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## **Burgerzin en soldatengeest**

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## Summary

*Burgerzin en soldatengeest* is a study of how a profession, namely the Dutch officer corps, attempted, in the period from 1832 to 1914, to formulate a response to a problem it had identified. Almost all the officers who in the past expressed an opinion in public on the issue of the relationship between society and the army said that the relationship was bad, or at least that there was room for improvement. What were, according to them, the reasons why this relationship left so much to be desired? Should those reasons be sought on the side of the nation or the army? In the opinion of the officer corps, what had to be done to improve the relationship? What solutions did they suggest and what initiatives did they take to improve the position of the army within society? These questions, which are central to the study, were of vital importance to the Dutch officers, because the officers were convinced that the Netherlands would only be able to defend itself successfully against a foreign enemy if there were close cooperation between the nation and the army.

The main source for this study has been a large number of publications (articles, pamphlets and books) written by officers. The study begins in 1832, the year in which *De Militaire Spectator*, the oldest military journal in the Netherlands, was founded. In that year, the officer entered the public arena and began to participate in the public debate. It is this role as publicist, debater and spokesman in particular that the officer adopts in *Burgerzin en soldatengeest*. In the nineteenth century, officers made keen use of the printed press. Besides *De Militaire Spectator*, there were several other military periodicals, albeit that some of them were only short-lived. As was customary in the nineteenth century, the officers were also diligent in writing pamphlets in which they addressed numerous military issues. Military authors wanted to be read by a civilian public. They therefore attached great value to the articles they published in civilian periodicals, such as *De Gids*, *Vragen des Tijds*, *De Tijdspiegel*, *Onze Eeuw* and *Sociaal Weekblad*. Military publications provide an excellent insight into the way officers thought about the questions formulated above.

Opting to view the question of the relationship between society and the army mainly from the perspective of the officer corps is largely inevitable, because the officers formed the key party to the public debate on this issue. It is true that civilian participation in this debate is not entirely non-existent, and their contributions are also discussed in

*Burgerzin en soldatengeest*, but their input was much more limited than that of the servicemen. The officers dominated the debate. According to them, the fact that they often had to conduct the debate by themselves was indicative of the marginal position of the army in society. At the same time, and this was typical of their ambivalence, they were often quick to consider the involvement of civilians in military issues as inconvenient interference by laymen. Officers were all the more sensitive to the opinions of civilians because their own position in the debate on the relationship between the nation and the army was also at stake. Anyone expressing an opinion on the army was also, if only implicitly, commenting on the officer corps. Officers could not disregard their own role either. They knew that their image, tainted by the past, left plenty to be desired and they debated the underlying reasons and sought ways to improve their reputation.

In the debate on the relationship between society and the army, there were two entirely opposing views. The founder and editor-in-chief of *De Militaire Spectator*, J.C. van Rijneveld, was the architect and first advocate of a conservative-military view on this relationship, a view characterised by distrust. In his opinion, civilian society could not be entrusted with the defence of the country, because that society was dominated by short-sighted self-interest. In his view, the country's security could only be guaranteed if its defence were to remain the responsibility of the monarch. The army should remain a royal institution. He argued in favour of maintaining the social isolation of the army, an untouchable status which was all the more necessary because, in his opinion, the typical military virtues could only flourish in isolation. Civilian materialism had to be kept out of the barracks. At the same time, Van Rijneveld was of the opinion that the recruitment of the army should be based on the concept of a nation in arms. The nation was indeed to be involved in military matters, an opinion at odds with his defence of isolation. In the 1840s, he was increasingly accused of going up a blind alley, as he was at a loss as to how to deal with this dilemma. This criticism mainly came from a younger generation of military authors who were inspired by the ideals of liberalism.

