



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Travelling barricades: transnational networks, diffusion and the dynamics of 1980s squatter conflicts in Western Europe

Steen, B.S. van der

Citation

Steen, B. S. van der. (2024). Travelling barricades: transnational networks, diffusion and the dynamics of 1980s squatter conflicts in Western Europe. *Contemporary European History*, 1-16. doi:10.1017/S0960777323000620

Version: Publisher's Version
License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3717120>

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

ARTICLE

Travelling Barricades: Transnational Networks, Diffusion and the Dynamics of 1980s Squatter Conflicts in Western Europe

Bart van der Steen 

Leiden University Libraries, Leiden, Netherlands

b.s.van.der.steen@library.leidenuniv.nl

This paper reconstructs and compares four squatter conflicts in Amsterdam, Nijmegen, Copenhagen and Hamburg during the 1980s in which squatters defended themselves from eviction from occupied houses by barricading entire streets. Remarkable similarities can be observed in how these conflicts developed. Was this the result of international contacts between the squatters, of similarities between the cities, or did the construction of barricades set in motion more general dynamics that influenced protest dynamics? This paper warns against overestimating the influence of transnational activist networks. Although the conflicts unfolded in similar ways while squatters fostered international contacts, the latter alone do not suffice to explain the former. Instead, this paper highlights the ‘social function’ of the barricade and the inherent conflict dynamics that barricade building set in motion.

Introduction

In February 1980, the occupation of a house on Vondelstraat street by Amsterdam youths escalated in an unprecedented way.¹ Squatters had organised a militant march in a different part of the city to divert the police’s attention, after which a small group occupied and barricaded the building. When the police arrived moments later to evict them, the squatters fought them off with sticks and stones, forcing them to retreat. The squatters then proceeded to barricade the whole street and held on to the barricades for a full weekend, after which the city deployed military vehicles, snipers and a massive police force to clear the streets. The squatted house, however, was left in peace and was later legalised. As the smoke cleared, many Amsterdam squatters felt victorious. Although they had not been able to withstand the full force of the authorities, they had been able to show their strength and resolve, had provoked the state to resort to extreme measures, and nevertheless managed to gain tangible results in the form of a legalised squat.

A year later, Nijmegen activists used similar tactics as the Amsterdam squatters to barricade a street.² Again, squatters diverted the police’s attention, and again military vehicles were sent to clear the barricades. But this time, the Nijmegen squatters had anticipated such a response and dug a tank ditch in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to stop them. Furthermore, the barricades lasted not a weekend but a full week. Squatters throughout Western Europe maintained contacts and fostered transnational networks, and when activists in Copenhagen and Hamburg fought out squatter conflicts

¹ E. Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur: Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse kraakbeweging, 1964–1999* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 2000); J. Blom et al., *De Vondelstraat: Verslagen van Radio STAD, 29 februari – 3 maart 1980* (Amsterdam: Van Gennep, 1980); *Even geduld, deze straat is gekraakt: Vondelstraat februari, maart 1980* (Amsterdam, 1980); G. Anderiesen, ‘Tanks in the Streets: The Growing Conflict over Housing in Amsterdam’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 5, no. 1 (1980): 83–95.

² A. Bruls, *De Pierson: Verhalen over een volksoptand in twintigste eeuw Nijmegen* (Nijmegen: De Stratemakerstoren, 2006).

in 1986 and 1987 respectively, they followed similar tactics and provoked similar government responses. Nevertheless, they achieved very different outcomes.³ While the squats in Amsterdam and Hamburg were legalised, the Nijmegen and Copenhagen squatters were evicted.

Remarkable similarities and differences can thus be observed in these four conflicts. How can this be explained? Traugott has referred to the 'sociological and symbolic functions' of the barricade to explain why barricades evoke very similar conflict dynamics.⁴ Scholars researching squatters as urban social movements investigate the general and local particularities of squatter conflicts.⁵ Social movement scholars researching the diffusion of protest forms have tried to assess the influence of activist networks.⁶ All these aspects of urban social conflict can be witnessed in the squatter barricade conflicts of the 1980s. They shared general characteristics, were influenced by local contexts, and connected through the activist networks that squatters maintained. How these three aspects of urban social conflict relate to each other in the context of squatter conflicts, however, has not yet been thoroughly investigated.

This paper therefore offers a systematic comparison of four squatter conflicts, and focuses on similarities and differences, in order to explain them through the abovementioned three factors: the 'social function' of the barricade, local contexts, and transnational squatter networks. The four cases have been chosen because they represent major instances in which squatters built barricades and were able to hold them for several days. Although other cities such as West-Berlin also witnessed spectacular squatter conflicts, where the barricading of squatted buildings was not uncommon, escalation up to the point of barricading entire streets remained exceptional throughout the decade. Furthermore, the four conflicts can be divided into two 'couples' of cities, Amsterdam/Nijmegen and Copenhagen/Hamburg, that were geographically and temporally close, therefore providing ample opportunity for gauging the extent and influence of squatter networks.

The paper is based on two bodies of source material – a systematic review of news reports, and squatter publications – and is constructed of three parts. The first section discusses the history and historiography of 1980s squatting and squatter internationalism. The second section compares the various phases through which the four squatter conflicts developed and uncovers their similarities. The third section uses the information from these cases to critically interrogate social movement scholarship on the diffusion of protest tactics.

History and Historiography of Radical Urban Squatting

Urban squatting emerged as a form of action in Western Europe in the late 1960s and developed into a fully-fledged social movement in the 1970s. In the 1980s, parts of the movement grew more confrontational, giving way to a militant (autonomist) squatter movement, which confronted authorities in the streets during riots, barricaded buildings and engaged in acts of sabotage such as fire bombings. This militant movement was particularly strong in the Netherlands, West Germany, Denmark and Switzerland.⁷

³ S. Borgstede, H. Küllmer and E. Proemmel, *Wir wollen alles: Hausbesetzungen in Hamburg* (Hamburg: Laika, 2013); B. Sichtermann and K. Sichtermann, *Das ist unser Haus: Eine Geschichte der Hausbesetzung* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2017), 136–51; F. Mikkelsen and R. Karpantschhof, 'Youth as a Political Movement: Development of the Squatters' and Autonomous Movement in Copenhagen, 1981–95', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2001): 593–608; '9 Tage hinter den Barrikaden' (1986), see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvVYwVQqRFY>.

⁴ M. Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 212.

⁵ M. Castells, *The City and the Grassroots. A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

⁶ K. T. Andrews and M. Biggs, 'The Dynamics of Protest Diffusion: Movement Organizations, Social Networks, and News Media in the 1960 Sit-Ins', *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 752–77. S. A. Soule and C. Roggeband, 'Diffusion Processes within and across Movements', in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, eds. D. A. Snow et al. (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2019), 236–51.

⁷ F. Anders and A. Sedlmaier, eds., *Public Goods versus Economic Interests: Global Perspectives on the History of Squatting* (London: Routledge, 2018); A. Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City: A History of Urban Squatting* (London: Verso, 2017); B. van der Steen, A. Katzeff, and L. van Hoogenhuijze, eds., *The City is Ours: Squatting and Autonomous Movements in Europe from the 1970s to the Present* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

Anders and Sedlmaier emphasise that squatting – i.e. taking possession of land or built structures without the permission of the formal owner – has a global history and takes different shapes in the Global North and South. Viewing squatting as ‘an urban innovation resource for the development of social and cultural interests “from below”’, they foreground the material needs of squatters and warn against over-politicisation of their struggle, stating that squatting can ‘have elements of resistance involved, but many who lived on land without full title or in buildings they did not own or rent were in the first place interested in the material reality of accommodation and sought to be included in a “mainstream” housing market they were unable to access with conventional means rather than challenging it in principle’.⁸

In doing so, they side with researchers such as Peter Birke, who approaches the history of squatting in Hamburg as part of a broader struggle against the ‘valorisation and economisation of the city’,⁹ of Reeve and Bailey, who view squatting’s history in London as part of a struggle against homelessness and lack of affordable housing,¹⁰ and Sedlmaier, who researches squatting in West Germany as part of a conflict over the public commodity of urban living space in the context of economic crisis and deindustrialisation of Western Europe.¹¹ Analysing contemporary housing struggles in Spain, Vasudevan speaks of the “two faces of occupation in an age of austerity” – responding to people’s basic needs and constituting an autonomous political force’.¹²

