

## **Political Violence and the Police Response in the Netherlands**

by  
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### **INTRODUCTION**

Even in an “open society,” political terrorism and its suppression by the police are relatively “closed” subjects. It usually is very difficult, if not impossible, to expose the machinations behind the terrorist attacks, on the one hand, and the counter-measures, on the other. The reason is obvious: given their concern for conducting successful operations, neither the terrorists nor the police have anything to gain from any “timely” exposure of their activities. However, the result is that most books on political terrorism and the police response to it amount to little more than speculation based on sources of doubtful reliability.

In this regard, the literature on this subject dealing with the Netherlands stands up well in comparison to that examining other European countries. There are, for example, three well-documented essays on the Netherlands’ experience; two of these have been published in the last three years.<sup>1</sup> In addition, there are several books which provide a fairly in-depth analysis of certain terrorist actions and their impact on the organization of the Netherlands police.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there are some publications that provide useful information on certain trends or present interesting interpretations of certain events, such as police surveillance, or the law and order role of the police.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is to present a picture of political terrorism in the Netherlands and the police effort in countering it. The first section reviews the historical background of what might be termed, with some exaggeration, “the terrorist problem” in the Netherlands. The second part examines the government’s response to this problem, by focusing on police action. The reason why the *police* response will be the main focus in this section, disregarding any other form of counteraction, is simply that there rarely has been any other kind of response. Finally, the essay attempts to look ahead and project the policy line that the Dutch government will follow in fighting political terrorism in the near future.

### **EVOLUTION AND SCOPE OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN THE NETHERLANDS**

Two initial observations need to be made. First, apart from World War II, the Netherlands did not experience any serious politically inspired violence until 1970.<sup>4</sup> The incident which drastically disrupted this historical pattern was

the siege of the residence of the Indonesian Ambassador in The Hague by the "Free South Moluccan Youths." On that occasion, a policeman was killed, followed by the hostage-taking of some thirty people.<sup>5</sup> Second, in spite of all the terrorism and other politically-motivated violence which has occurred on Dutch soil since 1970, the Netherlands do not have any domestic terrorist movements or organizations characterized by such features as lasting structures of a hierarchical nature, infrastructure in terms of material and technical facilities, or clearly visible support from certain sections of the general public. That said, it is essential to elaborate a little further on these observations.

### **Political Violence in the Netherlands Before 1970**

The political history of the Netherlands, from the French Period (1814-1815) on, has been less peaceful than some analysts would have us believe. Indeed, there has been a long series of labor strikes, demonstrations and riots ending in violent clashes.<sup>6</sup> Yet these violent protest actions generally took place within very limited areas of Dutch territory and did not last very long either. In other words, they did not represent any widespread and long-lasting social conflict, and therefore did not present any serious obstacles for the development of peaceful relations between the various sectors of the Dutch population.

However, despite this rather limited history of conflict, it was feared time and again before 1970, that, under the influence of trends in other European countries, there could be more serious conflict, including revolutionary actions and civil war situations. This was especially true in government circles and more particularly in police and judicial circles, as well as in the higher ranks of society. In the period 1848-1851, for instance, the various revolutions and coup d'états in Germany, France, and elsewhere, were monitored warily. By the turn of the century, many political leaders viewed the masses of urban workers as a potential threat to the political order, as "*classes dangereuses*."<sup>7</sup> At the end of World War I, the somewhat subversive words of the socialist leader Troelstra gave many people the idea that before long even the Netherlands would experience uprisings like those in Russia or Germany. And, naturally, the Cold War enormously fostered the fear of a major war being waged both within the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

The reason that it is so important to point out this recurrent fear of "chaotic" disruptions is pretty obvious: each time, this fear resulted in a policy aimed either at averting such disruptions or at their suppression when they disturbed public order. For example, the anarchists attacks that were carried out in Russia, Italy, and France at the turn of the century were reason enough for policy development even in the Netherlands. Such anarchist actions were viewed by many as the sparks that might cause the entire social fabric to explode. In fact, there was no significant upheaval in the Dutch social structure until the mid-1960s, when the traditional parties' majority in parliament was seriously challenged and radical youth groups emerged.<sup>8</sup>

## **Terrorist and Activist Violence Since 1970**

As noted above, the situation changed dramatically in 1970, with the raid on the Indonesian Ambassador's residence. This incident was the first of a long series of violent acts carried out in the Netherlands by foreign terrorist movements on the one hand and by domestic activist movements on the other. There were other forms of politically-inspired violence after 1970, such as the "squatters' riots," which occurred in the cities of Amsterdam and Nijmegen and elsewhere.<sup>9</sup> However, these incidents and other more or less violent attacks, committed by all sorts of *protest* movements, will not be discussed here.

