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Het leger onder vuur. De Koninklijke Landmacht en haar critici, 1945-1989

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Summary

The army under fire. The Royal Netherlands Army and its critics, 1945-1989

Does society need armed forces? If so, what form should they take and what position should they hold in a democratic society? Critical conscripts, conscientious objectors, professional soldiers, civilians and antimilitarists posed these questions during the Cold War. This study investigates their criticism of and protest against the armed forces and national security and defense policy in the Netherlands between 1945 and 1989. It first examines how and why the critics of the armed forces questioned its form and existence. Secondly, this study looks into the Ministry of Defense's reaction to these critics. It explores how the ministry interpreted and responded to criticism and protest. The main question of this study is to what extent did the ministry believe that the criticism undermined the armed forces' legitimacy?

Criticism, protests and changing perceptions of the Ministry of Defense

During the Cold War, the character and expression of criticism and protest against the armed forces and against national security and defense policy evolved. As the character of the criticism and protest changed, so too did the Ministry of Defense's perception of it alter. The first chapter of this study focuses on the 1945-1966 period. It analyses how the Ministry of War (from 1959 onwards: Ministry of Defense) was confronted with civil guards, such as the *Bijzondere Vrijwillige Landstorm* (Special Voluntary Landstorm), the *Vereniging Volksweerbaarheid* (Organisation for Defensibility) and the *Organisatie voor Algemene Nationale Hulp* (Organization for General National Assistance). The volunteers in these guards denied that the armed forces held the monopoly of power with regard to national defense. Instead, they asked for the authorities' approval to participate in national defense. They also requested weapons and uniforms. The civil guards believed in the necessity of their participation as the so-called communist fifth column grew in size and strength after 1945. At the same time, the armed forces were not able to protect the Netherlands without help from the citizens due to their struggle in the Dutch East-Indies and ongoing post-war reconstruction. From an ideological perspective, the civil guards believed that their citizenship justified their contribution to defending the country against the communists.

The Ministry of War was displeased with the rise of the civil guards. It believed the armed forces had a monopoly of power with regard to national defense. Civil volunteer organizations, with their power aspirations, threatened the armed forces' monopoly on military power. The government also felt threatened by these guards. It feared they would easily undermine state power and become their own state within the Dutch state. In 1948, the government decided to unite the members of the civil guards and put them under state control. It sectioned

them into reserve troops of the police, the military police and the armed forces. The name of the reserve troops of the armed forces was National Reserve.

Although the Ministry of War no longer had to worry about civil guards undermining its monopoly on military power, it now feared that the armed forces' defensive capacity was challenged. The Ministry believed that the nations' defense depended on its ability to counter the Soviet threat at the Dutch borders and its capacity to cooperate with NATO. These assumptions were not shared in equal measure by the government and the former civil guards united in the reserve troops. The former civil guards feared the purported domestic fifth column more than they dreaded an assault by the Soviet Union's armed forces and therefore focused on maintaining public order. The government did in fact perceive the Soviet Union as a threat, though rather in ideological and socio-economic than in military terms. Consequently, the state was not motivated to pay much attention to the military build-up of NATO nor the National Reserve. It would focus instead on the socio-economic reconstruction of the Netherlands.

This state of affairs changed following the beginning of the Korean War in 1950. Both the former civil guards, united in the National Reserve, and the government now believed the Soviet Union posed a military threat. They confirmed that the armed forces were the only appropriate and desirable means to counter this threat. The National Reserve became a full-fledged part of the Dutch army. The government now also believed it should pay more attention to NATO and to the Netherlands' role within this alliance. After the initial discussions between the Ministry of War, the government and the former civil guards about their mutual responsibilities the 1950s became the most stable decade with respect to the armed forces' legitimacy. The Ministry of Defense, politicians and civilians now agreed that the armed forces and the Dutch contribution to NATO were necessary and aligned with the Dutch security and defense policy.