This approach places them at odds with a research tradition that tends to view squatters in Western Europe as an explicitly political force. While Anders and Sedlmaier hold that ‘research on squatting is still in its infancy’,¹³ political squatting in Western Europe has received due attention and has alternatively been interpreted as an urban social movement,¹⁴ part of the wave of new social movements that emerged in the 1960s,¹⁵ or even as a radical or autonomist (youth) movement.¹⁶

Viewing squatters as activists tackling urban issues, Bailey researched how they managed to mobilise youths, homeless people and working class communities to occupy vacant houses, resist demolition plans and gain (temporary) leases. Pruijt has shown how squatters were able to mobilise activists, neighbourhoods and urban elites against far-reaching technocratic urban renewal schemes, effecting a fundamental governmental turn towards renovation and retention of housing blocks and traditional neighbourhood structures.¹⁷ Bodenschatz et al. compared such urban conflicts over urban renewal plans between Amsterdam, West-Berlin and London.¹⁸

Kriesi et al., on the other hand, approached squatters as part of the wave of new social movements that emerged in the 1960s, movements that seemingly distinguished themselves from traditional social

⁸ F. Anders and A. Sedlmaier, ‘Global Perspectives on Squatting’, in Anders and Sedlmaier, *Public Goods versus Economic Interests*, 1–26, 2.

⁹ P. Birke, ‘Right to the City – and Beyond: The Topographies of Urban Social Movements in Hamburg’, in *Urban Uprisings. Challenging Neoliberal Urbanism in Europe*, eds. M. Mayer, C. Thörn and H. Thörn (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 203–232.

¹⁰ K. Reeve, ‘Squatting since 1945: The Enduring Relevance of Material Need’, in *Housing and Social Policy: Contemporary Themes and Critical Perspectives*, eds. P. Somerville and N. Sprigings (London: Routledge, 2005), 197–216; R. Bailey, *The Squatters* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

¹¹ A. Sedlmaier, *Consumption and Violence: Radical Protest in Cold-War West Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014).

¹² Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*, 240.

¹³ Anders and Sedlmaier, ‘Global Perspectives on Squatting’, 3.

¹⁴ Castells, *The City and the Grassroots*.

¹⁵ H. Kriesi et al., *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2017).

¹⁶ G. Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: Geronimo, Feuer und Flamme. Zur Geschichte der Autonomen* (Berlin: ID Verlag, 2002). See also: B. van der Steen, A. Katzeff, and L. van Hoogenhuijze, ‘Squatting and Autonomous Action in Europe, 1980–2012’, in van der Steen et al., *The City is Ours*, 1–19.

¹⁷ H. Pruijt, ‘The Impact of Citizens’ Protest on City Planning in Amsterdam’, in *Cultural Heritage and the Future of the Historic Inner City of Amsterdam*, eds. L. Deben, W. Salet and M. van Thoor (Amsterdam: Aksant, 2004), 228–44. See also: H. Pruijt, ‘The Logic of Urban Squatting’, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37 (2013): 19–45.

¹⁸ H. Bodenschatz et al., *Schluss mit der Zerstörung? Stadterneuerung und städtische Opposition in Amsterdam, London und West-Berlin* (Giessen: Anabas, 1982).

movements due to their focus on issues of reproduction (housing, education, gender and race relations) and their potential to mobilise youths in horizontal activist communities.¹⁹ While Kriesi et al. explain the development of squatter movements through the opening of political opportunity structures and the dynamics of protest waves, they also argued that squatting was not merely a political movement centred around material needs but also fostered a certain way of life. Taking a cue from this, authors such as Hillenkamp approached (autonomist) squatters as a political subculture, arguing that subcultural elements enabled the continuous mobilisation of new groups of youths but also hampered movement learning processes, thus keeping the movement ‘stuck’ in its subcultural ‘ghetto’.²⁰

Vasudevan builds on this characterisation as he conceptualises autonomist squatting as ‘a political practice, a way of living and a youth subculture’, focusing on the ‘everyday practices and political imaginations of squatters’.²¹ Vasudevan argues that autonomist squatting had two faces: a ‘front stage’ where the movement interacted with authorities, media, allies and opponents, and a ‘back stage’ where activists embarked on ‘an existential search for a different identity and a collective form of living that took place primarily within squats and other “scene” spaces including bars, concerts and social centres’.²²

This paper focuses on autonomist squatters in Western Europe during the 1980s, approaches them as a radical social and political movement, and thus employs concepts and methods from social movement studies to reconstruct and explain their actions. At the same time, this paper acknowledges that squatting is a global phenomenon with a long history, and that only parts of the squatter population identify themselves as political or subcultural actors. Autonomist squatting in Western Europe, then, only represents a small part of this larger story.

The autonomist squatter movement’s historical significance can be identified on three levels. The Vondelstraat conflict, together with the Opera House Riots in Zurich (30 May 1980) and the ‘Battle of the Fraenkelufer’ in West-Berlin (12 December 1980), gave rise to an international (autonomist) squatter movement that was particularly strong in the metropolises of the Netherlands, West Germany, Switzerland and Denmark.²³ The squatters’ activism significantly influenced urban authorities in changing their policies of urban renewal from large-scale demolition of boroughs to careful renovation of historical structures.²⁴ Furthermore, as the 1980s progressed, squatters formed either the heart or the militant wing of various social movements and thoroughly influenced European protest cultures.²⁵ Finally, squatted spaces provided the infrastructure for underground subcultures such as punk and new wave, which left their mark not only on 1980s and 1990s pop culture, but also on its current incarnations. All of these effects transcended local and national boundaries.

Researching Squatter Internationalism

Although squatting was an international phenomenon, research has only recently come to pay closer attention to the squatters’ international networks, using different sources and methods. Initial research concentrated on explaining the emergence and radicalisation of squatter movements in particular cities. But although squatter movements mobilised on a local level, individual squatters were highly mobile, travelling from city to city. Owens has analysed how squatters formed networks and

¹⁹ Kriesi, *New Social Movements in Western Europe*.

²⁰ S. Hillenkamp, ‘Die Autonomen: Zwischen kultureller Wirklichkeit und politischer Wirksamkeit’, *Forschungsjournal Neue Soziale Bewegungen* 8, no. 2 (1995): 54–66. See also: B. van der Steen, ‘How Political is a Political Subculture? The Paradoxical Place of Politics within the Squatter Movement’, in *Routledge Handbook of Radical Politics*, eds. R. Kinna and U. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 2019), 510–23.

²¹ Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*, 8–9.

²² *Ibid.*, 77–8.

²³ Anders and Sedlmaier, *Public Goods versus Economic Interests*; Vasudevan, *The Autonomous City*; van der Steen et al., *The City is Ours*.

²⁴ H. Pruijt, ‘The Impact of Citizens’ Protest on City Planning in Amsterdam’; H. Bodenschatz et al., *Schluß mit der Zerstörung? Stadterneuerung und städtische Opposition in West-Berlin, Amsterdam und London* (Berlin: Anabas Verlag, 1983).

²⁵ K. Andresen and B. van der Steen, eds., *A European Youth Revolt: European Perspectives on Youth Protest and Social Movements in the 1980s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016).

exchanged protest repertoires, tactics and strategies.²⁶ Among others, he reconstructed how Amsterdam squatters went ‘on tour’ to various West German cities, where they showed a homemade film about the Vondelstraat conflict. Fellow activists regularly took inspiration from the Amsterdammers’ militancy. Reports from squatter media, however, highlight the ad hoc nature of many of these contacts and the occasional misunderstandings that they gave way to.²⁷

This paper reconstructs and compares four squatter barricade conflicts. To do so, an analysis was made of news media, squatter media and activist ego documents in order to compile four timelines, detailing the conflicts’ evolutions, dividing them into phases and highlighting their similarities and differences. The analysis of the data and compilation of the timelines followed an iterative process, where an initial research question guided the analysis, but was regularly adjusted on the basis of new information coming forth out of the analysis.²⁸ News media proved a valuable basis for this type of analysis, since they would provide their readers with detailed daily reports, often giving voice to various sides of the conflict (squatters, authorities, neighbours). That squatters valued this source to a certain extent is shown by the fact that they would regularly publish collections of newspaper clippings and systematically collect and archive them. Squatter media and ego documents were valuable because they would provide reconstructions and analyses of the conflicts from the squatters’ perspective and would sometimes provide information not contained in mainstream media reports.