Taking the distinction between terrorist and activist violence as a starting point, the size and evolution of terrorist and activist violent attacks that actually were committed from 1970 on can be charted as follows, at least insofar as these actions were reported by the Dutch media.<sup>10</sup> During the past two decades, some twenty *major* (and some 35 minor) incidents took place in the Netherlands in which members of foreign terrorist groups or movements were (allegedly) involved. These included: two attacks by the Japanese Red Army, including the attack on the French Embassy in 1974;<sup>11</sup> nine incidents involving Palestinian groups; four attacks by the Provisional IRA (killing seven people in all);<sup>12</sup> three confrontations with members of the RAF (killing three); and three attacks by Armenian groups.<sup>13</sup> In addition, there were a number of bombings and incidents of arson, or attempts at such actions, against French, Russian and American consulates and/or trade missions, where the identities of the attackers remained unknown. A striking feature of these incidents is the fact that the number of them neither increased nor decreased over the years.

Acts of terrorism and other politically motivated violence, which involved *domestic* groups, shows a somewhat different picture. From 1970 to 1980 there were ten major incidents, some of which became "world famous." The most significant were the two train sieges, in 1975 and 1977 respectively, and five (abortive) attempts at sieges and hostage taking by Moluccans, with thirteen people being killed in all.<sup>14</sup> However, from 1981 to 1985 the number of incidents that became publicly known rose to approximately thirty. A few of these were, again, connected with the undigested colonial past of the Netherlands: one or two attacks and shootings involved Moluccans and three attacks involved Surinamese people.<sup>15</sup> Approximately ten bombings and arson attacks were committed by activists protesting further nuclear armament<sup>16</sup> and Apartheid in South Africa; these included attacks committed by sympathizers of RARA (Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action), aimed at construction corporations, oil companies (Shell) and food chain stores (Makro).<sup>17</sup> The Red Revolutionary Front carried out about ten bomb attacks and arson incidents against government agencies in various cities (Ministry of Justice, police stations, social security offices, housing agencies).<sup>18</sup> There were also violent attacks during the same period against offices of political parties (twice), and against radio broadcasting stations (twice). Finally, the number of incidents which occurred from 1986 to

1988 alone, amounted to more than thirty. There were fewer attacks against government agencies, despite the rise in attacks (four) on police stations and police vehicles, in Amsterdam and Nijmegen. The major portion (approximately fifteen) of the incidents which occurred during these years consisted of arsonist attacks against business premises (oil companies, construction companies, banks) which either were or had been involved in the "cruise missile issue," or which had vested interests in South Africa (for example, Shell). The rest of these incidents consisted of a mixture of violent attacks against offices of the EEC, the multinational Philips, or against electricity plants; they were committed by political and religious splinter movements.<sup>19</sup>

Apart from these "real" incidents, the past twenty years have also seen a long series (between 20 and 25) of more or less serious *threats* which became public knowledge. In some cases, these threats were made against certain persons, institutions, and companies, but it also happened that some of them could not be related to any particular cause. The first category of threats included the rumors of plans of the Moluccans to abduct Her Majesty the Queen,<sup>20</sup> and the planting of fake bombs at business locations of Shell. The second category — unidentified threats — included, for example, a fake bomb that was planted in Amsterdam at the headquarters of the postal services.

Since 1970, the Netherlands has been confronted with an increasing incidence of political violence against individuals and property. Nevertheless, since the sensational outrages committed by the Moluccans during the mid-seventies, most of the terrorist violence to which Dutch society has been exposed has come from terrorist movements based in other countries, such as that arising from the Northern Ireland conflict.