These liberal officers, with W.J. Knoop and T.J. Stieltjes at the forefront, formulated a view on the relationship between society and the army which was at odds with that of Van Rijneveld. They expressed faith in the civilians, with whom they wanted to enter into close cooperation. They realised that until then those civilians had shown themselves to be rather adverse towards the army and national defence. In their view, that lack of interest was mainly the result of the introverted attitude of the army, which was largely a closed institution, still living in the era of the *ancien régime*. According to them, the army would only be able to gain the interest, the favour and the trust of the people if it were transformed into a public, efficient and national institution. An officer should no longer be allowed to consider himself a servant of the King, but should first and foremost be a citizen and have only the national interest at heart. The liberal officers saw it as their most important task to convince the civilians that, as long as its defence was organised on a national basis, the Netherlands could be properly defended. With its soldiers fighting in familiar surroundings of polders, dykes, rivers, marshes, quagmires and reed-lands, the tough Netherlands could gain the upper hand over any foreign enemy.

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These two conflicting views determined the debate on the relationship between society and the army until 1914. The one group of officers eyed civilian society with suspicion, whereas the other pointed out the necessity and possibility of cooperation between civilians and the military, on a basis of trust. One group wanted to keep the army in splendid isolation, for fear of it becoming contaminated by civilian values, whereas the other advocated integration. And while the one group detested parliamentary involvement in the army, the other called on the representatives of the people to take charge of the military domain and subject it to (rational) legislation. These two views sharply divided the officer corps. This division was not clear-cut, however, in the sense that there were two clearly separated camps within the officer corps. The situation was more obscure than that because, and this was highly characteristic of the debate, a large number of officer-publicists were unable to make a clear choice. Within their own consciences, the two conflicting views constantly fought for priority, with the tendency towards isolation and the tendency towards civilianisation alternately gaining the upper hand. As will be demonstrated, military majority opinion was swinging back and forth, with the (defensive) feeling that the integration of society and the army should not go too far eventually dominating. Nonetheless, ambivalence remained the key word until the end.

*Burgerzin en soldatengeest* consists of three parts. The first part, entitled 'In Isolation', covers the period from 1832 to 1870. In those years, a small but very audible liberal minority within the officer corps fought in vain to free the army from its isolated position and transform it into an open, efficient and national institution. This minority focused mainly on what it considered to be a far too extensive system of fortresses, which stood in the way of rational organisation of the defence of the country. These attempts at reform failed however, in the face of resistance by the army leadership which, despite the liberal constitutional reform of 1848, was succeeding in limiting parliamentary influence on the army. The liberal officers felt they were mediators who, despite their best efforts, were unable to bring two hostile parties (the nation and the army) any closer together. They accused their fellow officers of adopting an arrogant and aloof attitude towards civilian society. In the opinion of the liberal officers, however, the well-to-do civilians deserved some of the blame as well, because they left the national defence to the professional soldiers too readily, despite the issue being a public matter in the general interest.

The liberal officers saw some rays of hope as well, however. In their opinion, the most important improvements were related to the position of the officers in society. Mainly owing to the constitutional reform of 1848, the emancipation of the officer to become a fully fledged citizen had been completed. He was no longer the obedient servant of the King. Two measures in particular contributed to this development. In the first place, the new Constitution granted all servicemen the right to be elected, whereas before 1848 that right had been the prerogative of senior and general officers. In the second place, the new Constitution prescribed that the promotion, discharge and retirement of officers was to be governed by legislation. The law in question, which was adopted in 1851, enabled the officers to enter into the public debate without fear of dismissal. Despite

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these measures, however, the position of the officer remained ambiguous. He still ran the risk of being punished by his superiors or of his career being damaged if he publicly criticised the army leadership. In addition, many officers attached great value to the historically close ties between the army and the House of Orange, considering the King to be their commander-in-chief, whom they should obey unconditionally. They interpreted the officer's oath as an oath of allegiance to the sovereign *as a person*, which was at odds with the 1848 Constitution.

