



Universiteit  
Leiden

The Netherlands

## **Between local roots and transnational networks: the case of the squatter barricades of 1980 and 1981 in Amsterdam and Nijmegen**

Steen, B.S. van der; Verlaan, T.; Wicke, C.

### **Citation**

Steen, B. S. van der. (2024). Between local roots and transnational networks: the case of the squatter barricades of 1980 and 1981 in Amsterdam and Nijmegen. In T. Verlaan & C. Wicke (Eds.), *Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements* (pp. 73-93). Cham: Palgrave.  
doi:10.1007/978-3-031-57642-3\_4

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4020575>

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



# Between Local Roots and Transnational Networks: The Case of the Squatter Barricades of 1980 and 1981 in Amsterdam and Nijmegen

*Bart van der Steen*

From the Sorbonne University in Paris in 1968 to Zuccotti Park near Wall Street in 2011, the occupation of houses, buildings and public places has been an essential form of action for many urban social movements. In the 1970s, occupying houses to protest and relieve housing shortage even gave way to a social movement in its own right. Dubbed *Besetzer* in West-Germany, *besaetter* in Denmark and *krakers* in the Netherlands, squatters formed an urban social movement in which alternative lifestyles merged with anarchist-inspired activism. Although squatters organized on a local level, a city or even a borough, their political outlooks were often global. Consequently, squatters formed networks with likeminded activists in other cities. The nature and influence of these networks has, however, long been contested. Did personal networks lead to direct transfers of political styles and practical knowledge, or were indirect influences of images and stories carried by (movement and/or popular) media outlets

---

B. van der Steen (✉)  
Leiden University Libraries, Leiden, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [b.s.van.der.steen@library.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:b.s.van.der.steen@library.leidenuniv.nl)

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature  
Switzerland AG 2024

T. Verlaan and C. Wicke (eds.), *Urban Activism in Western Europe from the 1950s to the 1980s*, Palgrave Studies in the History of Social Movements, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-57642-3\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-57642-3_4)

more important? And how did activists negotiate local contexts and inter-urban networks? A case study of two very similar and spectacular actions from Amsterdam and Nijmegen squatters can shed new light on this issue.

In February 1980, the occupation of a house in the Vondelstraat by Amsterdam youths escalated in a so far unprecedented way. The squatters first organized a march in a different part of the city to divert the police's attention, then occupied and barricaded the building. When the police arrived moments later to evict, the squatters fought them off with sticks and stones, forcing them to retreat. The squatters then proceeded to barricade the whole street, renaming it the Vondel Free State, and held the barricades for a full weekend. On Monday morning, the city deployed military vehicles, snipers and massive police force to clear the barricades. The squatted house, however, was left in peace and later legalized. For the squatters, the confrontation ended in victory. Although they had not been able to withstand the full force of the authorities, they had shown their strength and resolve, provoked the state to resort to extreme measures, and managed to gain a tangible result in the form of the squat's legalization.<sup>1</sup>

A year later, Nijmegen activists barricaded the Piersonstraat to resist the demolition of fourteen small council houses and a storehouse in favor of a parking garage. In doing so, they used the same tactics as the Amsterdam squatters: first they diverted the police's attention, then they barricaded the street and subsequently held the barricades for eight days, after which the authorities again used military vehicles to clear the barricades. In anticipation of this move, however, the Nijmegen squatters had dug tank ditches. One of them was so deep that it took a vehicle four run-ups to pass over it.<sup>2</sup>

The Nijmegen tank ditch highlighted the squatters' ability to learn and exchange information across cities, but is also illustrative of the ambiguous nature of these trans-urban connections. While Amsterdam squatters prided themselves on having successfully 'exported' their methods,

<sup>1</sup> The Vondelstraat conflict is described in: E. Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse kraakbeweging, 1964–1999* (Amsterdam 2000); J. Blom et al., *De Vondelstraat. Verslagen van Radio STAD, 29 februari–3 maart 1980* (Amsterdam 1980). For a contemporary analysis, see: G. Anderiesen, 'Tanks in the streets. The growing conflict over housing in Amsterdam', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 5:1 (1980), 83–95.

<sup>2</sup> A. Bruls, *De Pierson. Verhalen over een volksoptand in twintigste eeuw Nijmegen* (Nijmegen 2006).

authorities and conservative media accused them of having superficially ‘transplanted’ militant conflicts to an otherwise peaceful and provincial town. This in turn forced the Nijmegen squatters to emphasize the local roots and nature of their struggle. As a result, various interpretations of the nature and influence of the inter-urban connections between squatters were developed and counterposed, both in the popular and the movement’s media.

Trans-national and -local contacts and the political transfer of ideas and tactics within social movements are never straightforward,<sup>3</sup> and the case study of the Amsterdam and Nijmegen barricades are a case in point. Nijmegen squatters asked their Amsterdam comrades for advice in preparing their action, but they did not wholly copy Amsterdam’s tactics without reserve. Instead, they developed their own plan so as to fit the local context. In doing so, they not only drew inspiration from their own experiences and contacts with Amsterdam squatters, but also from narratives and images of squatter conflicts that circulated in movement and mainstream media. Furthermore, they had to navigate between their local support base and their inter-urban connections as their local legitimacy faced challenges.

Research into squatter networks has mainly focused on direct connections between activists, and how these enabled them to exchange political ideas and practical knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This point, however, overlooks that squatter networks were often indirect and forged through popular and movement media. Furthermore, as news traveled, much could get lost and scrambled in translation. Rather than investigating exactly who was connected to who, in what ways, and to what effect, it could be

<sup>3</sup> For theoretical reflections and historical case studies on political transfer and diffusion within social movements see the special issue of *European Review of History* vol. 12:2 (2005); and in particular the contributions H. te Velde, ‘Political transfer. An introduction’, 205–221 and C. Tilly, ‘Invention, diffusion, and transformation of the social movement repertoire’, 307–320.

