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# Authority, Vigilance, Paranoia: Placing the Dutch Civil Militia in the History of the Paramilitary Radical Right, 1918–1940

Celestine S. Kunkeler 

Centre for Research on Extremism, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway  
[celestine.kunkeler@c-rex.uio.no](mailto:celestine.kunkeler@c-rex.uio.no)

The formation of the civil militias (*burgerwachten*) in 1918 across a range of Dutch cities, in response to the threat of revolution, has received extremely limited attention in both Dutch and international historiography. They have never been studied in their own right, having been considered a largely local and politically irrelevant phenomenon. In fact this large voluntary organisation existed both locally and nationally, and recruited over 100,000 men and women, and had ties to state and fringe groups abroad. Reconstructing the formation and development of the militias, and analysing its character as a paramilitary and strike-breaking organisation, this article demonstrates that the militias were an important ideological formation. The militia institutionalised anti-Bolshevism and radical right paramilitarism in the Netherlands, and as such had a role to play in the counter-revolutionary network that was developed across Europe.

The Netherlands is not famed for its militarism. While recent historical accounts of the war- and inter-war period have emphasised the country's entanglement with the violence and radicalism of the rest of Europe,<sup>1</sup> there is no sense that it in any way contributed to the (para)militarisation of politics. This is not unreasonable. The Dutch military was an unpopular institution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, illustrated by the great failure of voluntary mobilisation in August 1914. Enthusiasm for the national military was largely limited to the Liberal minority, and regarded with scepticism by most socialists, Protestants, and Catholics.<sup>2</sup> During the First World War, only a very small minority of right-wing volunteers showed enthusiasm for the conflict.<sup>3</sup> Instead, voluntary enthusiasm came at the end of the war.

When Pieter Jelles Troelstra (1860–1930), leader of the Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij*, SDAP), attempted to seize power in November 1918, a new paramilitary institution was spawned: the Voluntary Civil Militia (*Vrijwillige Burgerwacht*, BW). Citizens' militias were rapidly organised around the country, arming large numbers of civilians to resist a socialist revolt. This incident went down in Dutch history as 'Troelstra's mistake', though less because of BW resistance and more due to a lack of SDAP support for a revolution – it has been questioned whether the Netherlands' 'Red week' (9–17 November) really saw a proper attempt at revolution at

<sup>1</sup> Conny Kristel, *De Oorlog van Anderen: Nederlanders en Oorlogsgeweld, 1914–1918* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2016); Willem Huberts, *In de ban van een beter verleden: Het Nederlandse fascisme, 1923–1945* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2017); Celestine S. Kunkeler, *Making Fascism in Sweden and the Netherlands: Myth-Creation and Respectability, 1931–40* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Maartje Abbenhuis and Ismee Tames, *Global War, Global Catastrophe: Neutrals, Belligerents and the Transformation of the First World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Wim Klinkert, 'A Dutch Mass Army? Dutch Liberal Ideas and Practices to Enlarge the Army, 1914–1922,' *First World War Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 233–48 (233–34), doi:10.1080/19475020.2011.620784.

<sup>3</sup> Kristel, *De Oorlog van Anderen*, 35–6, 269.

all.<sup>4</sup> Afterwards, rather than disbanding, the BW was institutionalised. In many places it grew to considerable size, indicating popular support for some form of paramilitarism also in the Netherlands. This went hand-in-hand with a fundamental reassessment of what Dutch security required, as intelligence services became preoccupied with the revolutionary and socialist threat within, more than foreign agents without. Nevertheless, the militias have received very little attention from Dutch historians; the organisation has essentially remained a footnote, primarily in the history of November 1918 and the scare around fascist infiltration of the BW in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> The BW's sister organisation, the military Voluntary Landstorm (LS), has been the subject of a 1959 book by J.C. van der Does, a not unproblematically partisan history edited by veteran members of the institution;<sup>6</sup> to date, the only work to treat the civil militias in any detail is a 2004 local history on the Haarlem militia by Ben Endlich and Nanda van der Zee.<sup>7</sup> Thorough historical study of the Dutch civil militias is long overdue.