The second part of the study, covering the period from 1870 to 1891, is entitled 'A Panacea'. The German military victory over France greatly influenced opinion within the Dutch officer corps. The conservative-military ideal of an isolated army, preferably with as many professional soldiers as possible, had suddenly become obsolete. A large majority of the officers now became staunch supporters of the Prussian army model, characterised mainly by personal conscription. In Germany, unlike most other European countries including the Netherlands, wealthy citizens who were drafted were not allowed to have themselves replaced by a substitute. Every conscript joined the army in person. After 1870, the Dutch military publicists began to argue en masse in favour of abolishing all forms of conscription substitution. They considered personal conscription to be the panacea for all problems in the relationship between society and the army. Their reasoning was that the army would automatically develop into a full part of society if it became a carbon copy of the nation from a social perspective once personal conscription was introduced; in other words, once the rich and the poor were represented proportionally. After all, if the sons of rich citizens were forced to serve in the army as well, Parliament, in which the well-to-do held sway, could no longer afford to continue its stepmotherly treatment of that same army.

For most officers, embracing the Prussian army model coincided with a conversion to liberalism. This was no chance occurrence: they attributed a liberal and modern character to the Prussian military system, stemming from the enlightened mind of Scharnhorst and his fellow reformers. The Dutch officers by no means wanted to bring the authoritarian German form of government to their country. They were purely interested in the army system of their larger neighbour, which in their opinion would tie in perfectly with the Dutch political balance on account of its emphasis on equal rights and obligations. After 1870, Knoop's liberal views on the relationship between society and the army became the dominant view among officers. It became widely accepted among the officers to argue that (personal) conscription would enable the army to become strongly rooted within the nation. As the strength of the nation was meant to be displayed fully on the battlefield, the army should no longer be allowed to be an institution separated from the civilian population. In order to be able to lead this intended people's army properly, and in order to inspire sufficient confidence among the conscripts, the officers would have to have their feet planted firmly in society. It was therefore important for them to be brought up and educated in a civilian environment for as long as possible. Popular opinion among the officer corps held that Parliament should now elevate the defence of the country to become a subject for public concern. The 1874 Fortress Act, which



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organised the national defence on a rational basis by putting an end to the mishmash of fortifications, was therefore seen by that majority as an important step forward.

One of the factors which made it possible for the majority of the officer corps to convert to the ideals of liberalism was the fact that the nature of liberalism changed dramatically after 1870. It began to focus less heavily on the freedom of the individual, while the laissez-faire philosophy also began to lose its edge. Instead, both the progressive and conservative forms of liberalism emphasised the necessity for social cohesion and public spirit. The liberals began to appreciate the constructive role the state could play in the socio-economic and moral-educative regard. The influence of the German *Kathedersozialisten*, lectern socialists, began to make itself felt. This re-evaluation of the role of the state appealed strongly to officers. Moreover, many prominent liberal politicians were now also in favour of introducing personal conscription, not only because they considered conscription substitution to be socially unjust, but particularly because they had come to appreciate conscription as a means of teaching young people discipline and a sense of duty. In addition, conscription could contribute to maintaining and enhancing national unity, which according to the liberals was under threat from emerging socialism and the tendency of both the orthodox Protestant and Roman Catholic sections of the populace to isolate themselves within their own organisational structures. A large number of civilians and officers united in the *Antidienstvervangingsbond* (Union against conscription substitution), established in 1875, which campaigned for the introduction of personal conscription.

For a long time, the efforts of the *Antidienstvervangingsbond* were unsuccessful. In Protestant circles, and even more so among Roman Catholics, there was fierce resistance to personal conscription, because these religious groups considered the barracks to be a pool of corruption where the morals of the militiamen were at risk. Therefore, they argued, parents should not be deprived of their right to pay off their sons' conscription. The power of the *Antidienstvervangingsbond* was further undermined by the fact that a leftist-liberal minority was extremely averse to conscription being fulfilled in the barracks under strict military discipline. They considered this form of state coercion to be incompatible with civil freedom. J.K.H. de Roo van Alderwerelt was the best-known military representative of this movement. The civilian politician S. van Houten was his main sympathiser. These two men advocated an entirely different army model, characterised by a dual structure: firstly, a small army with a relatively large professional element, if necessary complemented by a limited contingent of conscripts; secondly an extensive and independently organised corps of armed civilians, on the basis of a universal duty to participate in military training. De Roo and Van Houten's ideal soldier was not a servile serviceman, but an armed citizen, who would be prepared to defend his freedom by force of arms if necessary.