All three sources used for this paper are inevitably biased and incomplete; biased because of the people making them and the audiences for which they were intended, and incomplete because they are reflections of the limited information that the makers had at their disposal. It is, however, important to note that no sources exist that are unbiased and complete. The goal, then, is to be transparent about and aware of the limitations of the sources and adjust the research methodology accordingly.

For example, a Dutch journalist reporting on events at the Hamburg Hafenstraße showed his limited understanding of the situation when he misread a squatter sign at one of the barricades: ‘*Kein Zutritt für Zivis + Reporter*’ (‘No entry allowed for plainclothes policemen and journalists’). Taking this to mean that not only journalists but also civilians (*Zivilisten*) were not allowed to enter the barricaded area, this prompted a snide remark on the squatters’ supposed sectarianism, after which the journalist was corrected by a reader’s letter.²⁹ Such factual errors, however, do not disqualify newspaper reports as a historical source. Analysing newspaper reports in large numbers and cross-referencing them with other sources enables researchers to place individual reports in a broader context, and even turn factual errors into valuable information, for example of a journalist’s level of knowledge and the politics that informed his reports.³⁰ In a similar way, squatter media and ego documents provide a particular view of, and limited information on, how squatter conflicts evolved and how squatters analysed and experienced them. Furthermore, squatter publications are often intended as interventions in inner movement debates, and were written with a specific goal and audience in mind. Thus, when Hamburg squatters dismantled their barricades and signed a lease with the city government for their houses, they declared it a victory and a concession from the authorities, even though their legal situation had not improved in any significant way; that declaration may have been informed by authentic feelings of victory but could also have been prompted by an urgently felt need to show

²⁶ L. Owens, ‘Have Squat, Will Travel: How Squatter Mobility Mobilizes Squatting’, in *Squatting in Europe: Radical Spaces, Urban Struggles*, ed. Squatting Europe Kollektive (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 185–207.

²⁷ B. van der Steen, ‘Die internationalen Verbindungen der Hausbesetzerbewegung in den 70er und 80er Jahren’, in *Deutsche Zeitgeschichte – transnational*, eds. A. Gallus, A. Schildt and D. Siegfried (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015), 203–220.

²⁸ This method was inspired by W. Lehne, *Der Konflikt um die Hafenstraße: Kriminalitätsdiskurse im Kontext symbolischer Politik* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus, 1994), 63–6, 80–2.

²⁹ ‘Krakers in Hamburg vieren nederlaag als zege’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 Nov. 1987; ‘Krakerstaal’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 28 Nov. 1987.

³⁰ E. Amenta et al., ‘From Bias to Coverage: What Explains How News Organizations Treat Social Movements’, *Sociology Compass* 11, no. 3 (2017): 1–12; R. Vliegthart and S. Walgrave, ‘The Interdependency of Mass Media and Social Movements’, in *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication*, eds. H. A. Semetko and M. Scammell (London: Sage, 2012), 387–98.

their supporters that their efforts in barricade building had been worthwhile.³¹ Again, critically reflecting on authors and intended audiences, on the goals and politics of the authors, and analysing the sources contextually, enables researchers to see the time-bound, place-bound, and politics-bound nature of these sources and to use them as valuable repositories of information, despite their possible biases and incompleteness.

Research on squatter movements has often based itself on mainstream and squatter media, as well as activist ego documents. Kriesi et al. have used news reports to statistically reconstruct the rise and decline of squatter protest actions, while Lehne and Amann have analysed how mainstream media framed squatter conflicts.³² Analyses of squatter media are traditionally aimed at reconstructing the political history of the movement. Haunss, for example, analysed how gender relations and forms of organisation were discussed in the West-Berlin squatter magazine *interim*.³³ A difficulty of such research lies in assessing the importance of such political debates in a movement that was decentralised, highly diverse and weary of dogmas.

Researchers focusing on movement culture and the experiences and identities of activists have regularly taken recourse to interviews with squatters and analyses of memoirs and other ego-documents. Since the statements of (former) activists cannot be taken at face value, researchers such as Owens have explicitly approached them as ‘narratives’, as stories that connect certain events in order to make a larger point.³⁴ Analysed as such, ego documents can provide insight into how squatters experienced and remembered their engagement in the movement.³⁵

In this paper, media are not simply approached as sources of factual information, but also as platforms where ‘framing conflicts’ occurred, i.e. where differing views were articulated and pitted against each other. Gamson and Wolfsfeld have portrayed movements and media as interacting systems, while Rucht has emphasised the basic power inequality between protesters and established media.³⁶ Others have emphasised, however, that squatters developed effective media strategies and were far from helpless in the face of disadvantageous media framings by others.³⁷ Squatters and their supporters energetically collected and republished newspaper clippings. The archive of the Amsterdam squatter movement, the ‘Staatsarchief’, held at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, consists of 75 meters of material, a large section of which is made up of newspaper clippings. This research is based on a systematic analysis of the newspaper reports on all four barricade events as stored in the Staatsarchief, as well as additional research in the Dutch newspaper database Delpher and the digital archives of the Hamburg-based publications *Die Zeit*, *Der Spiegel* and *Hamburger Abendblatt*. This material has been complemented by memoirs, interviews and other ego-documents produced by (former) squatters.

Turning Barricades from a Policing into a Political Issue

The Paris Commune of 1871 is generally seen as a turning point in the history of barricades. Although revolutionaries had temporarily taken over the city and built extensive barricades, the French army was ultimately able to crush them with ease, using machine guns and canons, and killing as many

³¹ ‘Krakers in Hamburg vieren nederlaag als zege’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 Nov. 1987.

³² Kriesi, *New Social Movements in Western Europe*; Lehne, *Der Konflikt um die Hafenstraße*. See also R. Amann, *Der moralische Aufschrei: Presse und abweichendes Verhalten am Beispiel der Hausbesetzungen in Berlin* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1985).

³³ S. Haunss, *Identität in Bewegung: Prozesse kollektiver Identität bei den Autonomen und in der Schwulenbewegung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2004).

³⁴ L. Owens, *Cracking under Pressure: Narrating the Decline of the Amsterdam Squatters’ Movement* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

³⁵ P. Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); R. Perks and A. Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998); S. Berger, S. Scalmer and C. Wicke, eds., *Remembering Social Movements: Activism and Memory* (London: Routledge, 2021).

³⁶ W. Gamson and G. Wolfsfeld, ‘Movements and Media as Interacting Systems’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (1993): 114–25; D. Rucht, ‘The Quadruple “A”: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements’, in *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements*, eds. W. van de Donk et al. (London: Routledge, 2004), 25–48.

³⁷ Adilkno, *Cracking the Movement: Squatting Beyond the Media* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

as 20,000 people. As a weapon for revolutionary warfare, then, the barricade had become obsolete. Or, as Friedrich Engels stated in 1895, its 'spell' had been 'broken'.³⁸ Bos has dubbed its later incarnations 'contentious roadblocks', while Traugott emphasises its 'sociological and symbolic functions'.³⁹ Squatters in the 1980s were well aware that their barricades would ultimately be no match for the combined forces of the state. As an Amsterdam squatter stated: 'If push comes to shove, we will lose. We have prehistoric weapons facing armored cars; it's sticks and stones against canons.'⁴⁰ To successfully confront the authorities, the squatters needed to be creative and move the confrontation from a physical to a political level. In all four cities, they did so in two steps.