Perhaps one reason the BW has not attracted more interest is its misleading image as a provincial and largely idle association of middle-aged men, which does sound very dull indeed. I argue that the study of the Dutch militias needs to be placed in the historiography of the broader European phenomenon of the counter-revolution, and the European interwar right generally.<sup>8</sup> This article targets two gaps in this literature. First is the neglect of the northwestern periphery in the history of European radical right paramilitarism and counter-revolutionary organisation.<sup>9</sup> The counter-revolutionary project to quash leftist revolt and undermine the strength of socialist movements, and in its most reactionary form establish a violent authoritarian state that would guarantee the power of the right, was not limited to its central-east European heartland – although that was without doubt the region of greatest violence – but spread also to countries with more stable and established democratic regimes. As it stands, this historiography retains a rather limited conception of counter-revolutionary politics in interwar Europe as defined by violent paramilitarism and White Terror; additionally, while its transnational character has been studied in great detail,<sup>10</sup> it has barely been acknowledged to stretch into northwestern Europe, perhaps due to the focus on its most violent manifestations. Second, the literature on the relationship between conservatives and the radical right has remained heavily focused on

<sup>4</sup> H.J. Scheffer, *November 1918: journaal van een revolutie die niet doorging* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1971), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Louis de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1: Voorspel* ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 46, 292; Robin te Slaa and Edwin Klijn, *De NSB: Ontstaan en Opkomst van de Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging, 1931–1935* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010), 117; G.J.A. Broek, *Weerkorpsen: extreemrechtse strijdgroepen in Amsterdam, 1923–1942* (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 2014), 84; Kristel, *De Oorlog van Anderen*, 246–7; Kunkeler, *Making Fascism in Sweden and the Netherlands*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> J.C. van der Does, *Als 't Moet: November 1918 en de Bijzondere Vrijwillige Landstorm* ('s-Gravenhage: N.V. Uitgeverij Nijgh & van Ditmar, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> Ben Endlich and Nanda van der Zee, *Metterdaad! De Vrijwillige Burgerwacht Haarlem* (Amsterdam: Becht, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> See for instance: Robert Gerwarth, 'The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War,' *Past & Present* 200 (2008): 175–209; Julia Eichenberg, 'The Dark Side of Independence: Paramilitary Violence in Ireland and Poland after the First World War,' *Contemporary European History* 19, no. 3 (2010): 231–48; Jochen Böhrer, 'Enduring Violence: The Postwar Struggles in East-Central Europe, 1917–21,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 50, no. 1 (2015): 57–77; Mary Vincent, 'Political Violence and Mass Society: A European Civil War?,' in *The Oxford Handbook of European History, 1914–1945*, ed. Nicholas Doumanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 388–403; Martin Blinkhorn, 'Introduction: Allies, Rivals, or Antagonists? Fascists and Conservatives in Modern Europe,' in *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Martin Blinkhorn (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Aristotle Kallis, 'The "Fascist Effect": On the Dynamics of Political Hybridization in Inter-War Europe,' in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, eds. António Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 13–41; Ismael Saz and others, 'Introduction,' in *Reactionary Nationalists, Fascists and Dictatorships in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> For two exceptions, see: Celestine S. Kunkeler, 'The Swedish Brigade: From National Romantic Heroes to European Counter-Revolutionaries?,' *European History Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2023), 88–114; Celestine S. Kunkeler, 'Counter-Revolutionary Strikebreaking in Interwar Europe: The Role of Norway, Christopher Fougner, and *Samfundshjelpen*,' *Scandinavian Journal of History* 49, no. 1 (2024), 69–91.

<sup>10</sup> For a recent example, see: Daniele Toro, 'Fascist Transnationalism: The Networking between the German, Austrian, and Italian Radical Nationalist Milieux during the Long 1920s,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascism Studies* 13 (2024): 13–37.

political parties. As a corrective, I aim to show how non-political, but strongly ideological, organisations like the institutional BW were influenced by the circulation of radical right ideas and were important nodes in rightist networks. My aim is *not* to demonstrate that the civil militias were a prominent force in Dutch right-wing politics, but rather to show that it emerged in a particular European context and should be seen as a representative example of radical right counter-revolutionary politics.