This alternative army model, which also had many supporters among the Roman Catholic part of the population, was not open to discussion as far as the propagandists of the *Antidienstvervangingsbond* were concerned. In their opinion, history had shown clearly that civilian armies as propagated by De Roo always came off worst on the battlefield when faced with disciplined and properly drilled armies. They therefore

demanded that the army have the monopoly on military training and exercises. In their view, the *schutterijen*, locally organised civil militias which operated independently from the army, should therefore step aside. To their regret, the members of the *Antidienstvervangingsbond* found that, as a result of the political discord, the introduction of the Prussian army model, including personal conscription, was not feasible in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, they had reason to believe, and this kept their hopes up, that public opinion was changing to their advantage, albeit slowly. This became apparent, *inter alia*, in the constitutional reform of 1887. In this amendment, the many restrictive stipulations regarding conscription which had been in the Constitution since 1815 were removed. Many officers subsequently concluded that conscription was now widely accepted as an intrinsic part of modern citizenship. Conscription was no longer considered a form of state coercion against which the citizen had to be protected by means of a great number of constitutional measures. Normalisation of conscription showed that the age-old great feelings of distrust between nation and army had decreased considerably.

The third part of this study, which runs from 1891 to 1914, is entitled 'For the preservation of military discipline'. The year 1891 saw a number of significant changes in the philosophy of the officer corps. During the great parliamentary debate on the so-called Bergansius Army Bill – an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to introduce the Prussian army model – the religious parties in particular had fired off a barrage of reproaches at the officer corps. The essence of these accusations was that the average officer was insufficiently concerned with the fate, both material and immaterial, of the militiamen. As a result of this criticism, a great many officers came to realise that they would have to put more effort into their task as educators of soldiers. Foreign examples also contributed to this realisation. Until 1891, the overriding idea among the officer corps had been that once the panacea of personal conscription had been introduced, the problems in the barracks would simply disappear. They now realised that those problems were partly the result of their own introverted attitude. An opposition periodical established in 1890, *De Landsverdediging*, argued in no uncertain terms that the arrogant officer corps was failing in its duty towards the rank and file and that it was by no means substantiating its claim that conscription would have a wholesome effect on the youth. Partly driven by this criticism, a majority of the officers began to take their educational task more seriously than before, on paper at least. *Burgerzin en soldatengeest* demonstrates, however, that despite the best of intentions, this role of educator did not live up to its promise in practice. It degenerated into a crude and frenetic attempt to keep the influence of socialism out of the barracks.

The philosophy within the officer corps took another remarkable turn after 1891. The issue of conscription substitution was no longer central to the military debate. Belief in personal conscription as a panacea for the problems in the relationship between society and the army was lost. When personal conscription was finally introduced in 1898, there was no atmosphere of jubilation among the military publicists. The reason was that too many officers feared that, now that the well-to-do citizens would have to serve in person, Parliament would give in to the temptation to reduce the burden of conscription considerably. In that case, personal conscription would mean they had brought a Trojan

horse into the barracks. This fear was not unfounded. Since the early 1890s, the leftist-liberals, led by Major A.L.W. Seyffardt, had argued strongly in favour of introducing the so-called Swiss army model. This model was characterised by a system of universal conscription, whereby the citizens only served a short time – no more than six months – in the barracks. No more time was needed, because in Seyffardt's reasoning, the citizens would prepare physically for their military task from their early youth. He hoped to be able to base his system on spontaneous enthusiasm in particular, rather than just on coercion. That enthusiasm would certainly come, he argued, if the citizens were no longer subjected to an un-Dutch soldiers' drill. Seyffardt emphasised the principle of 'all able-bodied men': in such a small country as the Netherlands, all male citizens should arm themselves, because only such a total mobilisation would be able to compensate somewhat for the numerical inferiority compared with the great powers.