The violence from activist movements can be attributed for the greater part to Dutch citizens, sometimes organized to some extent, in some "Front" or other. They are radical supporters of extremist views on major issues of foreign and domestic policy of this country, for instance on South Africa, defence matters, public housing, social security and welfare policy. Generally speaking, terrorist violence aimed at individuals has been a "foreign affair," and violence from activists aimed at property was more often than not committed by "domestic" groups. Whereas in many cases it was and still is possible to identify the perpetrators of terrorist violence — if not exactly down to each and every individual involved, but at least at the level of movements which have become known worldwide — the perpetrators of activist violence have turned out to be far more elusive. A considerable number of such cases has never been solved,<sup>21</sup> and the few arrests that were made over the years have not resulted in real insight — at least not as far as the general public is concerned — into what is hidden behind such names as the "*Rood Revolutionair Front*" (Red Revolutionary Front) or "RARA." Nevertheless, those who have committed attacks under these or other names have never been able to count on a great deal of sympathy from

“the general public.” The activist violence aimed at the Apartheid regime, for instance, was condemned by the legitimate anti-Apartheid movement.

## THE RESPONSE FROM THE GOVERNMENT IN TERMS OF POLICE ACTION

### The Response to Mass Political Violence

The large discrepancies between various sectors of the population in terms of political power, economic wealth and social status, which until the end of the first half of this century so often provided the breeding ground for popular riots, have gradually been reduced. Massive riots have gradually ceased to occur as a result of the increase in social and economic equality. Of great significance, though often overlooked, is the fact that in the time frame under review the central government has nevertheless expanded its police manpower to the point where it can suppress such demonstrations, repeatedly if necessary. The government pursued this development in two ways. On the one hand, the repressive potential of the police force was reinforced and specialized. Specifically, this included the expansion of the *Koninklijke Marechaussee* (The Royal Gendarmerie); the establishment of the *Korps Politietroepen* (the Military Police Troops); the centralization and militarization of the *Rijksveldwacht* (the County Police); and the formation of so-called “rifle-brigades” within the municipal police forces of the major cities.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, intelligence agencies were secretly established, with participation from various segments of the state police force, as well as from the major municipal police forces.<sup>23</sup> One far-reaching consequence of this proliferation of the police was that the role of the armed forces in the maintenance of public order was reduced substantially.

A similar trend has become apparent since the sixties, with respect to massive violent confrontations on housing issues, nuclear energy, nuclear defence, and unemployment. In response, state and municipal police, in close consultation with the central government, created mobile units in order to be able to control this new type of political violence by repressive measures. However, at the same time, the government developed new policies in many areas, which alleviated the worst feelings of discontent that existed among major oppositional movements and pressure groups. As a result of both tendencies over the past few years, there have been no more massive violent clashes with respect to these issues, either in the major cities or in more rural areas. This does not imply, however, that the operational structures that were set up to control such disturbances were also dismantled. This is because it is believed that the threat of major public disorders will always remain in some areas, for instance in the case of football hooliganism. Perhaps, too, in certain areas, these structures may be linked with the organization of the police response in combatting terrorism and violent activism.

## **The Response to Terrorism and Violent Activism**

Regarding the suppression of terrorism, Dutch government policy is more complicated than in the area of combatting mass activism. In addition to a series of police countermeasures, discussed in more detail below, government policy on anti-terrorism has included political measures. These measures can be divided into a "positive" political strategy and a "negative" one. "Positive" strategy refers to the situation where the government takes a specific initiative in order to avoid any further escalation of violence. The Dutch government has been following this line in the field of "domestic" terrorism; but then, this is where such a course is a natural one to follow. For example, as a result of the Moluccan incidents during the seventies, a whole range of social, economic and cultural measures were developed and implemented in a dialogue with representatives of this ethnic group. In order to avert any further outbreaks of violence. The Dutch government and the South Moluccan groups signed a formal "peace treaty" in 1986.<sup>24</sup> The "negative" strategy, in the author's view, consists of the government's deliberately neglecting to take specific counterterrorist initiatives. The Dutch government pursues this kind of policy in the case of "foreign" terrorism; there is usually no alternative in such cases anyway. For example, the Dutch government in general has refrained from making any firm public statements, not to mention any negative statement, on terrorist movements such as the ETA and the IRA. It is only when such movements commit violent attacks in the Netherlands that the Dutch government publicly condemns their actions. At the same time, however, the Dutch government ratified the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, in 1985. It also subscribes to the rather non-committal resolutions on the issue of terrorism which are adopted from time to time in the Council of Europe and the European Parliament.