<sup>4</sup> L. Owens, ‘Have squat, will travel. How squatter mobility mobilizes squatting’ in: Squatting Europe Kollektive (ed.), *Squatting in Europe. Radical spaces, urban struggles* (New York 2013), 185–207; Idem., ‘Squatting in Amsterdam. The Right to the City Meets a Politics of Mobility’ in: K. Andresen and B. van der Steen (eds.), *A European Youth Revolt. European perspectives on Youth Protest and Social Movements in the 1980s* (Basingstoke 2015), 53–66; B. van der Steen, ‘Die internationalen Verbindungen der Hausbesetzerbewegung in den 70er und 80er Jahren’ in: A. Gallus, A. Schildt and D. Siegfried (eds.), *Deutsche Zeitgeschichte—transnational* (Göttingen 2015), 203–220.

more fruitful to ask how squatters and contemporaries themselves imagined these networks and what roles they assigned to them.<sup>5</sup> Using the Amsterdam and Nijmegen barricades of 1980–1981 as a case study, this paper analyzes how squatters in different cities formed networks, how these networks influenced local conflicts, and how squatters and contemporaries grappled with the question of the nature and influence of these networks.

## SQUATTERS, MOVEMENTS AND URBAN DEMOCRACY

When squatting emerged in the 1970s, Western European cities faced a deep housing crisis. While there was a rampant housing shortage, many working-class boroughs were dilapidated. Authorities responded with renewal plans, proposing the razing of entire housing blocks to the ground in processes that could take years. The result was the increasing co-existence of housing shortage and widespread vacancies in city centers and aging working-class boroughs. Squatters set out to protest the renewal schemes, demonstrating how the housing crisis could be (partially) solved by the occupation of condemned dwellings. Soon they connected with other political activists, turning the practice of squatting from a form of self-help into an organized counterforce to local urban renewal agendas. As local groups from city boroughs connected to each other and to fellow squatters in other cities, networks formed. As these groups and networks started to emphasize their opposition to governmental housing plans, the networks became a movement.

Mamadouh has argued that the squatters constituted an urban social movement, because they formed a non-institutionalized collective actor that sought social and urban change and acted in an urban setting. Such movements are driven by their romantic urban ideals. According to these ideals, boroughs should form villages in a city; places where living, leisure

<sup>5</sup> In following this approach, I take inspiration from M. Diani and A. Mische, ‘Network approaches and social movements’ in D. Della Porta and M. Diani (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of social movements* (Oxford 2015), 306–322. See also: M. Diani, ‘Social movements, contentious actions, and social networks: “From metaphor to substance”?’ in M. Diani and D. McAdam (eds.), *Social movements and networks. Relational approaches to collective action* (Oxford 2003), 1–18.

and work merge and people are connected through local and equal relationships.<sup>6</sup> This ideal also holds a democratic promise, since all inhabitants have a place and are heard. Similar to Castells, Mamadouh, explicitly building on his work, emphasizes that the squatter movement arose from conflicts over public goods (i.e. housing), built a cultural identity as a *local* activist movement—in which both politics and various cultural identities found a place—and mobilized around the idea of local and direct democracy. As Sedlmaier has emphasized in an earlier chapter in this volume, the strength of Castells' method lies in its 'capacity of combining divergent impulses'. It enables researchers to transcend traditional divides and approach urban social movements as having 'class-based *and* non-class-based constituencies', combining 'political *and* cultural orientations', and employing 'instrumental strategies *and* expressive identities'.

From the start, squatters made various claims to urban democracy. They claimed that their own organization was highly democratic. Based on organizing in small groups, it was committed to giving a voice to every participant. Squatter activism sought to amplify this voice to political authorities. If squatters were successful, this would stimulate others to organize and act in a similar manner, thus stimulating mobilizations from below. From the 1960s onwards, this form of 'democracy from below' has become ever more accepted as either complementing parliamentary democracy, or forming a corrective to it.<sup>7</sup>

The success of the squatters and their proposed form of urban democracy is best measured in metropolitan contexts. According to Duivenvoorden, some four hundred squatted houses were legalized in the Netherlands between 1964 and 2000, two hundred of them in Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup> More important, however, is the fact that squatter activism in cities such as Amsterdam and West-Berlin pressured urban authorities to change their policies of urban renewal from large-scale demolition of boroughs to careful renovation of historical structures. This policy

<sup>6</sup> V. Mamadouh, *De stad in eigen hand. Provo's, kabouters en krakers als stedelijke sociale beweging* (Amsterdam 1992).

<sup>7</sup> R. Koopmans, *Democracy from below. New social movements and the political system in West Germany* (Westview 1995); Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid, *Democratie en geweld. Probleemanalyse naar aanleiding van de gebeurtenissen in Amsterdam op 30 april 1980* (Den Haag 1980).

<sup>8</sup> Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*.

change far extended the number of squatted houses that were legalized; it influenced the development of whole boroughs and cities.<sup>9</sup>

Radical and militant squatter activism played a central role in bringing about this policy change. The squatters movement of the 1980s set itself apart from its predecessors because of its militant stance and its willingness to confront the police in large numbers. Always keen on media attention and imagery, squatters organized a number of highly mediagenic militant actions, which spread their notoriety far beyond their localities.<sup>10</sup> And with effect. After a number of large-scale squatting riots in Amsterdam in 1980, the central government made significant extra funds available for relieving the housing crisis in the capital city. While squatters saw this as the government yielding to popular pressure, more conservative voices saw the squatters' actions as undermining democratic procedure. According to them, political decisions were to be made in parliament and through voting rather than 'negotiation by riot'.<sup>11</sup>

## PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL CONNECTIONS: SQUATTERS ON THE ROAD

Although the squatter movement was organized locally, individual squatters were highly mobile, moving from place to place and from country to country. The squatters' inter-urban connections soon became the stuff of legend. Both squatters and their opponents tended to over-emphasize these contacts and their influence. The first did so to bolster their militant

<sup>9</sup> H. Pruijt, 'The impact of citizens' protest on city planning in Amsterdam', in L. Deben, W. Salet and M. van Thoor (eds.), *Cultural heritage and the future of the historic inner city of Amsterdam* (Amsterdam 2004), 228–244; H. Bodenschatz et al., *Schluß mit der Zerstörung? Stadterneuerung und städtische Opposition in West-Berlin, Amsterdam und London* (Berlin 1983).