While the historiography on the BW is sparse, there is a considerable volume of archival material to draw on. This research is based on a range of private and state archives, found in the Dutch National Archive in The Hague, and the Amsterdam City Archive. It relies especially on the archives of those individuals and institutions that dealt directly with the BW, particularly the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Amsterdam mayoral office, which has one of the best-preserved archives for one of the largest militia forces in the country. It also includes the archive of the official Inspector of the Civil Militia (*Inspecteur van de Burgerwacht*), which gives a national overview of how the otherwise locally organised BW operated. A little tragically (if not altogether inconveniently for the hurried historian), most of this archive was destroyed in the 1970s to save space. The documents include financial records, statutes, training manuals, official and private correspondence, memoirs, reports, and propaganda. As such, they give insight into formal structures, official regulations, internal frictions, the ideological character of the institution, and how it developed over the course of its twenty-two year existence. The complete historical record of the BW is scattered across local and municipal archives in the Netherlands; therefore this article does not intend to be comprehensive and exhausting.

Rather, it is a presentation and analysis of the organisation of the BW, and its place in the history of the radical right, i.e. the wide spectrum of right-wing politics beyond liberal conservatism, which countenanced violent repression as a legitimate tool of political struggle.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, I aim to give a sense of where the BW fit in with the proliferation of radical right ideas in the Netherlands, especially in connection with anti-Bolshevism, which was such a distinct feature of the 'new right' in the interwar era.<sup>12</sup> The first section will handle the history of the BW's origins and institutionalisation in the context of the attempted November revolution and Dutch right-wing governments' suspicion of the socialist left. It outlines how the militias were organised and funded, and their role within the state security apparatus. The second section analyses how the BW actually performed in practice, and suggests that its significance should primarily be understood in terms of ideology, and its relationship to anti-Bolshevism. As such, it shows the impact of international anti-Bolshevism in the Netherlands, even though the national revolutionary threat was limited. I also touch upon some peculiar dimensions of BW ideology, such as its reactionary commitment to authority, and a gendered and patriarchal conception of national security. The third section provides a nuanced analysis of the BW's connections to the broader radical right, including fascism, domestically and transnationally, looking at organisational connections and the circulation of radical right propaganda. This shows that the BW was strongly inspired by events and role models abroad, underscoring that it should not be seen as a provincial Dutch institution, but as part of the new European radical right scene that formed in response to the Central and East European revolutions.

### Origins and Organisation of the *Burgerwacht*

The interwar civil militia of the Netherlands was not entirely unprecedented, but the militia groups of the nineteenth century and its antecedents in the early modern period – most famously documented in the art history of the Dutch Golden Age – did not constitute a meaningful basis for this institution, as they had largely fallen out of use by the 1900s. The Landstorm, in essence a reserve military

<sup>11</sup> See also: Geoff Eley, 'Conservatives and Radical Nationalists in Germany: The Production of Fascist Potentials, 1912–28,' in *Fascists and Conservatives: The Radical Right and the Establishment in Twentieth-Century Europe*, ed. Martin Blinkhorn (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> For an assessment of the term 'new right' see: David D. Roberts, *Fascist Interactions: Proposals for a New Approach to Fascism and Its Era, 1919–1945* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016), 3–6.

composed of trained volunteers, was formed in 1913 and became an organisation that could be deployed domestically in times of crisis.<sup>13</sup> In fact, it came into action alongside the BW during the days of November 1918, and effectively (and sometimes explicitly) constituted a second counter-revolutionary tool in the hands of the Dutch army.<sup>14</sup> Like the BW, the LS was expanded and institutionalised during the interwar period; it was not possible to be a member of both organisations at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

