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Postage stamps as manifestations of national identity : Germany and the Netherlands from 1849 to 2005

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Postage Stamps as Manifestations of National Identity

Germany and the Netherlands from 1849 to 2005

Postage stamps are true identity carriers – and therefore grist to cultural geographers’ mill. Take for instance Dutch and German stamps over the past 150 years: they tell strikingly different stories about the countries’ perceived national identities – and about the development of those identities.

Postage stamps provide revealing insights into the way national identities are manifested. They also show how these manifestations change in the course of time. Postage stamps visualize self-images of national identity and do that in a way, which, often unconsciously, exerts considerable influence on the formation – and distortion – of collective images and memories. Postage stamps are communication miniatures par excellence, both for receivers and

senders. They train the visual memory and in this way collective memories become fixed (a topic recently also discussed by *Pauliina Raento* and *Stanley Brunn* in *Geografiska Annaler*).

Postage stamps are typical mass consumption items: everyone gets to see them. The total number of stamps put into circulation in the Netherlands and Germany comes to many billions. The first stamp issued in the Netherlands (1852), which showed the head of King *William III.*, had a print run of nearly 20 million [1]. Recent Dutch standard stamps have been issued in quantities of over 100 million, and special issue stamps in quantities starting at half a million. In recent years special issues of German stamps have been produced in tens of millions of copies.

ernment decided that henceforth senders of mail would have to pay in advance for the services of the state postal company. With its depiction of the reigning monarch, Queen *Victoria*, the famous ‘Penny Black’ [2] set a trend, which many postal services in other countries would follow, including the Netherlands from 1852 onwards.

For a country like the Netherlands, whose history is hardly marked by revolution, the choice of identity images on postage stamps changes only slowly. For countries, which have had a revolutionary history over the past one and a half centuries, such as Germany, the images have changed more radically and there have also been rival manifestations of identity, such as those of the GDR (German Democratic Republic) as opposed to the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) and West Berlin between 1949 and 1990. How different were the developments in these shifting images in the Netherlands and Germany?

Communication miniatures

Postage stamps have functioned as communication miniatures ever since 1840, when the British gov-

Textbox 1: The Study

The study made use of the way the Michel catalogue categorizes stamps. Each stamp issue listed under a separate catalogue number was regarded as one unit for the purpose of our calculations. For the Netherlands all postage stamps issued by the national postal service (the PTT and later the KPN and TPG) were included in the study; stamps issued by the many private town and regional postal services were not included. For Germany the study was limited to the state postal services of the states preceding the German Empire (from 1849), the German Empire (1871–1945), the Occupation Authorities (1945–1949), the Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1990), West-Berlin (*idem*), the German Democratic Republic (*idem*) and United Germany (from 1990 onwards). A total of 2 425 Dutch stamps and 9 229 German stamps were taken into account in the study.



[1]



[2]



[3]



[4]



[5]



[6]



[7]

Comparison of Germany and the Netherlands

Until the early 20th century German and Dutch postage stamps featured mainly heads of state, numbers [3] and heraldic themes (the national coat of arms [4] or mythical figures such as 'Germania' [5]). Gradually images from political history were added (in Germany from 1900 onwards, in the Netherlands from 1907 onwards, beginning with scenes of the unification of Germany [6] and Michiel de Ruyter [7]). In Germany buildings and landscapes were also depicted from 1900 onwards; in the Netherlands this was not done until the 1930s. From the 1920s onwards there was a marked expansion in the scope of the themes depicted on both German and Dutch stamps, with attention being paid to economic, social and religious images, art and artists, science and scientists, sport, means of transport, etc. Until the end of the Second World War the depictions were nearly always of national subjects. If the stamp referred to an international event (such as the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, [8], or those in Berlin in 1936, [9]), it was an international event, which took place in the country itself.