The first step was to divert the police. As stated, the Amsterdam squatters did so by organising a militant demonstration in another part of the city to draw the police's attention away from the house that they wanted to squat. This tactic had been employed earlier in 1976 and 1978, and in 1980 it worked so well that Nijmegen squatters followed suit when they set out to barricade their street of squatted houses in 1981.⁴¹ In Copenhagen in 1986, squatters surprised the police by gathering in a block of 2,000 militant protesters, hours before the official start of their demonstration. As a result, the police were unable to prevent them from diverting course and heading for the contested squat, where they broke through the police lines and installed barricades from pre-made 'Spanish riders' and barbed wire.⁴² In Hamburg in 1987, police were present in even larger numbers, surrounding the squatted Hafenstraße complex, when squatters suddenly stormed out and started building barricades. Squatters and their supporters erected barricades throughout the city, but these were almost directly dismantled by the police. At the Hafenstraße, however, the police chose not to intervene for fear of lethal clashes and allowed events to run their course.⁴³

A Hamburg squatter later remembered that the police were 'completely taken by surprise',⁴⁴ while Katsiaficas claims that the Copenhagen squatters succeeded in 'completely fooling' the police.⁴⁵ It would be more precise, however, to say that the police were prepared yet still overwhelmed and temporarily outnumbered. The Amsterdam police, for example, had deduced early on the day that something was about to happen, as squatters started gathering throughout the city.⁴⁶ In the end, however, its hastily organised riot squad was no match for the squatters' coordinated action. Similarly, in Nijmegen, the mayor was informed hours in advance of the squatters' plans, but was unable to adequately respond, given 'the very limited man power at our disposal'.⁴⁷ He decided to focus on protecting the city centre's storefronts from rioting squatters, leaving only one police officer in charge of trying to stop a whole group of squatters from setting up barricades. In both cases, the police were in the know but still could not respond effectively.

The second step in the squatters' strategy was to turn the barricades from a policing problem into a political issue that could be negotiated with politicians rather than police. In Amsterdam, the police initially attempted to undo the occupation of the Vondelstraat house, but they were effectively rebuffed by the squatters.⁴⁸ In Copenhagen, the police made several unsuccessful attempts on the first two days

³⁸ Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade*, 212.

³⁹ D. Bos, 'Building Barricades: The Political Transfer of a Contentious Roadblock', *European Review of History* 12, no. 2 (2005): 345–60; Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade*, 241.

⁴⁰ 'De Amsterdamse krakersoorlog', *Haagse Post*, 8 Mar. 1980.

⁴¹ Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*; G. Jansen Hendriks, 'De Vondelstraat', *Andere tijden*, 14 Dec. 2010, see: <https://anderetijden.nl/afllevering/672/De-Vondelstraat>; Bruls, *De Pierson*; Omroep Gelderland, 'De Piersonstraat' (1991), see: <https://youtu.be/pdyk4TtwpLQ>.

⁴² D. Möbius, 'Schlacht von Ryesgade', *Haltenraum*: <http://haltenraum.com/article/schlacht-vonryesgade>.

⁴³ 'Acht Tage im November', *Die Tageszeitung*, 2 Nov. 2012; 'Szenen wie im Bürgerkrieg', *Hamburger Morgenpost*, 7 Nov. 2012; 'Sechs Stunden lang gehörte St. Pauli den Vermummten', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 13 Nov. 1987.

⁴⁴ 'Szenen wie im Bürgerkrieg'.

⁴⁵ G. Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics: European Autonomous Social Movements and the Decolonization of Everyday Life* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 122.

⁴⁶ Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 42–3.

⁴⁷ Omroep Gelderland, 'De Piersonstraat'.

⁴⁸ G. Jansen Hendriks, 'De Vondelstraat'.

to take over and break down the squatter barricades (they would remain for nine days).⁴⁹ When it turned out that the police could not clear the barricades, they soon reverted to patrolling *around* the barricades. In Amsterdam, the police patrolled the barricades but refrained from coming close to them, while the Copenhagen police positioned 450 officers around the barricaded area.⁵⁰ In Nijmegen, the police even 'formed a perimeter [...] to protect the squatters' from riotous youths who turned against the squatters and threatened to attack them.⁵¹ Being essentially a means for maintaining order, rather than doing justice, the police soon incorporated the barricades into the status quo that it was ordered to protect. By effectively withstanding the police, the squatters thus turned their barricades from a policing issue into a political one. Now, it was up to the city government to decide on the next steps.

Comparing the first phase of these four conflicts enables us to gauge their general characteristics and local particularities. While in Amsterdam the building of barricades occurred spontaneously, prompted by the unforeseen 'victory' over, and retreat of, heavy duty police, barricade building in the other three cities was well-prepared, including stashing of barricade material. Another difference lies in the place of these conflicts in different protest waves; while in Amsterdam the Vondelstraat conflict formed the start of a wave of militant squatting, in Hamburg, the battle for the Hafenstraße in 1987 represented the climax and end of a protest wave. The most striking aspect of this early phase of barricade conflict, however, is the general similarities in conflict dynamics that barricade building set in motion: the ways in which the squatters outwitted the authorities and the ways in which the police responded to barricade building and defence.

The Authorities Respond

While the squatters used very similar tactics, the same could be said for the police: when they could not crush the barricades they took to patrolling them. City governments, too, responded in similar ways to the squatter actions: they started negotiations, while at the same time preparing for violent eviction. Copenhagen called in 950 police officers, together with army materiel such as armoured cars,⁵² while Hamburg assembled a force of 6,000 police and border patrol officers, together with anti-terrorist squads, helicopters, armoured cars, and water cannons.⁵³ In Nijmegen, 200 police vans brought in 1,950 riot police and border patrol officers,⁵⁴ while Amsterdam mobilised 400 border patrol agents and 700 riot police.⁵⁵ These mobilisations were not simply meant as preparations for evictions. They were also shows of force and means of negotiation.

Most spectacular, and controversial, was the mobilisation of three Leopard tanks by Nijmegen and five tanks by Amsterdam, initially meant to de-escalate the situation by an overwhelming show of force. By thus avoiding riots, it was thought, tanks could protect both police and squatters. All machine guns would therefore be removed before deployment. Soon, however, it turned out that tanks were extremely vulnerable in an urban setting; they could not easily change course, and one well-aimed Molotov cocktail in the exhaust pipe could set the cabin ablaze. To 'protect' the tanks and their personnel, snipers were called in and ordered to shoot any activist who came near the tanks. A de-escalating scenario had transformed into an extremely lethal one.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ '9 Tage hinter den Barrikaden'.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bruls, *De Pierson*, 61; 'Gespannen situatie', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 21 Feb. 1981; 'Politie laat barricades in Nijmegen ongemoeid', *Trouw*, 18 Feb. 1981.

⁵² Möbius, 'Schlacht von Ryesgade'.

⁵³ 'Hamburg holt sich Verstärkung', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 14 Nov. 1987; 'Das Polizei-Aufgebot wird teuer für die Stadt', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 16 Nov. 1987.

⁵⁴ 'Het draaiboek van de ontruimingsactie in Nijmegen werd per velletje uitgedeeld', *Vrij Nederland*, 4 Apr. 1981; 'Krakers: ME gooid met stenen bij ontruiming', *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 Feb. 1981; '25 jaar na de Piersonrellen', *De Gelderlander*, 22 Feb. 2006.

⁵⁵ Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*; 'Keurige Amsterdamse buurt veranderde in slagveld', *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 3 Mar. 1980.

⁵⁶ E. Duivenvoorden, 'Tanks tegen de woningnood', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 26 Feb. 2020.

Even so, this ‘battle of nerves’ was answered by squatters in Amsterdam and Hamburg with real and staged shows of equal determination. Amsterdam squatters publicly stated that they would ‘do anything possible to stop an eviction’, while one of them later remembered that many activists were prepared ‘to give their lives to stop an eviction’.⁵⁷ Hamburg squatters stated that they were willing to face ‘armored vehicles, submachine guns, gas and stun grenades’ in a ‘final battle’ for their houses.⁵⁸ Declaring that they would not go down quietly, Hamburg squatters stashed large amounts of benzene, placed harpoons on the roofs to avert attacks by helicopters and even discussed throwing ovens from the roofs in case of an eviction.⁵⁹

These tactics seemed to work. In Amsterdam, communist and labour council members expressed alarm about possible lethal casualties and convinced the city council to call on the mayor to refrain from police action and instead start negotiations.⁶⁰ In Hamburg, a council member called the risk to human life in case of an eviction ‘incalculable’, while mayor Klaus von Dohnanyi feared a ‘nightmare’ scenario in which images of lethal violence would ‘appear on tv for days on end’, causing extensive riots and alienating a whole generation of leftist youths.⁶¹ As both cities were headed by liberal, left-of-centre mayors, negotiations soon showed promise. In Amsterdam, both parties almost reached an agreement, and in Hamburg a violent showdown was avoided altogether.