<sup>10</sup> The squatters' media politics and their relationships with (mainstream) media is discussed in detail in Adilkno, *Cracking the Movement. Squatting beyond the Media* (New York 1994) and N. Kadir, 'Myth and reality in the Amsterdam squatters' movement, 1975–2012' in 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* (PM Press: Oakland, 2014), 21–61.

<sup>11</sup> H. de Liagre Böhl, *Amsterdam op de helling. De strijd om stadsvernieuwing* (Amsterdam 2010), 402. See also the contemporary government report on squatting, political violence and democracy: Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid, *Democratie en geweld. Probleemanalyse naar aanleiding van de gebeurtenissen in Amsterdam op 30 april 1980* (Den Haag 1980).

image and wrest concessions from local authorities, while the latter did so to explain riots through outside interference. The result was a series of speculations that obscured the true nature of these contacts for political purposes.<sup>12</sup>

This happened, for example, in radical press publications. In the wake of the Vondelstraat barricades, the Frankfurt libertarian *Pflasterstrand* and the Hamburg Leninist *Arbeiterkampf* reported on the conflict.<sup>13</sup> However, both publications seemed to mold the Amsterdam movement to their own political ideas. The Amsterdam squatters were united in their commitment to direct action, housing issues and collective living, but the movement was politically diffuse in the sense that it had no official program or manifesto. Many activists were inspired by anarchist ideals, but Leninism and anti-imperialism also enjoyed some popularity. Viewing the movement through a political lens, *Pflasterstrand* emphasized the Amsterdam movement's libertarian character and spontaneity, while *Arbeiterkampf* emphasized its organization and discipline. Both claims, however, were only partly true. Reporting on a foreign conflict in Amsterdam was made subservient to local movement politics in Frankfurt and Hamburg.

Biases also occurred when squatters actually went on the road. An infamous example is the trip of a group of Amsterdam squatters to West-Berlin in December 1980. According to Andriessen, they had brought a self-made film of the Vondelstraat conflict, which among others showed armored vehicles breaking through the squatter barricades. The West-Berlin squatters watched in awe as the Amsterdam activists stated 'so machen wir das' ('this is how we do it'). Two days later, the 'Battle of the Fränkelufer' unfolded, during which West-Berlin squatters barricaded streets and occupied a house. A wave of squatter actions ensued. Afterwards, authorities claimed that the fighting methods seemed to be directly 'transplanted' from Amsterdam.<sup>14</sup> Such an interpretation, however, tends to overlook the local dynamics of squatter conflicts. West-Berlin activists had ample experience in confronting the police and building barricades. Rather than 'teaching' the West-Berlin squatters how to barricade, the

<sup>12</sup> Van der Steen, 'Die internationalen Verbindungen der Hausbesetzerbewegung'.

<sup>13</sup> 'De Kraakdraak. Ein Haus in Amsterdam', *Pflasterstrand*, 31 May 1980; 'Amsterdam. Panzer gegen Hausbesetzer', *Arbeiterkampf*, 10. March 1980.

<sup>14</sup> L. Adriaenssen, *Een dwarse buurt. Het herscheppingsverhaal van de Staatsliedenbuurt en Frederik Hendrikbuurt, 1971-1996* (Amsterdam 1996), 71.

Amsterdam squatters arrived at a time when a West-Berlin squatter movement had already formed and conflicts between activists and police were about to escalate.

Nevertheless, the narrative of Amsterdam squatters ‘exporting’ riots gained real traction. Riots following visits to West-Berlin and Nurnberg led Andriessen to conclude that ‘the trips by Amsterdam squatters sparked a string of political riots throughout Germany and Switzerland’.<sup>15</sup> When Amsterdam squatters visited Cologne in 1980, the tabloid *Bild* exclaimed: ‘Hilfe, die Kraaker kommen!’<sup>16</sup> The sentence was copied almost to the letter when the Hamburg underground magazine *Große Freiheit* excitedly announced a meeting with Amsterdam squatters later that same year: ‘The rioters are coming!’<sup>17</sup>

But in most places that the Amsterdam activists visited in 1980/81—among them West-Berlin, Cologne, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Hannover, Münster, London, Madrid and New York—things remained quite peaceful, sometimes to the frustration of local activists. Hamburg squatters had hoped to kickstart their movement with the visit of fellow activists from Amsterdam and Zurich. When the meeting, however, failed to turn into a successful political action, they called on other Hamburg activists to ‘not continuously look to Zurich and Amsterdam but pick up the resistance against the state in Hamburg and create Zurich-Amsterdam-situations here’.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the cycle of squatter conflicts, in 1983, Munich squatters acknowledged that movements could not simply be roused through outside help or support. The activists refused ‘development aid’ from activists from other cities and stated: ‘We first need to get off our own asses’.<sup>19</sup> A bit later, squatters in the Hamburg Hafenstraße started to organize an annual international meeting as part of their escalating

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>16</sup> Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*, 179.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Die Krawallmacher kommen!’, *Große Freiheit* no. 39, November 1980.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Die Konsumenten kamen, die Krawallmacher gingen’, *Große Freiheit* no. 40, December 1980.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Deads wos—is dead’, *Radikal* no. 118/119 July/August 1983.

conflict with the city.<sup>20</sup> By now, the Hamburg squatters were well-organized and able to host a series of meetings with increasing numbers of supporters from other cities and countries. The two cases show that strong local movements could attract traveling activists and grow stronger, but traveling activists could not go out and create movements wherever they went. Local political relations decided what influence international connections could have. Even so, the above also shows that these connections soon gave rise to exaggerations, rumors, speculations and mythmaking.