It was not until 1945 that stamps appeared which alluded to international phenomena

Table 1: Thematic breakdown of all Dutch and German postage stamps, 1849–2004

Theme	Netherlands		Germany	
	N	%	N	%
Numbers or letters	273	11	815	9
Symbolic depictions, incl. postal symbols	315	13	408	4
Social, social history/children	386	16	318	3
Sport and sportsmen and -women	45	2	531	6
Art, culture and artists	294	12	1431	16
Science, scientists and technology	91	4	471	5
Religion, religious history	7	0	227	2
Politics, political history	125	5	759	8
Head of state (and/or family)	378	16	375	4
Heraldic or mythical depictions	41	2	811	9
Economy, economic history	37	2	688	7
Means of transport	79	3	524	6
Buildings, landscapes and geography	204	8	1270	14
Nature and environment, flora and fauna	150	6	601	7
Total	2425	100	9229	100
International references	154	6	740	8

Source: see Textbox

abroad. The annual issue of 'Europe stamps' in the Netherlands and the FRG from 1956 onwards and stamps expressing solidarity with other Eastern bloc countries in the GDR Germany are examples, but the trend towards globalization can also be seen in various other stamps [10 and 11], even though the total percentages of 'international images' on postage stamps are not so large: 6% in the Netherlands and 8% in Germany. The vast majority of the images are related to national and local subjects.

Table 1 shows which themes were popular for Dutch and German stamps. The point of departure in this table is the primary theme of a depiction. This does not necessarily correspond with the purpose of issuing the stamp: for example, some of the Dutch "kinderzegels" (children's charity stamps) depicted scientists or art. They are classified in the table under 'science' and 'art'. There are striking differences between the two countries with respect to issuing policy. For instance, in the Netherlands the highest percentage of the stamps issued feature

images related to the head of state or the royal family. This subject is much less prominent in German stamps; in Germany the highest percentage has to do with art and in particular national artists and their works. In the Netherlands this is also an important theme, but it only comes third. Dutch stamps very often show symbolic or abstract representations and far fewer heraldic themes (coat of arms, flag, mythical figures);



[8]



[9]



[10]



[11]



[12a]



[12b]



[12c]



[13]



[14]



[15]

in Germany it is the other way around. Germany also pays considerably more attention to political and economic themes, with 'labour' being a very common theme, particularly in the 1920s, between 1945 and 1949, and in GDR stamps [12a, b, c]. Geographic representations, such as landscapes, buildings, globes and maps, also feature much more often on German stamps than on Dutch ones, whereas in the Netherlands much more attention is paid to children, partly because of the children's charity stamps which have been issued annually since 1924. Sport and transport receive considerably more attention in Germany. Finally, it is striking that in both countries religious images on stamps are relatively rare, but occur considerably more frequently in Germany than in the Netherlands. Hardly any churches are included among the many 'characteristic' buildings shown

on Dutch stamps. And when religious themes do occur, care is taken that a variety of denominations are depicted [13].

German Empire, FRG, GDR

Within Germany there is a big difference between the stamps of the German Empire (1871–1945) and the succeeding states the FRG and the GDR, and between those of the FRG and GDR themselves (they had separate postal services from 1949 to October 1990). The stamps of the German Empire most frequently show numbers and letters without identity, followed by symbolic and abstract depictions, which again convey little identity. During the 1923 hyperinflation in particular 'number' stamps were issued in massive quantities. The most important of the depictions which do carry identity are the heraldic and mythical national images (especially the

earliest ones), followed by heads of state (particularly in the Weimar Republic), images from political history or current political affairs (especially in the *Hitler* era) and pictures of German buildings and landscapes (in the *Hitler* era eventually also landmarks from the annexed areas). Other images appear rarely or not at all.

The FRG and the GDR are surprisingly similar as far as their most dominant images are concerned. Both states frequently turn to art and culture as manifestations of national pride (although attention is also paid to non-German artists). Geography (German landscapes and towns) is also popular, as are nature and – to a lesser extent – sport and means of transport. The differences are to be found mainly in political representations: considerably more attention is paid to current political affairs in the GDR than in the FRG. Both countries have few stamps showing the head of state, but the FRG has more than the GDR. However, the most striking difference is in the appearance of religious depictions: in the FRG they are relatively important, whereas in the GDR they are almost completely absent until suddenly in 1990 a stamp turns up showing the Polish Pope – but not surprisingly this was after the "Wende" [14].