Seyffardt, who as Minister of War did not succeed in introducing the Swiss army model in the Netherlands, later tirelessly continued to propagate his principle of 'all able-bodied men' as a publicist. He did more than just write, however. In 1900, he was one of the founders of the *Volksweerbearheid* (People's Defence) association, which aimed to bring the Dutch people to the utmost level of fitness. He hoped that his fellow citizens would take part in physical exercise from an early age, as well as practise military skills, so that what he considered to be an artificial army - living in seclusion behind the walls of the barracks, detached from the nation - would become superfluous. The Swiss army model was also very popular among a group of progressive officers centred on the periodical *De Militaire Gids*. This journal advocated the evolution of the army in a democratic way, which meant the army, and in particular the officer corps, would lose its authoritarian and introverted *ancien-régime* nature. *De Militaire Gids* argued that with the introduction of personal conscription the army had become an exact copy of the nation from a *social* point of view. That was not enough, however. According to the journal, the transformation of the army in barracks into a civilian militia army was meant to ensure that the army would be a copy of the nation from a *mental* point of view as well. Only when that goal had been achieved, would people and army be able to actually form a harmonious entity.

To the majority of the officer corps, these ideas were taboo. In their view there were no two ways about it: from the mental point of view, the army was supposed to be a *mirror* image of materialistic civilian society. It was remarkable that, so long as the issue of personal conscription dominated the debate, the nature of the Prussian army model was progressive. After all, what was at stake was the socially just principle of equal rights for all. Now that it had become important to emphasise the importance of mental isolation within the walls of the barracks, the Prussian army model automatically began to appear more conservative. The majority of the officer corps had now been forced onto the defensive. They were no longer fighting to win anything, but to prevent themselves from losing something. From 1890 onwards, they mainly fought to maintain the army in barracks and with it, military discipline. This transformation from the progressive to the conservative manifested itself most clearly in the area of military judicial procedure. In this respect, the majority of the officers had for years been calling for modernisation,



more openness and a certain degree of professionalisation and civilianisation. When at the turn of the century, partly as a result of the Dreyfus affair, the very existence of the military judge came under discussion, however, that majority acted resolutely on the defensive. For the sake of military discipline, they argued, military justice should not be tampered with. The courts martial were to be maintained, because allowing civilian judges into the military realm would be fatal to the authority of the commanders and therefore to discipline in general as well.

The majority of the officer corps had their way in the end. In 1901, a moderate version of the Prussian army system was introduced, which was anchored more firmly in society by the Army Acts of 1912 and 1913. With the simultaneous disbanding of the *schutterijen*, the army gained the monopoly on military training and exercises. Two key reasons can be identified for the 'victory' of the Prussian army system. Firstly, *Volksweerbearheid* only managed to win over a small majority of the Dutch population to its ideal of 'all able-bodied men'. The vast majority was not very enthusiastic at the prospect of unprompted exercising and therefore implied that an army system based on coercion was the only realistic option, in the same way that civilians would not pay taxes of their own free will. *Volksweerbearheid* blamed its lack of success on sabotage by the establishment, which wanted to keep the military force under its own control at all costs. The second reason was the fact that, in view of the threat of socialism, a parliamentary majority eventually favoured a well-drilled and isolated army in barracks, which would not be susceptible to the "red virus". In the end, arming the entire male population in peacetime – the ultimate consequence of the Swiss militia model – seemed too dangerous an idea to most liberals and the religious parties.

*Burgerzin en soldatengeest* also focuses attention on the navy. The views of the naval officers on the relationship between society and the fleet were characterised by a large degree of resentment. Traditionally, the navy enjoyed greater popularity among the Dutch population than the army. According to almost all the navy publicists, however, that popularity was entirely gratuitous, as it was based only on the grand, seventeenth-century past of the fleet. Among the population, there was hardly any interest in the fate of the modern navy. And that fate, the naval officers agreed, was lamentable, because the navy was not given the opportunity to answer its calling on the high seas. It was condemned to perform stultifying tasks in the colonial waters and to contribute to the defence of the Dutch coast. There were, incidentally, navy publicists who realised that the navy had mainly its own introverted attitude to blame for the lack of interest from the public. Following their liberal colleagues in the army, they called for more openness and efficiency. They too, however, continued to believe in the possibility of a navy equipped with large ships, which would be able to live up to the Dutch reputation as a naval power the world over. They continued to be haunted by the ghosts of the great seventeenth-century admirals such as Tromp and De Ruyter.