What the above examples overlook, is that most connections between squatters were established through (mainstream) media. Activists in the West-German town Göttingen were so inspired by media images of Amsterdam squatting riots, that they dubbed their own squatted school building the 'Kraaker Schule'. When one traveled to Amsterdam to see the city for himself, he had to sleep in his car because he did not know anybody and was surprised that Amsterdam squatters hung out red flags from their buildings. In West-Germany, squatters only used black flags, since the color red was associated with social democracy.<sup>21</sup> This demonstrates that media images traveled further and at times had greater impact than personal contacts, and that in the process of information exchange things got lost or scrambled.

## POLITICAL TRANSFER: BUILDING BARRICADES IN AMSTERDAM AND NIJMEGEN

Squatters in Amsterdam and Nijmegen both built barricades and used a similar tactic to divert the police's attention. This was no coincidence. Nijmegen squatters had traveled to Amsterdam in search of information and support when preparing their action.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, a local journalist later acknowledged that the Nijmegen action 'was in fact very simple and had been executed in Amsterdam as well'.<sup>23</sup> However, when the barricades were built, significant differences soon became apparent.

<sup>20</sup> S. Borgstede, H. Küllmer and E. Proemmel, *Wir wollen alles: Hausbesetzungen in Hamburg* (Hamburg 2013).

<sup>21</sup> B. Langer, *Operation 1653. Stay rude, stay rebel* (Berlin 2004), 13, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Bruls, *De Pierson*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with R. Hoogveld in Bruls, *De Pierson*, 53.

The Amsterdam barricades were built spontaneously and remained weak throughout the weekend. The Amsterdam squatters had merely aimed to reoccupy a previously evicted house. That they would succeed and even force the police to retreat was unprecedented. Thus, when the police had left the scene after a fierce battle with a group of squatters, the latter grew ‘very quiet’ for a while. For minutes, nobody spoke, but then, ‘as if by agreement’, they started to tear paving stones out of the streets and build barricades, using everything they could find.<sup>24</sup> On one of the barricades, the squatters placed a sign, parodying the border between West and East Berlin: ‘You are now leaving Free Amsterdam’.<sup>25</sup> The police decided to patrol around the barricades, but refrained from nearing them, considering the risk of another defeat at the hands of the squatters too high.<sup>26</sup>

A journalist dubbed the barricaded street ‘a small area that seems impregnable’.<sup>27</sup> Specialists, however, knew better. A photographer who had previously witnessed the Paris barricades of May 1968 stated that the squatters made ‘the exact same mistakes’ as the Paris revolutionaries: ‘The barricades are built too close to the walls of the houses, so that there are no flight paths. At the same time, so many places are left open, that people, or police, can easily enter the area from the nearby Vondelpark’.<sup>28</sup> Proof of the fragility of the Amsterdam barricades came on Sunday morning, when a fire broke out in one of the houses within the barricaded area. The squatters dismantled one of their barricades ‘in no-time’, to allow the fire patrol to enter the area (the police had pledged not to use the opportunity to enter the area).<sup>29</sup>

In contrast, the Nijmegen barricades were well-prepared and very robust. Although their police diversion may have been inspired by

<sup>24</sup> ‘Nanda’s spuitbus en wat daarop volgde’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 6 March 1980; Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 52.

<sup>25</sup> ‘Barricaden en “aapjeskijkers” rond “Plein van de Vrijheid”’, *De Stem*, 3 March 1980.

<sup>26</sup> G. Jansen Hendriks, ‘De Vondelstraat’, *Andere tijden*, 14 December 2010, online via: <https://anderetijden.nl/afl levering/672/De-Vondelstraat>; E. Duivenvoorden, ‘Tanks tegen de woningnood’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 26 February 2020.

<sup>27</sup> ‘De Amsterdamse krakersoorlog’, *Haagse Post*, 8 March 1980.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Laat ze maar komen!’, *Panorama*, 14 March 1980.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Nanda’s spuitbus’, *Groene Amsterdammer*; ‘Buurt is krakers nu zat’, *De Telegraaf*, 3 March 1980.

Amsterdam, it was local activists who drew up the plans for the barricades. Days before the action, activists had collected barricade material, and attached hooks to houses in three small streets. On the night of the barricades, steel cables were tied between the hooks, after which bed spirals were placed against them and subsequently covered with sand and water, which froze because of the cold February weather. As a result, the barricades became ‘hard as concrete’.<sup>30</sup> The squatters not only dug tank ditches outside the barricades, which they filled with water,<sup>31</sup> but also tried to flood the surrounding streets, turning them into ‘large ice rinks’, suggesting jokingly 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.<sup>32</sup> Testament to the robustness of the barricades it became impossible for security services to enter the area. When a squatter was severely wounded, it took hours before an ambulance could pick him up, because it ‘simply could not reach us’.<sup>33</sup> Referring to fire hazards in Amsterdam, a local newspaper remarked that ‘the barricades make it impossible for fire patrols to enter the area. If a fire would break out, the squatters will have to put it out themselves’.<sup>34</sup>

Dennis Bos has argued that the barricades of the Paris Commune of 1870 were symbolic, dubbing them ‘contentious roadblocks’.<sup>35</sup> While fortifications outside of the city were able to withhold the opposing forces for weeks, the barricades within the city could not even do so for two days. Still, in Paris 1870 as in Amsterdam and Nijmegen 1980–1, the barricades did not merely articulate the resolve of the activists in a symbolic way. Rather, they were seen as so dangerous, that the authorities

<sup>30</sup> ‘Barricades op toegangen naar kraakwijkje hard als beton’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 24 February 1981.

