matter of time till The Netherlands had to capitulate. The question at that moment was: do we stay or do we go in exile? After a emotional en chaotic meeting in which De Geer did poorly in leading it, they decided to go into exile in London. Queen Wilhelmina was already on her way to London when the cabinet took that decision. She tried successfully to evade any contact with the cabinet. Afterwards nobody asked why she did things on her own. Some suggested that she hoped that the cabinet would stay, so she could organize the resistance from England on her own without being hampered by politicians who she resented.

In London things went wrong for De Geer. Wilhelmina was clearly unhappy with him. She thought he was not determined enough to fight the Nazis and, again, she probably wanted to lead the Dutch in exile herself. She forced De Geer to resign under the threat of abdication of the throne. He and his ministers didn't want a constitutional crisis, so they gave in. De Geer was replaced by Gerbrandy, till then minister of Justice, who was close to Wilhelmina. A deeply disappointed De Geer decided to go to the Dutch indies – what is now Indonesia – where several of his children and their families lived. On his stop over in Lissabon he decided to return to his wife in The Netherlands. For this he had to turn tot the Nazis for help.

Back in The Hague he was treated as an outcast. Prior to his return the government in London had released a statement in which his return to occupied territory was depicted as an act of betrayal. A majority of the Dutch agreed with the government in London that the return of a former prime-minister could be regarded as an sign of surrender. In an attempt to explain his return he wrote the brochure *Synthese in den oorlog*, which made it all worse for him. To be able to publish this he, again, had ask the German for help. The content of that brochure, he pleaded for a syntheses between fascism and democracy, upset many in the resistance movement.

After the war the Dutch people was still mad at him. Wilhelmina and Gerbrandy on the other hand were greeted with a lot appraisal for their role in London. A majority of the people regarded them as hero's and that formed a stark contrast with De Geer who was blamed for his return and his brochure. Gerbrandy advised the new minister of justice to prosecute De Geer because of his return to occupied territory and his brochure with the help of the Nazis. The new government refused, because there were 100.000 detainees waiting for a trial, which was more important then a time consuming investigation into the behavior of De Geer. A year later the prosecution of De Geer was nevertheless started on instigation of special prosecutor Sikkel, a brother in law of Gerbrandy.

On May 9th and 10th the trial was held in Amsterdam in which De Geer was held accountable for weakening the resistance of the Netherlands by helping the German occupiers. Leading judge was J.A. van Hamel, a huge admirer of Wilhelmina and a friend of Gerbrandy. At the time De Geer arrived at home in The Hague his oldest son Lodo was executed by the Germans because of espionage activities. Van Hamel declared De Geer guilty and only because of his age he escaped a severe jail sentence. In cassation De Geer's verdict was reaffirmed. Taking in consideration the circumstances of the trial the conclusion can be that De Geer didn't get a fair chance.

After the war he immediately continued his quest for rehabilitation for the accusations Gerbrandy had made in his statement in 1941 after De Geer's return to the Netherlands. He published a lot of brochures which had the war and its aftermath as theme. He also wrote two autobiographies. But it didn't help him much. On the contrary. Sometimes it seemed that the louder he said his return had anything to do with his approval of Nazism, the more the Dutch were inclined to disbelieve him.

How did historians assess De Geer's role in Dutch politics? I have noticed a striking difference between the way his achievements were described before and after the war. Before 1940 journalists and historians recognized his independency and his knowledge of politics. They were positive about his hard work for the common good. They also saw him as a good administrator. The basis for that was amongst other things the law that changed the relationship between city's and the central government, which is still in place.

That changed after 1945. As we already stated, many historians reviewed his resignation because of the Vlootwet as a case of desertion. They accused him of having sympathy for the Nazi's or being a pacifist, but for both allegations there is no proof. On the contrary. He often stated that pacifism is dangerous and that the Dutch Nazi party NSB is detestable.

But they also underestimated the importance of his role in Dutch politics. Firstly he put together a cabinet in 1926 after a government crisis which lasted for four months in a time when already some sound of discontent about the democratic system could be heard. His cabinet showed the Dutch that a government could act energetic. He did the same in 1939 when democracy was even more scrutinized than in 1926. And last but not least, he succeeded in introducing the social-democrats in national government.

But never got the credit for this. After the war nowhere in the Netherlands a street was called after him. His own political party CHU tried to keep his achievements silent. How different everything would have been when he hadn't decided to return to occupied territory. The well known journalist Jan Blokker once mused about how our memory of Dirk de Geer would have been if he had died of a heart attack right after the German armies invaded the Netherlands. We would think of him as one of the finest but also loneliest politicians of the interbellum period.