The GDR's stamps are full of happy labourers and other economy-related images, whereas the FRG's pay more attention to social affairs [15]. Another striking feature is the use of universal and abstract depictions on FRG stamps (especially during the last period) and the greater use of flags and the arms of the state in GDR stamps.

The Netherlands through time

Interest in certain themes is clearly also connected with the spirit of the times. In the 'classical' period of Dutch stamps the head of state was very prominent; other depictions were of numbers and occasionally the national coat of arms.

In the period prior to the First World War political history received much attention, especially in connection with the 100th anniversary of the restoration of Dutch independence. Stamps featured portraits of previous kings as well as of the contemporary head of state *Wilhelmina*. Until the mid-1930s the head of state herself took pride of place again, but social themes also came into vogue. From 1935 to 1944 the head of state was less prominent and numbers predominated. After the classical era this is often a sign of crisis: the country prefers not to manifest an identity (one can see the same thing in Germany in 1923 and just after the Second World War). There is also an increasing focus on social themes and on art and science. The German occupiers manifested themselves with stamps such as those featuring Germanic symbols [16] and the Dutch Legion [17], but also stamps showing Dutch naval heroes of the 17th century.

In 1944 the Dutch government in exile in London issued stamps for use in the liberated south showing war images [18] in addition to stamps featuring Queen *Wilhelmina* (of higher denominations). After the war the first stamp issued after the recovery of independence showed a Dutch lion struggling with a dragon [19]. In the ten years following the war

stamps showing the head of state and the royal family were predominant (in addition to stamps with social themes): the queen and the princesses as a manifestation of the restoration of independence. This was the last time that the head of state figured so prominently in the stamps issued by the postal service. In the period to 1975 most stamp issues featured social themes, while many also paid attention to art and culture, including local culture [20a, b, c, d, e].

In the next 20 years geography started to gain importance and from 1985 to 1995 it was the most dominant theme. Since 1995 strange things have happened in Dutch philately. Not only has the number of issues increased enormously, but the choice of themes has shifted to various abstract images [21], the arts, and flora and fauna, nature and environment. Could this be a result of the privatization of the postal services? Is it an expression of post-modernity? Or is it a sign of crisis in the Dutch national identity? In this period there are also many stamps available in the Netherlands which feature only numbers or only texts.

Germany through time

In the classical period of German stamps, from 1849 to 1925, some- times the heraldic and mythical



[16]



[17]



[18a]



[18b]



[19]

depictions were predominant and at other times the 'neutral' numbers. In the early years of the Weimar Republic 'labour' was also a prominent theme [22a, b]. In the period between the inflation (1923) and the rise of National Socialism the head of state was the most frequent depiction on postage stamps, but coats of arms were also important, particularly regional arms. Geography and the arts were also on the rise. In the *Hitler* era geographic images were predominant [23], followed by images of current political affairs. For the first time sport – that modern mass phenomenon par excel-



[20a]



[20b]



[20c]



[20d]



[20e]



[21]



[22a]



[22b]



[23]



[24]



[25]



[26]



[27]

lence – also received considerable attention. In the period of chaos which followed, at first the postal services fell back on neutral numbers, but in the stamps issued by the Allied Occupying Forces and by the FRG geography was also a popular theme. In the Russian occupation zone and the later GDR there was a considerable focus on economy-related images, with many triumphant labourers and peasants. But on both sides of the political spectrum art works already featured frequently on stamps.

For the first time truly international themes were also used; it is interesting to see that both the GDR and the FRG reached their peak with respect to international orientation not in the more recent decades of globalization, but in the 1960s. After that there was a decrease rather than an increase in globalization in postage stamp images.

From about 1955 onwards works of art and pictures of artists became the dominant messengers of identity; both the GDR and the FRG fell back on Germany's rich cultural history [24 to 26]. Buildings and landscapes were still close runners-up. The third and fourth places always went to political themes or nature and environment, flora and fauna. Gradually the economy disappeared from stamps (even in the GDR!) and after 1973 the postal services showed no more interest at all in the head of state, neither in the FRG nor in the GDR. After unification preference was still given in the standard series of stamps to themes such as 'Women in German History' [27], 'Places of Interest'/'Pictures from Germany', or 'Coats of Arms of the States of the Federal Republic of Germany'.