The system of police measures which have been implemented as part of Dutch policy to combat terrorism is more complex than it appears at first sight. Moreover, these measures are also partly aimed at the suppression of violent activism. However, in summary, all these measures put together amount to the following.

First, in the area of intelligence work, the Netherlands have been actively participating since 1976 in the international consultations between the EEC member states, as structured under the name of TREVI.<sup>25</sup> Second, intelligence collection on terrorist (and activist) movements on the one hand, and the technical assistance provided to police forces which might confront such movements, has been organized since the early seventies into a national body. This took formal shape with the establishment of a so-called Special Cases Center (BZC) (Since 1991, Special Investigations BRZ) attached to the National Criminal Intelligence Service (CRI) in The Hague.<sup>26</sup> The CRI comes under the supervision of the Ministry of Justice. Third, the civil intelligence agencies, in particular the National Security Service (BVD), are able to obtain information

from the political intelligence service branches with the State Police and the Municipal Police. The jurisdictional struggle between the BZC/BRZ and the BVD, in particular, was settled a few years ago to the extent possible, in a covenant laying down the responsibilities of the two agencies.<sup>27</sup> For the past twenty years, these forces, as well as the military intelligence services, have been industriously gathering intelligence on individuals and organizations (both within and outside the country) who use or are suspected of using terrorism and violent activism on Dutch territory to achieve their goals.

To facilitate action in the event of a terrorist attack, the Dutch government in the early 1970s established a complex consultational/command structure involving all parties concerned from judicial, administrative and police authorities. At its head is a crisis center, chaired by the Justice minister who, after consultation with the Prime Minister and other senior officials, has the authority to make decisions about handling an incident.<sup>28</sup>

At about the same time, the State Police Force, the Army and the *Koninklijke Marechaussee* created so-called Special Support Units and Special Security Task Forces, to provide an operational capability. These units are specialized in marksmanship, close combat, and hostage rescue. In addition, measures were implemented in the Army to prepare the formation of units that could carry out the cordoning and protection of areas and buildings where terrorist actions are occurring.<sup>29</sup>

Between the gathering of intelligence on terrorists (and activists) on the one hand, and the more or less *military* actions against terrorists on the other hand, lies the vast problem of detecting the actual perpetrators of such violent actions. Obviously, these activities are to a very large extent similar to those which “normally” take place in the day-to-day detection and investigation of serious crimes. In concrete terms, special investigation units, either with a national or a regional scope, were put together on several occasions in the past, in order to concentrate on the investigation of the members of a certain activist movement, or to investigate the backgrounds of specific individuals from certain activist circles. The mission of these units varied. The Co-ordinating Anti-Terrorist Project Team, for instance, was authorized to conduct investigations into the RARA organization more or less independently, while the scope of duties of the National Co-ordinating Anti-Terrorism Project Team, which is currently attached to the CRI, does not extend beyond the central storage, analysis and exchange of information, which is gathered by other agencies.<sup>30</sup> Similar teams have been set up in the past in an effort to put an end to the activities of ‘ordinary’ criminals: (armed) robbery gangs and drug trafficking rings. Within the framework of the measures to combat terrorist and activist violence, the general rule is to deploy technical support units that can also play a significant role in “normal” investigations, such as observation units, arrest teams, and criminal intelligence divisions.

## CONCLUSIONS: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE AND FOR EUROPE?

The response of the Dutch government to terrorist and activist violence can in general best be described as a controlled one. Even in the face of activist violence relating to certain controversial issues of foreign and domestic policy, the Dutch government will usually take a rather moderate public posture in response to such acts of violence. This does not mean that they do not condemn such acts, nor does it mean that a minister will never be heard making a bold statement on the subject. But it does mean that even when a firm statement is given, this will not amount to a declaration of war, as happens frequently in other countries. Moreover, in this writer's view, on issues such as South Africa, nuclear disarmament and environmental matters, the Dutch government will proceed with caution anyway, since it knows full well that these issues are regarded as extremely sensitive by major sectors of the population. This implies, in the first place, that wherever possible, such violence will not be countered with violence. Second, it means that the organization and execution of countermeasures involving the use of violence will be incorporated, to the extent possible, into the existing organization and operation of the police force.