In the late 1950s this situation started to change. Politicians of the communist and pacifist parties, as well as some activists, objected to deploying the first nuclear weapons on Dutch soil. Their objections showed that the general consensus towards the armed forces and the national security and defense policy began to crumble. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Defense did not believe the opponents of the nuclear weapons would challenge its monopoly on military defense as such. Most civilians and politicians still approved of the national security and defense policy. Besides, the critics directed their objections neither directly to the Ministry of Defense, nor to the armed forces. Their criticism reflected a general discord with regard to militarism and the nuclear arms race.

The second and third chapters of this study, dealing with the 1966-1976 timeframe, analyze how the Ministry of Defense was confronted with criticism and protest against national security and defense policy from the mid-1960's onwards. It explores how the armed forces were criticized by its own members as well as by civilians. First, critics doubted the need for a strong military defense and likewise attacked the armed forces' legitimacy. In 1966, conscripts established the first military 'labor union', the *Vereniging van Dienstplichtige Militairen* (Union

of Conscripted Soldiers). The conscripts believed the Warsaw Pact was no longer an acute threat due to the easing of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. As a result, they could afford to focus on their personal freedom inside the armed forces instead of collective military security. The army in particular had to deal with the critical conscripts, because it contained most of them. In the 1970s, a few professional soldiers even chose to side with the critical conscripts. The conscientious objectors united in 1967 in the *Bond voor Dienstweigeraars/Dienstplichtigen* (League of Conscientious Objectors/Conscripts) and in 1972 in the *Vereniging Dienstweigeraars* (Organization of Conscientious Objectors). They denied that the Soviet Union posed a threat and considered the armed forces and NATO as Cold War relics. So, from 1974 onwards, did the antimilitarists in *Onkruit*, who tried to make their point clear through sabotage and anti-NATO activities.

Second, critics also condemned the undemocratic appearance of the armed forces. They stated that while the armed forces had to protect the constitutional state and democracy, it was not democratic in its appearance and means itself. The conscripts believed that the army's characteristics were not democratic enough. They perceived themselves not as soldiers, but as civilians wearing a military uniform. They strove to obtain the same civil rights and the same degree of personal freedom inside the armed forces as their peers had in civil society. They sought the democratization of the armed forces, freedom of speech and the right to strike inside the armed forces. Conscientious objectors and antimilitarists demanded the participation of civilians in the decision-making process with regard to the national security and defense policy.

For the first time since the beginning of the Cold War, the Ministry of Defense was confronted with wide-scale criticism inside and outside the armed forces. It was shocked that conscripts, conscientious objectors, professional soldiers and antimilitarists did not focus most of their attention on the Soviet threat but concentrated instead on the transformation of the armed forces' organization and morale. Some of them even attempted to abolish the armed forces. Despite the easing of tensions between the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the Ministry of Defense believed that the armed forces had to be fully operational at all times. It still considered the Soviet Union a major military threat. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Ministry of Defense believed the armed forces' legitimacy depended on its operational capability to counter the Warsaw Pact. Democratization could affect this capability. Conscripts that went on strike, for example, would not be fully capable of countering a sudden Soviet attack. The struggle of the conscientious objectors and the antimilitarists for the participation of civilians in the decision-making process with regard to the national security and defense policy also undermined the armed forces' democratic legitimacy. The Ministry of Defense stated that the security and defense policy was sanctioned by parliament and executed by the armed forces. In a democracy, civilians could not directly interfere in this process. If the armed forces no longer had the exclusive power to execute the national security and defense policy, their democratic legitimacy would be undermined.

The fourth chapter of this study, which covers the timeframe between 1977 and 1989, examines how critics of the armed forces and the national security and defense policy put the

public acceptance of the armed forces under pressure. Against the background of the intended introduction of the neutron bomb to the NATO weapons arsenal in 1977 and the NATO Double-Track Decision of 1979, critical civilians, conscripts, conscientious objectors and professional soldiers protested against the deployment of new cruise missiles on Dutch soil. They considered these weapons immoral from a religious and ethical perspective. They also believed the western possession of cruise missiles would intimidate the Soviet Union and increase the chance of a Soviet attack. Conscripts and professional soldiers considered it their democratic right to protest against cruise missiles within the armed forces and rejected their obligation to carry out nuclear drills. At the same time, antimilitarists protested against the existence of the armed forces as such and pleaded for a nonviolent national security and defense policy.