<sup>31</sup> ‘ME “regelt” rellen rond Nijmeegse kraakpanden’, *Brabants Dagblad*, 18 February 1981.

<sup>32</sup> H. Jansen and G. Koenraadt (dir.), *Piersons unknown* (1981). At 5:15 you can see ice skating squatters. Online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mj0Qt\\_uz3c&ab\\_channel=DePierson.nl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mj0Qt_uz3c&ab_channel=DePierson.nl).

<sup>33</sup> ‘De Reünie Special: De krakers van de Nijmeegse Piersonstraat’, online at: <https://www.kro-ncrv.nl/programmas/dereunie/seizoenen/seizoen-2017/special-de-krakers-van-de-nijmeegse-piersonstraat-kn1690381>.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Te vroeg met barricades’, *De Gelderlander*, 19 February 1981.

<sup>35</sup> D. Bos, ‘Building barricades. The political transfer of a contentious roadblock’, *European Review of History* vol. 12:2 (2005), 345–360.

decided upon extreme measures to overcome them; either lethal violence as in 1870 or armored vehicles and tanks in 1980–1. Bos has furthermore demonstrated that stories and images of the Paris Commune within the labor movement were mainly spread via media, after which they were regularly amended to fit local contexts, as was the case with the 1980s squatter actions.

The different barricades could point to contacts between squatters in different cities, with Amsterdam activists informing their Nijmegen comrades about the possibility of tanks being used to clear the barricades. But that is not the full story. They also illustrate the hardening of squatter conflicts during the early 1980s, and show the significance of different local contexts. The Nijmegen barricades, after all, responded to a local urban conflict and were designed and mainly manned by Nijmegen activists. And they faced a more resolute and confrontation-prone city government than the Amsterdam squatters. Even so, the Nijmegen barricades seemed alien to many of the city's inhabitants, as if they were 'imported' from outside. This sentiment guided the initial reactions to the barricades, which differed greatly between the cities.

### LOCAL LEGITIMACY AND LOCAL SUPPORT

In Amsterdam, the barricades were an instant hit. Via a local radio station, squatters asked their fellow urbanites for support. In response, people brought blankets, food and money to the squatters, as well as crates of oranges, cigarettes, beer and toilet paper.<sup>36</sup> On Saturday evening, 'not the discotheque or the cinema, but the Vondelstraat [was] the main attraction'.<sup>37</sup> Cafés and snack bars in the area experienced a 'golden era', selling as much in one day as they would normally do in two months, while high end restaurants and hotels saw their clientele evaporate.<sup>38</sup> On Sunday, the barricaded site was flooded with youths and onlookers, as well as prominent citizens. Not only council members and aldermen came over, but also former prime minister Joop den Uyl.<sup>39</sup> At one point, even Daniel

<sup>36</sup> 'Nanda's spuitbus', *Groene Amsterdammer*; Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*.

<sup>37</sup> Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 118–119.

<sup>38</sup> 'Krakers enorm gespannen', *Algemeen Dagblad*, 3 March 1980.

<sup>39</sup> J. Carmiggelt, 'Tanks in de Vondelstraat', *Ons Amsterdam*, 8 January 2005.

Cohn-Bendit, leader of the Paris student revolt of May 1968 showed up; he was in town for a lecture.<sup>40</sup>

In Nijmegen, on the other hand, locals—especially youths—attacked the squatters. From day one, youths had gathered around the barricades, throwing eggs and stones and even trying to storm the barricades. A squatter who appealed to the youths to stop their aggression was beaten up.<sup>41</sup> Another squatter was hit by a stone and permanently lost his sight in one eye. In an interview, a group of youths motivated their actions through boredom, ‘Nijmegen is such a boring city’, but also through their sense that the squatters were outsiders. According to the youths, the squatters were all ‘students’: ‘You can see it and you can smell it’.<sup>42</sup> At one point, the aggression became so fierce, that the police dispersed the youths and set up a permanent perimeter around the barricades, in the words of an officer, to ‘protect the squatters’.<sup>43</sup> The squatters felt threatened by the youths, but also felt queasy about being protected by police officers, who they knew would ultimately evict them.<sup>44</sup>

The Nijmegen squatters had to ‘prove’ their local roots to dispel the aggression that their action had aroused. They did so in two ways. First, they approached local members of the Catholic trade union youth organization (Katholieke Werkende Jeugd, KWJ), well-established in the traditionally catholic city, to appeal to local youths. KWJ members connected to the youths and invited a number of them to visit the barricaded area. There, the youths met with acquaintances and in a number of cases their hostile attitude gave way to support.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, and more importantly,

<sup>40</sup> ‘Nanda’s spuitbus’, *Groene Amsterdammer*.

<sup>41</sup> ‘De ontruiming van de kraakpanden en het “proportioneel” geweld van de burgemeester’, *Vrij Nederland*, 28 February 1981.

<sup>42</sup> ‘Kraakers viermaal door ME ontzet’, *De Gelderlander*, 18 February 1981; ‘Nijmeegse krakers stuiten op veel agressie’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 18 February 1981; ‘De ontruiming van de kraakpanden’, *Vrij Nederland*.

<sup>43</sup> ‘De ontruiming van de kraakpanden’, *Vrij Nederland*; Interview with W. van Kraaij in: Bruls, *De Pierson*, 61; Omroep Gelderland, ‘De Piersonstraat’ (1991), online via: <https://youtu.be/pdyk4TtwpLQ>; ‘Gespannen situatie’, *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 21 February 1981; ‘Politie laat barricades in Nijmegen ongemoeid’, *Trouw*, 18 February 1981.

<sup>44</sup> ‘Nijmeegse krakers stuiten op veel agressie’, *NRC Handelsblad*; ‘Tanks tegen geweldloze krakers’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 25 February 1981.