In Nijmegen and Copenhagen, however, the squatters were less successful. Ignoring the rules of the ‘battle of nerves’, Nijmegen squatters stated early on that they wanted to avoid violence, ‘at all costs’, and publicly proclaimed their commitment to a tactics of non-violent, passive resistance.⁶² It enabled them to build an extensive support base, but at the cost of a tactic of ‘negotiation by riot’.⁶³ More importantly, however, they faced a conservative city government unwilling to give in to any of their demands. Only if the squatters would leave their barricades and allow their houses to be demolished would the city reconsider its redevelopment plans; that was as far as it was willing to go.⁶⁴ In a similar way, the conservative socialist mayor of Copenhagen was unwilling to consider, let alone concede to, the squatters’ demands. Even when rock star Kim Larsen proposed to buy the squatted complex and donate it to the city, which would then lease it to the squatters, the mayor declined and an impasse ensued.⁶⁵ The Copenhagen squatters had shown their strength in barricade fighting, but this alone was not enough to make the city change its course. And while the squatters sought to negotiate, they also had to secure and ‘govern’ the barricaded areas.

Again, general similarities and local differences are evident. Since squatters in Amsterdam and Hamburg felt supported by a broad section of the urban population, they faced fewer challenges in negotiating their own radicalism and militancy with their quest for local legitimacy. In Copenhagen and Nijmegen especially, squatters faced more backlash and felt forced to tone down their militancy in order to build and maintain a local support base. In this context, local government played an equally important role, as the Amsterdam and Hamburg governments were more progressive and divided over the squatter conflicts. Although militant squatting had by now turned into an international movement, characterised by similar programmes and action repertoires, differing local contexts could highly influence their strategies.

⁵⁷ Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 61–2; *De stad was van ons: 28 voormalige kraaksters en krakers aan het woord over de geschiedenis van de Amsterdamse kraakbeweging* (1996), chp. 4, see: <http://www.iisg.nl/staatsarchief/publicaties/destad/index.php>.

⁵⁸ ‘Hafenstraße: “Noch einmal alle Kräfte konzentrieren”’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 30 Oct. 1987; ‘Hafenstraße – gerüstet, militant und motiviert’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 31 Oct. 1987.

⁵⁹ ‘Hafenstraße: “Wir wollten keine toten Polizisten”’, *Hamburger Morgenpost*, 8 Nov. 2012.

⁶⁰ Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 67, 107.

⁶¹ ‘Ausschuß soll den Konflikt an der Hafenstraße durchleuchten’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 12 Nov. 1987; ‘Hafenstraße: “Sie sind das C in der SPD”’, *Der Spiegel*, 23 Nov. 1987.

⁶² ‘Te vroeg met barricades’, *De Gelderlander*, 19 Feb. 1981; ‘Zwaargewonde bij kraakrel in Nijmegen’, *Brabants Dagblad*, 23 Feb. 1981.

⁶³ The term is derived from E. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 58.

⁶⁴ ‘Politieke uitweg zat er niet in’, *De Gelderlander*, 24 Feb. 1981; ‘De ontruiming van de kraakpanden en het “proportioneel” geweld van de burgemeester’, *Vrij Nederland*, 28 Feb. 1981.

⁶⁵ ‘9 Tage hinter den Barrikaden’.

Governing Barricaded Areas and Mobilising Support

The robustness of barricades had been crucial to changing squatter conflicts from policing problems into political issues. But while squatters in all four cities did their best to make their barricades look insurmountable, many of them were not. In Amsterdam, the contrast between perception and reality was perhaps the strongest. A journalist described the barricaded Vondelstraat as a ‘small, seemingly impregnable area’, but specialists knew better.⁶⁶ A photographer who had seen the Paris barricades of May 1968 stated that the 1980s squatters made ‘exactly the same mistakes’: whole sections were left open, allowing the police to penetrate the area.⁶⁷ When a fire broke out, Amsterdam squatters dismantled one of their barricades ‘in no-time’, to allow the fire patrol to enter.⁶⁸ The barricade builders were enthusiastic but untrained.⁶⁹ At one point, even the army major who would later lead the tank column to smash the barricades went undercover and offered suggestions to the activists, advising them to build the barricades ‘in such a way that I could later destroy them as quickly as possible’.⁷⁰

Some barricades were stronger than others. Barricades built in front of the *Hafenstraße* were quickly and easily moved closer to the houses by the squatters to allow commuters to travel to work and back.⁷¹ When, however, a sympathiser was seriously injured, he had to be carried on a stretcher over the barricades, because the inner barricades could not be opened up so simply.⁷² The Nijmegen barricades were likely the strongest. The squatters hosed water on their barricades, made of bed spirals and sand, which froze and made the barricades as ‘hard as concrete’.⁷³ (In addition to building tank ditches, they also tried to flood the surrounding streets, joking that the riot police should wear ice skates when clearing the barricades. On one film, squatters can actually be seen ice skating on one of the streets.⁷⁴)

Ironically, in the barricaded areas, anarchist-inspired squatters became responsible for maintaining order. Again, the similarities between the four cases are remarkable. In Amsterdam, a small group of insiders, who were mockingly referred to as ‘the government’, took the lead. When the barricaded area was flooded with youths and onlookers, vandalism and rowdy behaviour forced the squatters to start ‘playing police’. They formed patrols, manned with walkie-talkies, to control the area.⁷⁵ Not all crowds, however, were easy to contain. On the third morning, a squatter remarked that he and his comrades had considered throwing out a large group of rowdy teenagers, ‘but the risk of a major clash was too big’.⁷⁶ In Copenhagen, a similar dynamic ensued as the in-group of squatters, recognisable by their blue overalls, took it on themselves to organise rudimentary policing within their ‘cop-free’ area full of small stores. In many cases, people corrected each other, and according to one squatter, ‘every time someone said, “let’s loot a vending machine”, someone else was there to stop it’. Even so, the squatters felt it necessary to put up notices which stated that looters would be punished.⁷⁷

In Hamburg, too, the squatters took over the role of improvised keepers of the peace. As in the other places, the barricade builders upheld the ethics of moral economy; a local baker had the windows smashed but nothing stolen, ‘except for three homemade fruit breads’, while the local branch of the SPAR supermarket chain was looted and faced damages of almost 60,000 DM.⁷⁸

⁶⁶ ‘De Amsterdamse krakersoorlog’, *Haagse Post*, 8 Mar. 1980.

⁶⁷ ‘Laat ze maar komen!’, *Panorama*, 14 Mar. 1980.

⁶⁸ ‘Nanda’s spuitbus en wat daarop volgde’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 Mar. 1980; ‘Buurt is krakers nu zat’, *De Telegraaf*, 3 Mar. 1980.

⁶⁹ ‘Het is nu oorlog’, *Trouw*, 1 Mar. 1980.

⁷⁰ Jansen Hendriks, ‘De Vondelstraat’.

⁷¹ ‘Es wird geräumt’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 13 Nov. 1987.

⁷² ‘Taubstummer an der Hafenstraße schwer verletzt’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 17 Nov. 1987.

⁷³ ‘Barricades op toegangen naar kraakwijkje hard als beton’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 24 Feb. 1981.

⁷⁴ H. Jansen and G. Koenraadt (dir.), *Piersons unknown* (1981), see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mj0Qt_uz3c&ab_channel=DePierson.nl.

⁷⁵ ‘Het is nu oorlog’, *Trouw*, 1 Mar. 1980; Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 121–2; ‘Krakers enorm gespannen’, *Algemeen Dagblad*, 3 Mar. 1980.

⁷⁶ ‘Slijtageslag om gekraakt pand’, *Trouw*, 3 Mar. 1980.

⁷⁷ ‘9 Tage hinter den Barrikaden’.

⁷⁸ ‘Hafenstraße: Die Betroffenen’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 13 Nov. 1987.

This the squatters accepted, but they publicly apologised for damages to a nearby primary school.⁷⁹ Almost by extension of such gestures, interactions with the police were at times convivial. When a car hit a dogwalker within the barricaded area, Hamburg squatters allowed police and a fire brigade to enter the area, to help the injured man and take statements.⁸⁰ And in Amsterdam, when squatters cleared a barricade to let the fire brigade enter, police assured them that they would not abuse the opportunity to enter the area.⁸¹ A new kind of order emerged within the barricaded areas.