The Ministry of Defense believed that the nuclear, as well as the antimilitaristic protests undermined the credibility of the armed forces' operational capability. In the 1980s, the legitimacy of the armed forces depended on this credibility. The Soviet Union had to believe the Dutch military would not hesitate to use its cruise missiles. According to the Ministry of Defense, the better this deterrence strategy functioned, the more likely it was that the Soviet Union would abandon its plans for attack. It was crucial that NATO would have no reason to doubt the operational capability of the Dutch armed forces. Similarly Dutch society had to be asserted in this belief as its judgment influenced the image of the Soviet-Union and NATO with regard to the Dutch armed forces.

Central themes in the Ministry of Defense's response to the criticism and protests

This study has shown that during the Cold War, the Ministry of Defense feared that the critical conscripts, conscientious objectors, professional soldiers, civilians and antimilitarists undermined the armed forces' legitimacy. Four other central themes in the ministry's response to the criticism and protests has been explored in this study.

First, the Ministry of Defense only had limited ability to respond to the criticism and protest against the armed forces and the national security and defense policy. It had to accept the primacy of the government in these matters. The Ministry also had little power to deal with the critics because only conscripts, conscientious objectors and professional soldiers could be punished by the Services Correctives Establishment. Antimilitarists and other activists were under the jurisdiction of civil authorities and lawyers. The Ministry of Defense could not intervene if civil lawyers refused to prosecute civilians who had sabotaged the armed forces or preached antimilitarism. The ministry's ability to initiate proceedings against the critics was also limited by the fact that conscripts and conscientious objectors left after their term of service was over. New conscripts and conscientious objectors stood at the head of organizations like the Union of Conscripted Soldiers, the League of Conscientious Objectors and the Organization of Conscientious Objectors. They did not necessarily choose the same path as their predecessors, which made it difficult for the Ministry of Defense to anticipate their actions.

Second, the Ministry did not gain much support from the government for its interpretation of the criticism and protest, nor for its strict approach towards the critics. Public opinion and politics conflicted with the Ministry's position that conscripts were a danger to the armed forces' legitimacy. In their opinion, the struggle of conscripts, conscientious objectors, professional soldiers, civilians and antimilitarists reflected the zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s and had to be expected. Therefore, they believed that a repressive approach to the critics was inappropriate. The differences in opinion between the Ministry of Defense on the one hand, and politics and public opinion on the other, created a chasm between both parties. This study has shown that the Ministry of Defense's approach to the armed forces and national security and defense policy was incompatible with the approach advocated by its critics. One could also argue that the way the Ministry approached its critics, as well as its interpretation of their criticism, were at times incompatible with the interpretation and approach taken by the government.

Third, due to the limited scope of its authority over its critics, the Ministry of Defense often had to make concessions when dealing with them. Lacking societal and political support for its conservatism, the armed forces became more liberal and democratic in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the Ministry of Defense accepted the establishment of the first military 'labor union', alleviated the armed forces grooming standards and compensated overtime work with more money and furloughs. Nevertheless, the Ministry did not accept changes that would have jeopardized the operational capability of the armed forces and thus their legitimacy. The right to strike inside the armed forces, for example, was not introduced.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Defense during the Cold War needlessly feared the undermining of the armed forces' monopoly on military power, their democratic position and their operational capability and credibility. At most, one could argue that the nature of the armed forces changed as a result of the wide-scale criticism and protest. However, the motivation for these changes cannot be attributed solely to the critics. Ultimately, they resulted from the incompatibility of the Ministry of Defense's position with politicians and public opinion and the political impulses originating from within the Ministry and the armed forces to adapt to the transformation of society.