<sup>45</sup> Bruls, *De Pierson*, 24–27; interview with J. Peters in Bruls, *De Pierson*, 71; ‘De slag om een Nijmeegse volkswijk’, *Algemeen Nijmeegs Studentenblad*, 19 February 2019, online via: <https://ans-online.nl/interview/de-slag-om-een-nijmeegse-volkswijk>.

squatters used their pirate radio station, hosted from within the barricaded area, to appeal to locals for support.<sup>46</sup> In response, supporters formed a ‘human shield’ around the barricades. During broadcasts, the hosts spoke in local dialects and interviewed locals who supported them. According to observers, the radio station brought about a ‘reversal’ in the locals’ attitudes toward the squatters: ‘Step by step the image of the squatters as “invaders” was broken down’. Instead, the squatters grew into a ‘symbol of all things Nijmegen’.<sup>47</sup> Just as in Amsterdam, people heeded calls to donate food, drink and blankets, as well as wood for campfires, and a large support movement grew beyond the barricades. The combination of humor, activist zeal and ‘quality pop music’ fueled the station’s popularity, and it was believed that more people in Nijmegen listened to the pirate radio station ‘than all the four national broadcasting stations together’.<sup>48</sup> The broadcasts, however, not only reinforced the squatters’ legitimacy in the city, but also in the rest of the country, as radio pirates amplified the signal and even a national broadcasting agency retransmitted its broadcasts.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, the influence of the radio and the size of the squatters’ support should not be overestimated. One month after the conflict, a survey revealed that people dismissing and applauding the police’s approach were tied (33% and 36% respectively).<sup>50</sup> Still, the authorities viewed the radio station as a major influence, and so it was their first target during the eviction, an anti-terrorist unit stormed the building housing the transmitter and vandalized the equipment.<sup>51</sup>

By that time, however, a reversal of roles had taken place. By successfully emphasizing their Nijmegen roots and support base, the squatters

<sup>46</sup> Interview W. van Kraaij in: Bruls, *De Pierson*, 59.

<sup>47</sup> ‘De breuk die Prins Karnaval niet kan lijmen’, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 11 March 1981; ‘Krakers “kraken” ook de ether’, *De Gelderlander*, 18 February 1981.

<sup>48</sup> ‘De ontruiming van de kraakpanden’, *Vrij Nederland*.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with W. van Kraaij in Bruls, *De Pierson*, 59; ‘25 jaar na de Piersonrellen’, *De Gelderlander*, 20 February 2006; ‘Krakers veranderden de Nijmeegse Piersonstraat in een vesting 35 jaar geleden’, *Omroep Gelderland*, 16 February 2016. Online via: <https://www.omroep gelderland.nl/nieuws/2105707/Krakers-veranderden-de-Nijmeegse-Piersonstraat-in-een-vesting-35-jaar-geleden>.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Schuld vooral bij relschoppers’, *De Gelderlander*, 7 March 1981.

<sup>51</sup> Bruls, *De Pierson*, 30.

were now seen by many as locals and bearers of local political legitimacy. The local authorities on the other hand, who had called for support from the national government and mobilized large numbers of heavy-duty police from other cities to maintain order and evict the barricades, were now seen as outsiders and invaders of the local polity. This became clear during and after the eviction of the occupied area.

### ‘THIS IS WAR’: EVICTIONS AND OUTCOMES

Both in Amsterdam and in Nijmegen, the squatter barricades were crushed by tanks and large numbers of heavy-duty police. In Amsterdam, the social-democratic city government had been willing to grant the squatters concessions, but only after the latter dismantled their barricades, which they refused. In Nijmegen, negotiations with the conservative city government almost immediately broke down. As a result, the local authorities in both cities fell back on heavy means to quell the squatter resistance. But although they used similar methods, the responses in both cities were very different.

Early Monday morning, 3 March 1980, three days after the barricades had been erected, the Amsterdam city government sent five Leopard tanks, four armored vehicles, four hundred border patrol agents, and seven hundred riot police to the Vondelstraat.<sup>52</sup> At that moment, no more than eighty squatters were on site; the rest had left the site to catch some much-needed rest after manning the barricades for two full days and three nights.<sup>53</sup> The riot police moved in first, and slowly drove the remaining squatters outside of the barricaded area. According to a local radio station, the situation was ‘almost anti-climactic’, although the squatters feared for their lives. One of them remembers thinking: ‘Now there’s going to be casualties’.<sup>54</sup> Subsequently, the tanks moved in and within ‘less than fifteen minutes’, the barricades were ‘shattered like matchstick boxes’.<sup>55</sup> In something that resembled a suicide action, two squatters jumped onto one of the moving tanks. With the two squatters on top,

<sup>52</sup> Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*; ‘Keurige Amsterdamse buurt veranderde in slagveld’, *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, 3 March 1980.

<sup>53</sup> Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 155.

<sup>54</sup> Blom, *De Vondelstraat*, 156; Adilkno, *Cracking the Movement*.

<sup>55</sup> “‘Rookgordijn van formaliteiten moest bedoeling verhullen’”, *Trouw*, 4 March 1980; ‘Gespannen situatie in binnenstad’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 3 March 1980.

it drove into the barricades, upon which another squatter was standing, refusing to leave.<sup>56</sup> As if by a miracle, all three survived without serious injury.