Local radio stations proved crucial for the squatters' efforts to rally local support and amass political legitimacy. Again, the similarities between the four cases are remarkable. Squatters used their own pirate radios to update fellow urbanites on recent developments and invited them to visit the barricades. The squatters' humour, interviews with locals and broadcasting of alternative music helped them to gain a sympathetic and folksy image. While Amsterdam squatters broadcasted live negotiations,⁸² Hamburg squatters read the Yeti's support letter sent 'from the icy heights of the Himalayas',⁸³ and Nijmegen squatters reported on developments in local dialects. In response, people brought blankets, food and money, as well as boxes full of oranges, cigarettes and toilet paper.⁸⁴ Especially in Nijmegen, a conservative city where local youths had initially attacked the barricades, the radio broadcasts brought about a 'reversal' in the locals' attitudes towards the squatters, who grew into a "symbol" of all things "Nijmegen", and came to be seen as part of the 'local cultural identity'.⁸⁵ As the importance of the radio stations was acknowledged on both sides of the barricade, Hamburg squatters turned the studio into one of the most fortified sites within the complex, while in Nijmegen, an anti-terrorist unit was assigned to storm the studio even before the barricades were smashed by tanks.⁸⁶

The decisions of squatters to start 'governing' their barricaded areas, of locals to visit and bring food and blankets, and of activists to 'squat' local radio waves in order to mobilise support can all be seen as part of what Traugott has dubbed the 'social function' of the barricade. Irrespective of time and place, these dynamics were almost automatically set in motion by the building of barricades. Squatters had only limited control over the decisions of locals to come and visit, or their actions within the barricaded areas. Even if squatters exchanged information and knowledge on this, its effect would have been limited. Comparing this phase of the four barricade conflicts highlights their general characteristics over their local particularities and relativises the influence of squatter networks.

'This Is War': Tanks and Truces

How successful were the squatters, and how were their conflicts resolved? A systematic comparison of the final phase of barricade conflicts reveals striking differences, but also highlights similarities and the varied influences of squatter networks.

In Amsterdam, squatters and the city came close to an agreement when the squatters' inability to agree on the composition and mandate of a negotiation delegation, and their refusal to remove the barricades on Sunday evening, re-escalated the conflict. On Monday morning, five Leopard tanks, accompanied by a massive police force, drove into the barricaded street, where only eighty squatters were

⁷⁹ 'Es wird geräumt', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 13 Nov. 1987; 'Schule geschlossen!', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 13 Nov. 1987; 'Splitter', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 14 Nov. 1987.

⁸⁰ 'Gespannte Ruhe in der Hafenstraße', *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 16 Nov. 1987.

⁸¹ 'Nanda's spuitbus en wat daarop volgde', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 Mar. 1980.

⁸² J. Carmiggelt, 'Tanks in de Vondelstraat', *Ons Amsterdam*, 8 Jan. 2005.

⁸³ 'Hönkel, Grummel, Hönkel, Grummel', *Der Spiegel*, 23 Nov. 1987.

⁸⁴ Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*; Bruls, *De Pierson*, 59; '9 Tage hinter den Barrikaden'; Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 123; G. Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 460.

⁸⁵ 'De breuk die Prins Karnaval niet kan lijmen', *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 11 Mar. 1981; 'Krakers "kraken" ook de ether', *De Gelderlander*, 18 Feb. 1981. Although the violence against the Nijmegen squatters significantly subsided by mid-week, and support grew, the latter should not be overestimated. A survey in March revealed that 56% of the respondents afterwards felt that the barricades should have been cleared directly, while people dismissing and applauding the police's approach were tied (33% and 36% respectively). 'Schuld vooral bij relschoppers', *De Gelderlander*, 7 Mar. 1981.

⁸⁶ 'Hönkel, Grummel, Hönkel, Grummel', *Der Spiegel*, 23 Nov. 1987; Bruls, *De Pierson*, 30.

present. The squatters were driven out without much protest, after which it took the tanks less than fifteen minutes to shatter the barricades ‘like matchstick boxes’.⁸⁷ In the evening following the tank action, between 6,000 and 10,000 protested against police violence.⁸⁸ Looking back, many squatters felt victorious. They had shown their strength and resolve, and even though the barricades had been crushed, their squat had been left undisturbed. Furthermore, the action had mobilised new supporters.⁸⁹ In the following months, squatting took a leap, while the city government changed its policies towards squatting. In the following years, it acquired and legalised up to 200 squats in the city.

Negotiations in Nijmegen, on the other hand, had resulted in nothing when the city ordered three Leopard tanks to clear the barricades. As riot police and border patrol started clearing the sit-in blockades throughout the city, the police fired more than 135 teargas grenades laced with chemicals into the barricaded area, literally smoking out the squatters.⁹⁰ As in Amsterdam, they were given free passage out of the area, after which the tanks moved in. The barricades were subsequently crushed as ‘if they were made of cardboard’.⁹¹ It took some time before the squatters felt able to claim a victory. They had, after all, not been able to protect their squatted houses from demolition. But on the night of the eviction, 10,000 people protested, and in the week that followed daily marches mobilised up to 14,000 people.⁹² In response, the city council decided to postpone the construction of a parking garage, and ultimately built social housing on the location. This is one of the factors that currently makes squatters view their action as a success.⁹³ Moreover, their action also brought about a lasting change in Nijmegen’s political culture. In 1978–82, the Christian Democrats had excluded the Labour Party from local government. In 1982, both parties lost the local elections, after which the Labour Party lastingly entered city government, often with support from leftist parties.⁹⁴ From a conservative city, Nijmegen transformed into a left-leaning city, often dubbed a Dutch ‘Havana’.⁹⁵

Copenhagen squatters, too, had not managed to gain anything substantial out of negotiations with the city. After long and arduous talks, the squatters decided to give up their resistance and try to ‘fool’ the police once more. After eight days of barricading, the squatters called for a press conference on the following day at 09:00 a.m., ‘but when the media arrived, they found the houses deserted’.⁹⁶ Overnight, the squatters had left in small groups, without being seen.⁹⁷ The squatted houses were thus voluntarily abandoned by the squatters themselves. Although Mikkelsen and Karpantschof hold that the squatters ‘emerged from the battle with renewed strength and courage’, and sizable support,⁹⁸ the squatters’ self-made documentary film reveals not only the sense of loss they felt after leaving the barricades and giving up the squat, but also the divisions that this decision caused among the squatters.

⁸⁷ Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*; ‘Rookgordijn van formaliteiten moest bedoeling verhullen’, *Trouw*, 4 Mar. 1980; ‘Keurige Amsterdamse buurt veranderde in slagveld’, *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 3 Mar. 1980.

⁸⁸ ‘Gespannen situatie in binnenstad’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 3 Mar. 1980; ‘Er is woonruimte genoeg, alleen is die niet goed verdeeld’, *Elseviers Weekblad*, 8 Mar. 1980.

⁸⁹ *De stad was van ons*, chp. 4.

⁹⁰ ‘Cijfers’, *De Gelderlander*, 23 Mar. 1981; ‘Het draaiboek van de ontruimingsactie in Nijmegen werd per velletje uitgedeeld’, *Vrij Nederland*, 4 Apr. 1981; ‘25 jaar na de Piersonrellen’, *De Gelderlander*, 22 Feb. 2006.

⁹¹ ‘Traan- en braakgas, ME en tanks verjagen de krakers’, *Brabants Dagblad*, 24 Feb. 1980.

⁹² ‘Doodstil erbewijs aan de “Pierson”’, *De Gelderlander*, 27 Feb. 1981; ‘Nijmeegse raad schort bouw parkeergarage op’, *De Waarheid*, 13 Mar. 1981.

⁹³ ‘Krakers ervaren ontruiming niet als een nederlaag’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 Feb. 1981; ‘De slag om een Nijmeegse volkswijk’, *Algemeen Nijmeegs Studentenblad*, 19 Feb. 2019.

⁹⁴ For local election results and the historical composition of the city’s government, see: <https://www.huisvandenijmeegsegeschiedenis.nl/info/Gemeenteraadsverkiezingen>.