According to the navy officers, in one area the navy was at a disadvantage compared with the army. Whereas the army was always assured of sufficient manpower because of conscription, the fleet was to a great extent dependent on the labour market for its

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personnel requirements. Although there were some sea militiamen, their numbers were few and they were not allowed to serve in the colonies. The navy therefore mainly had to rely on the recruitment of volunteers. And that recruitment was largely unsuccessful. The navy constantly had to contend with personnel shortages. Out of bitter necessity, it recruited mainly young boys who were then pressed into signing a lengthy contract. This practice of child recruitment gave the navy a bad reputation, which was worsened by the many complaints about the harsh regime on board the naval ships. There was chronic discontent among the ratings, and as a result they joined their own union en masse, the *Matrozenbond* (Seamen's Union), established in 1897, which soon found itself pursuing a socialist course. The Netherlands was thus landed with a "red fleet". In a few cases, naval officers wrote openly that they were no longer able to trust their subordinates on board. In naval circles, there was only one solution to this acute crisis of authority. Like the army, the navy would have to begin making use of conscripts on a grand scale. Only through that instrument, it was said, would it be possible to anchor the fleet firmly in society.

The slump in personnel numbers in the fleet stood in stark, almost absurd contrast to the grand plans for the future which the naval officers entertained for the navy. Around the turn of the century, a new fervour had gripped this corps. After years of doubt as to the rationale of a proper navy, that is to say equipped with large ships, it had discovered a new task for the fleet. This task, which justified the purchase of a battle fleet, lay in the defence of the Netherlands East Indies against external threats. Following the rapid emergence of Japan as a naval power, this danger appeared to have become especially acute in a short space of time. Whereas the naval officers had long detested the colonies as a place where the navy was wasting away, the Indies were now its life buoy as a result of the new security situation in Asia. With a political majority sharing this fear of the Japanese threat, and convinced that holding on to the Indies was vital to the Dutch economy, Parliament seemed increasingly willing to equip the Netherlands with a fleet of large ships. In 1913, the government presented an ambitious fleet plan, which appeared to match the ambitions of the naval officers fully. It remained unclear, however, how the Netherlands would ever be able to afford and man such a fleet. On those points, the plan was rather vague. The plan was never implemented, as the outbreak of the First World War threw a spanner in the works. For the time being, the idea of a navy with large ships remained a fantasy.

The main difference between the navy and the army with regard to their relationships with society was that, especially after 1898, the army had become a copy of society as a result of conscription. In addition, the liberal-military views of Knoop and others, holding that the national defence should be based on close cooperation between the nation and the army, had gained universal recognition, albeit that this realisation had not led to the introduction of any form of universal conscription. The concept of a people's army was by now widely accepted, but no one seemed to think there was a requirement for a people's navy. The pursuit of a people's army, firmly rooted in the nation, was the greatest driving force behind the process of civilianisation of the army, which had begun after

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1840. After 1900, this process, which had had the support of the majority of the officer corps since 1870, was called to a halt at the insistence of that same majority, because military discipline was at risk. A mental division had to be maintained between the army and society, so that the military community would not be contaminated by civilian values. The distrust towards civilians as first formulated by Van Rijnveld, together with Knoop's views, still to an extent determined military philosophy, with all the resulting ambivalence. This tension between the desire for social integration and the desire for mental isolation was to continue to dominate the issue of the relationship between society and the army during the rest of the twentieth century. Physically, socially and mentally, the navy long remained further removed from society than the army. Paradoxically, however, the fleet was much more strongly confronted within its own ranks with what the establishment considered to be the most serious social threat, namely socialism. Whereas many were alarmed at the idea of the "red fleet", no one appeared to be particularly concerned about a "red army".