In Nijmegen, the authorities followed a similar scenario. Three Leopard tanks were called in, as well as three armored vehicles, two water cannons, 1.950 riot police and border patrol officers, and snipers.<sup>57</sup> But other than in Amsterdam, the authorities faced opposition in sizable numbers. While a hundred squatters dug themselves in behind the barricades, another eight hundred protesters blocked the way to the barricades with non-violent sit-ins.<sup>58</sup> At 04:30 a.m., police and border patrols surrounded the area and ended the sit-in actions with aggressive force.<sup>59</sup> They subsequently moved to the barricades and shot more than 135 gas grenades into the barricaded area, with mixtures of teargas and CS-gas.<sup>60</sup> As squatters fainted, lost orientation and were incapacitated by involuntary vomiting, they had to give up their fight.<sup>61</sup> The squatters were given free passage by the police, and in response left their sticks and stones behind at the barricades.<sup>62</sup> The tanks then came in to clear the barricades. In a dramatic move, two squatters tried to stop a tank by trying to push a stick between the caterpillar and the tracks, but failed.<sup>63</sup> The first two barricades were subsequently smashed as ‘if they were made of cardboard’, but the third demanded four attempts before tanks could drive

<sup>56</sup> Interview Frans de Wit in: *De stad was van Ons*.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Het draaiboek van de ontruimingsactie in Nijmegen werd per velletje uitgedeeld’, *Vrij Nederland*, 4 april 1981; ‘Krakers: ME gooide met stenen bij ontruiming’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 February 1981; ‘25 jaar na de Piersonrellen’, *De Gelderlander*.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Blokade van kazerne hielp krakers niet’, *Vrije Volk*, 23 February 1981.

<sup>59</sup> According to *Vrij Nederland*, ‘almost never have non-violent protesters been beaten this hard’. See: ‘Het draaiboek’, *Vrij Nederland*.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Cijfers’, *De Gelderlander*, 23 March 1981.

<sup>61</sup> According to *Eindhoven's Dagblad*, ‘the squatters exited through the main barricade: dirty, grim and furious’. See: ‘Barricades op toegangen’, *Eindhoven's Dagblad*. See also: ‘Weet je, mijn oom was bij de krakers’, *De Nieuwe Linie*, 18 March 1981; (“‘We hebben bewondering voor de krakers’”, *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 25 March 1981.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Barricades op toegangen’, *Eindhoven's Dagblad*.

<sup>63</sup> Jansen and Koenaardt, *Piersons Unknown*. At 2.43 two squatters attempt to stop one of the tanks. Online via: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiKxClXfzKg&feature=youtu.be>.

through the tank ditch and clear the barricade.<sup>64</sup> At 9:30 a.m. the police action was complete and two hours later construction workers started demolition works.<sup>65</sup>

Both in Amsterdam and in Nijmegen, the barricades and tanks generated comparisons to civil war. In Amsterdam, the squatter conflict was already for some time referred to as a war, urban warfare or the squatter war.<sup>66</sup> In Nijmegen, the escalation came more suddenly, as did the equations with war. In the week of the eviction, Nijmegen commemorated that same part of the city's accidental bombing by allied planes, thirty-seven years earlier.<sup>67</sup> As passersby and residents saw tanks and border patrols passing through the streets, they stated with anger and disbelief: 'This is civil war plain and simple'.<sup>68</sup> Of course, people were aware of the difference with a real war, and of the fact that 'people were not firing at each other with real guns',<sup>69</sup> but the usage of tanks and the threat of police firing on protesters made an impression that could only be articulated through war metaphors.<sup>70</sup> In the weeks that followed the slogan 'has war broken out here' was sprayed on walls throughout the city.<sup>71</sup>

The tanks in Nijmegen also brought associations with Amsterdam. As mainstream media described the Nijmegen conflict as 'the first real squatter war outside of Amsterdam',<sup>72</sup> locals were left to wonder what

<sup>64</sup> 'Traan- en braakgas, ME en tanks verjagen de krakers', *Brabants Dagblad*, 24 February 1980.

<sup>65</sup> 'Veel sympathisanten bij Nijmeegse kraakpanden', *Trouw*, 23 February 1981; 'Keiharde ontruiming', *Haagse Courant* [?], 23 February 1981.

<sup>66</sup> "'Het is nu oorlog'", *Trouw*, 1 March 1980; 'Amsterdamse krakersoorlog', *Haagse Post*; H.J.A. Hofland, *De Stadsoorlog. Amsterdam*'80 (Alphen aan den Rijn: Sijthoff, 1981).

<sup>67</sup> Bruls, *De Pierson*.

<sup>68</sup> 'Keiharde ontruiming', *Haagse Courant*; 'Terzijde', *Vrij Nederland*, 4 April 1981. The deployment of tanks provoked references to the Second World War. In his chapter, Sedlmaier shows that this was not a unique phenomenon. Conflicts over housing and urban redevelopment in London in the 1970s also caused activists their to refer to the Second World War, when they rallied behind the slogan 'stop the Blitz'.

<sup>69</sup> Omroep Gelderland, 'De Piersonstraat' (1991).

<sup>70</sup> 'Oorlog', *De Gelderlander*, 25 February 1981.

<sup>71</sup> Idem.

<sup>72</sup> 'Achterhaalde filosofie oorzaak kraakactie', *De Volkskrant*, 20 February 1981; 'Televisie en radio', *De Volkskrant*, 24 February 1981; Historian Eric Duivenvoorden spoke of a 'conflict between squatters and the city that was in no way inferior to the one in Amsterdam'. See Duivenvoorden, *Een voet tussen de deur*.

this meant for Nijmegen's identity. The conservative local newspaper *De Gelderlander* asked how the conflict could have escalated in Nijmegen, which was 'after all only a provincial town'.<sup>73</sup> The theme of 'Amsterdam situations', however, also allowed locals to externalize the conflict. One observer stated jokingly, as he witnessed tanks driving through the city, 'it's almost as if we're in Amsterdam'.<sup>74</sup> While the squatters had become a symbol 'of all things Nijmegen', the city government was ever more associated with violence, 'Amsterdam situations' and the central government.<sup>75</sup> The apex of this development arrived when local carnival associations declared their support for the squatters, who in return promised solemnly that they would not mar or block carnival celebrations with militant squatter actions.<sup>76</sup>