⁹⁵ ‘Nijmegen blijft “Havana aan de Waal” en derde “meest linkse gemeente” van het land’, *De Gelderlander*, 13 Apr. 2021; ‘Nijmegen is het “Havana aan de Waal”: waar komt die linkse inborst vandaan?’, *NPO Radio 1*, see: <https://www.nporadio1.nl/nieuws/politiek/df278ff6-d5f3-49e4-b71d-88958713f9d5/nijmegen-is-het-havana-aande-waal-waar-komt-die-linkse-inborst-vandaan>.

⁹⁶ Katsiaficas, *The Subversion of Politics*, 123.

⁹⁷ T. Steiger, ‘Cycles of the Copenhagen Squatter Movement: From Slumstormer to BZ Brigades and the Autonomous Movement’, in *The Urban Politics of Squatters’ Movements*, ed. M. Martinez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 165–86.

⁹⁸ Mikkelsen and Karpantschof, ‘Youth as a Political Movement’, 616.

In Hamburg, the prospect of a potentially lethal conflict moved both the squatters and the mayor towards a compromise. After a week of barricades, Mayor von Dohnanyi gave a press conference in which he solemnly promised that the squatters would get a lease under the condition that they would dismantle their barricades within twenty-four hours.⁹⁹ Although the squatters had previously dismissed the lease conditions as ‘criminal’ and ‘unacceptable’, they now decided to take up the offer. In less than two hours, the squatters and their sympathisers managed to dismantle the outside barricades, and subsequently set out to remove the internal fortifications. When all was done, a young man was seen on the streets with a broom, ‘literally sweeping the pavement’.¹⁰⁰ Although a Dutch journalist cited the lease’s conditions and stated that the squatters ‘celebrated defeat as if it was a victory’,¹⁰¹ the latter held that they had shown their strength and support, and thereby forced the city to make significant concessions. In 1994 the squats were definitively saved from renewed eviction plans and permanently legalised.¹⁰²

In the outcomes of these four barricade conflicts, at first sight we tend to mainly see differences – while the Amsterdam and Hamburg squats were legalised, the Nijmegen and Copenhagen squats were evicted. Nevertheless, Amsterdam and Nijmegen squatters both regarded the outcomes of their struggle as a victory. Although Hamburg squatters technically did not improve their situation, they nevertheless celebrated the outcome as a victory, while Copenhagen squatters – who emerged out of the conflict with renewed energy and support – experienced leaving the barricades as a defeat. Moreover, we see different government approaches – while Dutch authorities deployed tanks, Copenhagen and Hamburg authorities did not. However, it is important to note that the Amsterdam and Nijmegen conflicts took place in the early 1980s, when police were not yet trained for repressing militant squatter conflicts; by the late 1980s, Dutch police had their own heavy duty vehicles and were no longer reliant on army material. Furthermore, if we employ the concept of political opportunity structures, it becomes possible to group the four cases into two generalised conflict trajectories: where militant squatters faced progressive and divided city governments (Amsterdam and Hamburg), they were more likely to gain significant concessions than in places where city governments were less progressive and undivided (Nijmegen and Copenhagen).

Squatter networks deserve special attention in this phase of barricade conflict. In all four instances, local squatters could rely on support from activists from other cities and even abroad. Thus, squatters from Amsterdam and West Germany came to Nijmegen, while Copenhagen and Hamburg squatters travelled to each other. Such shows of support had three types of effects. First of all, squatters used these contacts to boost morale. Secondly, however, the presence of squatters from abroad could also endanger their local legitimacy claims. This happened, for example, in Nijmegen, where critics dismissed the squatters as non-local actors. Finally, despite the presence of squatters from other cities, the dynamics of these four conflicts remained firmly local, because of the squatters’ explicitly local demands (legalisation of urban squatted houses), and the authorities’ explicitly local perspective (maintaining urban peace).

Conclusion: Squatter Networks, Diffusion and the Social Function of the Barricade

The four barricade conflicts offer an opportunity to critically engage with social movement scholarship on the diffusion, or transfer, of protest tactics. Their striking similarities could be explained by Traugott’s ‘social function’ of the barricade, but how does this relate to the transnational networks that squatters maintained, and the information that they exchanged?

Since the nineteenth century, observers have been fascinated by the ways in which protest forms have travelled from place to place. Social movement scholars have dubbed instances in which

⁹⁹ ‘Hafenstraße: “Sie sind das C in der SPD”’, *Der Spiegel*, 23 Nov. 1987; M. Haller, ‘High Noon an der Hafenstraße. Die Geschichte von B. Setzer’, *Marx21*, 18 Nov. 2017.

¹⁰⁰ ‘Das Wunder’, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, 19 Nov. 1987.

¹⁰¹ ‘Krakers in Hamburg viere nederlaag als zege’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 Nov. 1987.

¹⁰² Sichtermann and Sichtermann, *Das ist unser Haus*, 136–51.

‘innovative tactics, frames, and organising structures’ are communicated between social movements diffusion,¹⁰³ or transfer, and have asked: what is diffused, which channels or mechanisms enable diffusion, and to what effect?¹⁰⁴

According to Soule and Roggebrand, diffusion can take place through direct personal contacts and networks (relational diffusion), via indirect channels such as the media (non-relational diffusion), or when a third party acts as a conduit between a sender and receiver (brokered diffusion).¹⁰⁵ They hold that ‘most attention is given to relational forms of diffusion’, and Tarrow has suggested that this is ‘because innovations travel most easily along established lines of interaction’.¹⁰⁶ Others, such as Spilerman, and Andrews and Biggs, have, however, shown that in the 1960s US civil rights movement, mass media acted as the most important channel for diffusing protest tactics.¹⁰⁷

This also applies to research on squatter internationalism, which is still in its infancy and has up to now focused on the influence of direct personal contacts, while it is likely that information spread via the news reached and affected many more squatter activists.¹⁰⁸ Conservative media and authorities were prone to exaggerate the influence of squatter networks, suggesting that they formed a tight international network capable of ‘exporting’ tactics wholesale. When squatter conflicts turned to riots in West-Berlin in December 1980, the Dutch tabloid *Telegraaf* was quick to cite authorities who claimed that the squatters’ tactics seemed to be ‘directly transplanted’ from Amsterdam.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a delegation of Amsterdam squatters had visited West-Berlin, but squatters travelled to various West German cities without provoking riots.¹¹⁰ More important were local pressures that had been brewing for some time in West-Berlin and, furthermore, Berlin squatters had ample experience in confronting the police.¹¹¹

Rather than stable, dense and well-organised, squatter international contacts were loose, irregular and activated on an ad hoc basis. In 1981, the US American weekly *Newsweek* suggested that Amsterdam squatters organised regular ‘training sessions’ for Swiss and German squatters, but this claim merely evoked ridicule from the Dutch press.¹¹² When, in 1985, Hamburg squatters learned of the death of a squatter who had been arrested in the course of an eviction in Amsterdam, they immediately responded by vandalising the local offices of the multinational conglomerate Philips and the Dutch consulate. However, they had no contacts with Dutch squatters and took their information from Dutch and German mainstream media. Only afterwards were they able to establish contacts with Amsterdam squatters.¹¹³

As Soule and Roggebrand have argued, diffusion does not refer to ‘fixed packages that are transplanted in whole cloth from one site to another’.¹¹⁴ Central to the spread of protest tactics are ‘creative borrowing, adaptation, and learning’ by activists. This, again, was illustrated in 1980, when Hamburg activists invited squatters from Zurich and Amsterdam to learn from their strategies. After all, images

¹⁰³ Soule and Roggeband, ‘Diffusion Processes within and across Movements’.

¹⁰⁴ R. K. Givan et al., eds., *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); H. te Velde, ‘Political Transfer: An Introduction’, *European Review of History* 12, no. 2 (2005): 205–21; C. Tilly, ‘Invention, Diffusion, and Transformation of the Social Movement Repertoire’, *European Review of History* 12, no. 2 (2005): 307–20.

¹⁰⁵ Soule and Roggeband, ‘Diffusion Processes within and across Movements’.

¹⁰⁶ S. Tarrow, ‘Dynamics of Diffusion: Mechanisms, Institutions, and Scale Shift’, in Givan et al., eds., *The Diffusion of Social Movements*, 204–19.