The immediate context for Troelstra's attempted revolution, and the creation of the BW that it triggered, was the demobilisation of the Dutch and German armies as the First World War came to an end, and the German revolution of 9 November, just across the border. The situation was tense as hundreds of thousands of German soldiers demobilised, some 70,000 of which marched through the Dutch province of Limburg. To secure the border, military leave was revoked for Dutch soldiers on 23 October. Somewhat counterproductively, this led to severe unrest in the ranks, as soldiers were thoroughly fed up with mobilisation. In the Harskamp barracks things escalated into a widely reported incident, when soldiers mutinied, broke into the wine cellar, and set fire to the building. The military camp burned down, and it took several days before other troops had quelled the revolt.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile the famous sailors' mutiny broke out in Kiel, Germany. When revolutionary sentiment spread to Berlin and workers' and soldiers' councils took power, the Dutch government feared the revolutionary wave would cross the border.<sup>17</sup> Agitation from David Wijnkoop (1876–1941), leader of the Social Democratic Party (*Sociaal-Democratische Partij*, SDP, later the Communist Party of Holland), added to fears that leftist revolt was imminent. On 9 November 1918, the German Revolution was official, and the new republic a fact.<sup>18</sup> The arrival of the dethroned former emperor, Wilhelm II, at the Dutch border the day after further escalated political tensions.

The right became increasingly convinced the SDP and/or SDAP would attempt a revolution. SDP membership had doubled over the course of the revolutions in Russia and Germany.<sup>19</sup> The parliamentary Catholic party took preventative measures to stop Catholic workers from joining a revolution, and the first steps were taken to form civil militias in the government city of The Hague. A Catholic mass meeting was scheduled for 17 November – the date of the SDAP and trade union congress in Rotterdam – to preach against revolution.<sup>20</sup> The Calvinists did not remain idle either. A small self-avowedly counter-revolutionary (*contra-revolutionair*) circle associated with Hendrikus Colijn (1896–1944), colonial army veteran, future leader of the orthodox Calvinist Anti-Revolutionary Party and prime minister of the Netherlands for much of the 1930s, started to organise resistance against the supposedly imminent coup.<sup>21</sup> Colijn himself, at the time Director of the Batavian Petrol Company (the Dutch East Indies subsidiary of Shell), was in London to negotiate food deliveries to the Netherlands.<sup>22</sup> A detailed account by one of his secretaries, H.H.A. van Gybland-Oosterhoff, an Indology scholar, key figure of the Calvinist Christian-Historical Union (*Christen-Historische Unie*), and later founder of the far-right Union for National Restoration (*Verbond voor Nationaal Herstel*), helps us to reconstruct the fears and events of those days.<sup>23</sup> By 8 November associates of Gybland-Oosterhoff had become concerned 'about the unreadiness of the Government against the

<sup>13</sup> Does, *Als 't Moet*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Klinkert, 'A Dutch Mass Army?', 237–41.

<sup>15</sup> Does, *Als 't Moet*, 160, 189.

<sup>16</sup> Kristel, *De Oorlog van Anderen*, 227–43.

<sup>17</sup> Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 1, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gerwarth, *Die Grösste aller Revolutionen: November 1918 und der Aufbruch in eine neue Zeit* (Munich: Siedler, 2018), chap. VI.

<sup>19</sup> Constant Willem Hijzen, 'The Perpetual Adversary: How Dutch Security Services Perceived Communism (1918–1989),' *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 38, no. 1 (2013): 166–99 (174).

<sup>20</sup> Scheffer, *November 1918*, 106.

<sup>21</sup> Does, *Als 't Moet*, 57–8; Piet Hagen, *Politicus uit Hartstocht: Biografie van Pieter Jelles Troelstra* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2010), 651–2.

<sup>22</sup> Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, 1, 46–7.