The direct political effects of the squatter conflicts in Amsterdam and Nijmegen were also different. The evening after the clearing of the barricades in Amsterdam, between six and ten thousand protested against police violence.<sup>77</sup> Even so, political relations in the capital were not thoroughly shaken up by the squatter conflict. During the municipal elections of 1982, the social democrats lost 5% of the vote, but remained the largest party with 33,5%, while parties on the right and the left grew.<sup>78</sup> In Nijmegen, ten thousand people protested on the day of the eviction. For a whole week, protests continued, and at their height mobilized 14,000 people. Two weeks later, as two thousand protesters protested and rioted outside town hall, the city council decided to postpone the construction of the parking garage. Years later, it was decided that instead of a parking garage, new social housing would be built at the site of the squatter barricades. The Piersonstraat action, however, also brought more lasting change in Nijmegen's political culture. Before 1982, the Christian Democrats had excluded the labor party from local government. In 1982, both the Christian Democrats and the Labor Party lost about 7.5% of the

<sup>73</sup> 'Zeigelhof: meer dan alleen een gewraakte garage', *De Gelderlander*, 25 February 1981.

<sup>74</sup> 'Nacht vol geweld', *De Gelderlander* [?], 23 February 1981.

<sup>75</sup> 'Amsterdamse toestanden in Nijmegen', *De Nieuwe Linie*, 25 February 1981.

<sup>76</sup> 'De breuk die Prins Karnaval niet kan lijmen', *De Groene Amsterdammer*.

<sup>77</sup> "'Er is woonruimte genoeg, alleen is die niet goed verdeeld'", *Elseviers Weekblad*, 8 March 1980.

<sup>78</sup> The election results can be consulted at: <https://www.verkiezingsuitslagen.nl/verkiezingen/detail/GR19780531>.

vote (receiving 31.1% and 21% respectively), while the radical left grew from 15.6% to 25%. After 1982, no city government would be formed without the Labor Party, and the coalition would often include support from parties to the left of the Labor Party.<sup>79</sup>

The different responses and effects of the clearing of the barricades in Amsterdam and Nijmegen stand out. In Amsterdam, the Vondelstraat episode cemented the emerging movement's cohesion and militancy, forming the start of an extensive protest wave. In Nijmegen, the Piersonstraat conflict transformed the squatters from alien intruders into legitimate activists with a local support base able to lastingly change local political relations. In this process, mainstream and movement media played a central role. Through the media, squatters and other local actors confronted the image of Amsterdam squatters 'transplanting' riots to Nijmegen. Although there had been real and personal connections between Amsterdam and Nijmegen squatters, the local meaning that was assigned to them proved crucial for the success of the Nijmegen movement.

## CONCLUSION

The case of the Amsterdam and Nijmegen barricades sheds new light on how to approach squatter translocalism, transnationalism and inter-urban networks. Rather than trying to map the personal and organizational networks in detail, this case study has concentrated on the contested nature and different meanings that were assigned to these networks, both among squatters and others. In the process of debating these meanings, the real, and supposed qualities of these networks became part of the image of the squatters. Even though the nature and effects of squatter networks were often enhanced in the imaginations of squatters and their opponents, these imaginations had real-life effects. For both activists and authorities mobilized support from other cities. When the narrative of 'outside help' through inter-urban networks became dominant, the legitimacy of local actors, be they activists or authorities, was diminished.

Mainstream and movement media played a central role in styling and restyling the image of squatter networks. In Amsterdam and Nijmegen,

<sup>79</sup> The election results can be consulted at: <https://www.huisvandenijmeegeschiedenis.nl/info/Gemeenteraadsverkiezingen>.

squatter pirate stations helped to cement the image of squatters as local actors and mobilize support from locals. Particularly in Nijmegen, radio broadcasts were crucial in transforming the image of the squatters from outside intruders into legitimate local actors. In other instances, however, movement media left the possible tensions unresolved between local and inter-urban connections. When Amsterdam squatters prided themselves on fomenting squatter unrest in other cities, they provided a mirror image to conservative media outlets, who had decried their supposed capacity for inciting riots ‘wherever they went’. Moreover, squatters in various cities seemed to take relish in parodying and playing into these fears, excitingly announcing that the Amsterdam ‘rioters’ were coming over. In the subsequent debates, various meanings of squatter networks were counterposed, but their real content and influence remained indeterminate.

As social movements are non-institutionalized actors with porous boundaries and a continuously changing participant base, it may be impossible to map social movement networks in detail, or assess their specific influence. Analyses of the imagined and contested nature of these networks, however, may already reveal much about how these movements and their networks functioned and what they brought about.

In 1945, directly following the Second World War, the Dutch Communist Party dubbed housing shortage the ‘primary enemy of the people’. On 12 September 2021, 15,000 people marched in Amsterdam to protest the continuing housing crisis. The protesters claimed that the shortage amounted to 300,000 houses and apartments, but emphasized that 143,000 houses, apartments and office spaces remained simultaneously vacant. An isolated attempt at squatting a house, however, mobilized only a dozen activists and was quickly stopped by the police.<sup>80</sup> Commentators explained the failed action by pointing out that squatting had been criminalized in 2010, but that argument is not convincing. In Germany, where squatting grew into a sizable movement during the 1980s, it had never been legal. Apart from a lack of political opportunities and support from other political actors, it is plausible that the act of squatting cannot currently electrify the imagination of youths and activists. Because they

<sup>80</sup> ‘Duizenden betogers vragen met protestmars naar de Dam aandacht voor wooncrisis’, NOS, <https://nos.nl/collectie/13877/artikel/2397519-duizenden-betogers-vragen-met-protestmars-naar-de-dam-aandacht-voor-wooncrisis>, 12 September 2021; ‘Er staan 143 duizend panden leeg. Is kraken de oplossing voor de woningnood?’, *Volkscrant*, 17 September 2021.

think it unrealistic, people do not do it. In a process that mirrors popular imaginaries of active squatter networks in the 1980s, shared images of squatting in 2021 have real-life effects on social movement mobilizations.