¹⁰⁷ S. Spilerman, ‘Structural Characteristics of Cities and the Severity of Racial Disorders’, *American Sociological Review* 41 (1976), 771–793; Andrews and Biggs, ‘The Dynamics of Protest Diffusion’.

¹⁰⁸ Owens, ‘Have Squat, Will Travel: How Squatter Mobility Mobilizes Squatting’; Van der Steen, ‘Die internationalen Verbindungen der Hausbesetzerbewegung in den 70er und 80er Jahren’.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Amsterdammers gaven Duitsers kraakles’, *De Telegraaf*, 21 Mar. 1981.

¹¹⁰ L. Adriaenssen, *Een dwarse buurt. Het herscheppingsverhaal van de Staatsliedenbuurt en Frederik Hendrikbuurt, 1971–1996* (Amsterdam: Wijkcentrum Staatslieden-Hugo de Grootbuurt, 1996), 71; Van der Steen, ‘Die internationalen Verbindungen der Hausbesetzerbewegung in den 70er und 80er Jahren’.

¹¹¹ Sichtermann and Sichtermann, *Das ist unser Haus*, 38–45.

¹¹² ‘Newsweek laat Amerikanen griezelen’, *Het Vrije Volk*, 18 Apr. 1981.

¹¹³ *Sabot* no. 4, 2 Nov. 1985; *Sabot* no. 5, 25 Nov. 1985.

¹¹⁴ Soule and Roggeband, ‘Diffusion Processes within and across Movements’, 241.

of squatter riots in both cities had featured prominently in German media. The meeting, however, turned into a debacle when it transpired that the latter's tactics could not be made to work in a Hamburg context.¹¹⁵ If the visits of Amsterdam squatters to West German cities showed anything, it was that diffusion of militant tactics was only possible *after* activists had managed to establish a local presence. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, when Hamburg squatters had turned the Hafenstraße squat into a militant action centre, activists from other cities came to visit and were present to lend support when the Hamburg conflict escalated into barricade building.¹¹⁶

Local knowledge and local legitimacy nevertheless remained crucial. Geronimo recalls how Hamburg squatters took inspiration from a Frankfurt squatter manual, but it was a local activist/metalworker who installed steel doors and other fortifications in the Hafenstraße squat.¹¹⁷ In a similar way, Nijmegen squatters convened with their Amsterdam counterparts when making their plans, but in the end they drew up their own barricade plans and collected barricade material. Furthermore, when local youths attacked the Nijmegen squatters, the latter had to 'prove' their local roots to dispel the aggression that their action had aroused. Next to their pirate radio station, the squatters could rely on support from Catholic trade union youths, who invited a number of aggressors to visit the barricaded area, where they met with friends and family and in a number of cases turned to supporting the squatters.¹¹⁸

Although squatters formed transnational networks, direct contacts were loose and irregular, and their influence should not be overestimated. Rather, the above reconstruction shows that the building of barricades set in motion its own dynamics. Traugott, for example, has argued that locals visiting and supporting the barricades were an inherent part of barricade conflicts, and traces this dynamic back to the nineteenth century.¹¹⁹ And he makes a similar point when referring to the 'governance' of barricaded areas; the barricade's 'social function' inherently produced such divisions of labour, even if this process eluded 'the conscious awareness of participants and analysts alike'.¹²⁰ Building on Traugott's work, the above could be seen as a warning not to confuse likeness with diffusion.

Not only protesters but also forces of order exchanged information and learned from each other. This led to a dynamic that Della Porta and Tarrow have dubbed the 'coevolution of police and protest behavior', or 'interactive diffusion'.¹²¹ However, not all similarities in police behaviour can be explained through this process. That police initially tried to stop barricades but, if unsuccessful, resorted to patrolling them can instead be explained as an outcome of the 'social function' of the barricade. The reluctance of authorities to use lethal force to quell such protests was, however, also part of Western European political culture. Katsiaficas has remarked that in the same period, in Philadelphia, the police did not hesitate to firebomb the house of a militant black power collective, killing several activists and incurring extensive damages to surrounding houses in the process.¹²² Such use of force was considered unacceptable and incompatible with European liberal democratic structures.

Similarities, finally, are also visible in the ways in which these conflicts are remembered. Here, too, we see similar trajectories, where authorities try to depoliticise and activists aim to re-politicise the memory of urban conflict. Because of their spectacular nature, all four squatter conflicts were soon incorporated into urban memory cultures.¹²³ While (former) squatters tend to commemorate the

¹¹⁵ 'Die Konsumenten kamen, die Krawallmacher gingen', *Große Freiheit* no. 40, Dec. 1980.

¹¹⁶ S. Borgstede, 'Der Kampf um das Gemeinsame: St. Pauli Hafenstraße', in Borgstede et al., eds., *Wir wollen alles*, 105–49, 134–5.

¹¹⁷ Sichtermann and Sichtermann, *Das ist unser Haus*, 142.

¹¹⁸ Bruls, *De Pierson*, 24–7; 'De slag om een Nijmeegse volkswijk', *Algemeen Nijmeegs Studentenblad*, 19 Feb. 2019, see: <https://ans-online.nl/interview/de-slag-om-een-nijmeegse-volkswijk>.

¹¹⁹ Traugott, *Insurgent Barricade*, 178–224.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 184–5.

¹²¹ D. della Porta and S. Tarrow, 'Interactive Diffusion: The Coevolution of Police and Protest Behavior with an Application to Transnational Contention', *Comparative Political Studies* 45, no. 1 (2012): 119–52.

¹²² Katsiaficas, *Subversion of Politics*, 127.

¹²³ A. Erll and A. Nünning, *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010); J. K. Olick and J. Robbins, 'Memory Studies: From "Collective Memory" to the Historical

barricades as part of an enduring anticapitalistic struggle, municipalities, cultural institutions and commercial actors tend to emphasise the past nature of squatter conflicts and how they gave way to newfound urban harmony. Thus, when Nijmegen authorities in 1988 placed a statue on the site where the barricades had once stood, activists were quick to respond by pouring red paint over it.¹²⁴ Even so, when the municipal museum organised an exhibition on the barricades in 2006, it invited a former police officer and a former squatter to open it together.¹²⁵ When the Berlin-based German Historical Museum offered to buy one of the Hafenstraße façades, with its characteristic squatter graffiti, for an exhibition on the country's protest history (it would be placed in the same room as Andreas Baader's record player), the residents were quick to decline.¹²⁶ The Hamburg tourism department currently celebrates how the Hafenstraße squatters turned the borough into a 'popular and culturally diverse district'.¹²⁷ Then again, in the mid-1980s, when the conflict was in full swing, Hamburg tour buses and harbour cruises took detours along the squatted houses as a form of 'chaos-sightseeing'.¹²⁸

Acknowledgements. The author thanks Andrés Brink Pinto, Irina Pulyakhina and Diederik Smit for their helpful suggestions.

Sociology of Mnemonic Practices', *Annual Review of Sociology* 24 (1998): 105–40; J. K. Olick, V. Vinitzky-Seroussi and D. Levy, eds., *The Collective Memory Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹²⁴ 'Ter herinnering aan de rellen', *Het Parool*, 18 Jan. 1988.

¹²⁵ 'Museum laat lastige en rebelse Nijmegenaren zien', *Algemeen Dagblad*, 1 Oct. 2018.

¹²⁶ 'Happy birthday Hafenstraße', *Analyse & Kritik. Zeitung für linke Debatte und Praxis* no. 457, 20 Dec. 2001.

¹²⁷ See, for example, the following three websites: <https://www.hamburg.com/alternative/13082818/hafenstrasse>; <https://www.hamburg.de/hafenstrasse>; <https://hamburgtourist.info/hafenstrasse.html>.

¹²⁸ 'Echte Stätte der Phantasie', *Der Spiegel*, 9 Nov. 1987; 'Der Bürgermeister und die Schmuttel-Meile', *Die Zeit*, 20 Nov. 1987.

Cite this article: van der Steen B (2024). Travelling Barricades: Transnational Networks, Diffusion and the Dynamics of 1980s Squatter Conflicts in Western Europe. *Contemporary European History* 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000620>