This incorporation has automatically led to a certain degree of centralization, specialization, and differentiation of the police system, but it has not affected the basic system. This would only be the case if this conglomerate of permanent and separate anti-terrorism units, that has been created within the *regular* police force, had in addition been placed under the competency of a *special* body, endowed with separate, far-reaching powers. Having said that, it should be recognized that the Dutch government did react firmly to the terrorist violence from Moluccans when it was felt that there was no alternative.<sup>31</sup>

Why could the Dutch government afford to stick to this controlled response? The crux of the matter is that since the late 1970s the principal terrorist problem in the Netherlands has been foreign, not domestic, terrorist organizations. Furthermore, although activist violence did increase in recent years, it cannot be typified as particularly endemic; nor was this violence, it would seem, organized in a coherent way. Moreover, the use of these two types of politically inspired violence is not supported by the majority of the population.

In light of the above, it is hardly surprising that the official and unofficial committees that have for the past few years been studying the issue of politically motivated violence and the police response to it did not come up with proposals to change drastically the current approach to terrorist and activist violence. Rather, the reports of these committees recommended intensifying the prevention of such violence by means of: political debate; an adequate system of collecting and utilizing operational information; the implementation of technical and public security measures; and the repression of such violence within the existing administrative and legal frameworks, avoiding any (unnecessary) use of



drastic force as much as possible.<sup>32</sup> There are no indications that the political arena has even considered alternative ways of dealing with this type of violence.

Nevertheless, it is extremely difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the Dutch government policy on political violence in relation to policy goals: limiting such violence to the maximum extent at a minimum of material and immaterial cost. The reason is clear; no one is able to judge to what extent the ETA, the PIRA and similar organizations have been influenced by this policy. There is no one in a position to maintain, with any degree of authority, that the fact that organizations such as the RAF, Action Directe or CCC did not exist in the Netherlands was the result of the controlled response of the Dutch government. This suggests that it is not appropriate for the government of the Netherlands to take on the role of the "Dutch uncle" on this issue toward other countries, where the problems surrounding terrorist and activist violence are usually far more complicated.

#### Endnotes

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6. For a general overview, see C. Fijnaut, *Opdat de macht een toevlucht zij? Een historische studie van het politieapparaat als een politieke instelling* (Antwerpen: Kluwer Rechtswetenschappen, 1979).
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9. *Ibid.*, pp. 156-60.
10. This overview is based on data compiled by P. Klerks: see Klerks, 1989, op. cit.
11. Brian M. Jenkins, *Embassies Under Siege: a Review of 48 Embassy Takeovers, 1971-1980, R-2651RC* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, January 1981), p. 29.
12. These included: the assassination of the British ambassador and his orderly in 1979; three British servicemen killed in two attacks in May 1988; and two Australians killed by "accident" in 1990.

13. Francis P. Hyland, *Armenian Terrorism: the Past, the Present, the Prospects* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1991), pp. 134, 142, 196.
14. J. Bowyer Bell, *A Time of Terror: How Democratic Societies Respond to Revolutionary Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 175-77. Some of the victims died during rescue attempts.
15. Schmid, "Politically-Motivated Violent Activists . . .," p. 169.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-68.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 163-65.
18. Alex P. Schmid, Albert J. Jongman, et al., *Political Terrorism: a New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Data Bases, Theories and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), p. 625.
19. Klerks, pp. 217-29.
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30. Private information.
31. See, Prime Minister Joop den Uyl, quoted in Dobson and Payne, pp. 118-19.
32. *Bedrijfsleven, politie en (politiek) geweld* ('s-Gravenhage: Stichting Maatschappij en Politie - Stichting Maatschappij en Onderneming, 1988); *Geweldsmisbruik door de politie; rapport van de commissie bezinning op het geweldsmisbruik door de politie* ('s-Gravenhage: Ministerie van Justitie, 1987).