Geography

In both Germany and the Netherlands one of the main focal areas of postage stamp issuing policy in the 20th century was geography: landscapes, townscapes and buildings, and occasionally a map or a globe. However, geography was considerably more prominent in issuing policy in Germany than in the Netherlands. The geographic images refer to actual locations on the map, so that there is also a

political dimension. Which areas receive the most attention? Do urban or rural scenes predominate? And – most importantly – where are they located?

Without immediately drawing conclusions, it may be said that The Hague, Amsterdam and the provinces of Holland are firm fixtures in the Dutch postage stamp landscape. A total of 182 Dutch stamps with geographic themes were issued; of these, 41 represent sites which cannot be clearly identified, for example a windmill 'in the vicinity of Kinderdijk' [28]. Of the 141 site-specific stamps, four show sites in former Dutch colonies (two in Curaçao [29] and two in the Dutch East Indies) and one a site in a 'truly' foreign country (Japan, but the stamp in question showed the Dutch Pavilion in Osaka). Nearly 60 % of the stamps showing sites in the Netherlands show places in North or South Holland, and 31 of them show The Hague (but that is because many stamps feature the Peace Palace [30] and Amsterdam [18 stamps; 31]). Of course the Delta works (and the Netherlands as a "land of water") are liberally represented and therefore so is Zeeland [32].

As far as the periphery is concerned, Gelderland and Friesland are represented relatively frequently, Drenthe and Groningen very rarely and Flevoland not at all. It must be said, however, that during the past few decades a large number of private town and regional postal services have been set up, mainly in the periphery. Often they issue outstanding postage stamps which more than compensate for the lack of attention for local themes in national



[28]



[29]



[30]



[31]



[32]

stamps. It is also interesting to note that the PTT/TPG (the national postal service) mainly depicts buildings in towns and townscapes, whereas the local postal services show a striking number of rural landscapes (33).

German stamps have always been much more geographically oriented than Dutch ones: there are no fewer than 1 220 German postage stamps with geographic depictions. Like Dutch stamps, German stamps show few foreign locations, with the exception of



[33]



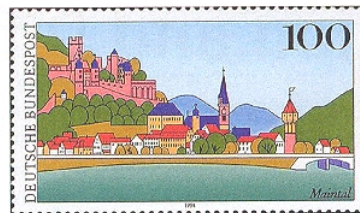
[34]



[35]



[36]



[37a]



[37b]

areas annexed during the Second World War, such as Vienna [34]. And German stamps also favour townscapes, or buildings in towns, while paying much less attention to rural landscapes (though in the GDR the number is relatively high). The prominence of Berlin in German stamps as a whole (25%) is much greater than that of Amsterdam in Dutch stamps (around 10%), but that is mainly because from 1949 to 1990 West Berlin had its own stamps, with many scenes from Berlin [35]. A second German city, which received a great deal of attention, is Leipzig; the reason is the postal services' focus on the Leipzig Trade Fair [36]. Other towns are much less visible; the towns shown most frequently after Berlin and Leipzig are Dresden, Munich, Saarbrücken (for a while there were special stamps for Saarland), Frankfurt and Cologne. But the Ruhr area gets a very rough deal, as does a city as big as Hamburg. Many German geographic depictions are slightly nostalgic and refer to cultural heritage rather than to economic geography [37].

Interest in the collection of stamps may be waning, but postage stamps would still serve as an academically interesting source of visual information, even if nobody collected them any more. They provide a picture of the way postal administrations deal with expressions of identity – something which varies widely between differ-

Table 2: Themes on postage stamps of the GDR and FRG *

Theme	% GDR	% FRG
Numbers	1	0
Symbolic	2	9
Social	3	8
Sport	8	6
Art	19	18
Science	7	7
Religion	0	8
Politics	13	7
Head of State	1	4
Heraldic	5	1
Economic	8	3
Transport	8	7
Geography	12	12
Nature	10	9
Total	100	100

*1949–1990

ent countries and periods. Studying this aspect of postage stamps is a study in cultural (and political) geography in miniature. It is also a novel form of philately. ■

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