<sup>23</sup> Scheffer, *November 1918*, 107–9.

danger of the spread of the revolutionary movement from Germany to Holland'.<sup>24</sup> Meetings with state officials in Haarlem and Rotterdam the following day indicated indifference and even defeatism. Most famously Zimmerman, Mayor of Rotterdam, stated he would not resist a transfer of power to the SDAP, wanting to avoid a collapse of authority and a state of civil war.<sup>25</sup> While the SDAP waited to debate the budding revolution that weekend, plans were made to defend key government buildings and the royal palace in The Hague. A military and political bureau would be formed to coordinate action. On 12 November Troelstra gave a parliamentary speech declaring that the hour of revolution was at hand (notwithstanding the lack of support from the rest of the party leadership). With reference to the seizure of power by the left in Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Bulgaria, he announced the Netherlands too was ready for change (*kentering*). The army itself was made up of working men and, Troelstra claimed, they would not be loyal to the government. Some two-thirds of the police were supposedly on the side of the workers' movement. 'Your regime, my gentlemen, your bourgeois regime is rotten and it will be difficult for you, when you want to use violence, to provoke something other than a violence that is stronger than yours.'<sup>26</sup> While Troelstra did not have the backing from the SDAP leadership, much of the rank-and-file responded enthusiastically, as did party newspaper *Het Volk* in its front page article, 'Towards the new era!', the following day.<sup>27</sup> The socialists' framing of their own strength vis-à-vis the police and military explains why the BW came to be seen as an important ideologically reliable alternative to other state forces. Indeed as right-wing politicians such as Gybland-Oosterhoff and Mayor Zimmerman show, it was not only the socialists who believed the military and police to be unreliable.<sup>28</sup> It also had the long-term impact of side-lining the SDAP in Dutch government, as it was deemed an unreliable governing partner for the rest of the interwar period.

The right now publicly encouraged resistance – Gybland-Oosterhoff wrote an article in the Calvinist *De Nederlander* newspaper calling for citizens to 'strongly resist every attempt to violently sideline our state institutions'.<sup>29</sup> Much of this non-governmental activity aimed to 'stimulate' the government to take action – though the government was already moving, even if this was not visible to outsiders. The Minister of War mobilised the LS, though this constituted a small force of no more than 400 to 600 'order-loving citizens' who had been summoned 'with profound solemnity yet holy decisiveness' to 'stand firm with righteous weapons'.<sup>30</sup> On the morning of 13 November, a committee of twelve Hague military, police, and other officials decided to mobilise a civil militia of untrained volunteers. A public call for volunteers was issued in the right-wing press. There were some concerns that there would be confusion and overlap of responsibilities between the LS and BW, but the perceived emergency required rapid action. (These concerns immediately materialised, when it turned out all available machine guns had been assigned to the BW, rather than the militarily trained LS.) Within the next few days some 3,000 volunteers joined The Hague militia;<sup>31</sup> on 15 November, the revolution was effectively called off, as Troelstra lost support for his chosen course.<sup>32</sup>

The initial emergency organisation in The Hague, with the help of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of War, was quickly consolidated. When unrest broke out in the city, BW guards of fifty men were stationed around key sites, armed with rifles.<sup>33</sup> The mayor of The Hague wrote to his Amsterdam counterpart to follow his example. The Ministry of War would supply weapons and

<sup>24</sup> Report 'dagverhaal,' 1, Gybland Oosterhoff, 2.21.079, inv. no. 125, NL-HaNA.

<sup>25</sup> Scheffer, *November 1918*, 251–2; Hagen, *Politicus uit Hartstocht*, 647.

<sup>26</sup> Hagen, *Politicus uit Hartstocht*, 660.

<sup>27</sup> 'Naar den nieuwen tijd!,' *Het Volk*, 13 Nov. 1918, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Scheffer, *November 1918*, 246.

<sup>29</sup> 'Wat wilt gij?,' *De Nederlander*, 26:7690, 12 Nov. 1918, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Proclamation leaflet, 'Oproeping!,' 's-Gravenhage, 2.21.079, inv. no. 125, NL-HaNA.

<sup>31</sup> Report, 'Haagsche Burgerwacht,' 's-Gravenhage, Dec. 1918, in Archive of E.B.F.F. Wittert van Hoogland (2.21.178), inv. no. 239, NL-HaNA.

<sup>32</sup> Report 'dagverhaal,' Gybland Oosterhoff, 2.21.079, inv. no. 125, NL-HaNA.

<sup>33</sup> Does, *Als 't Moet*, 186.

officers for the BW. By 19 November, a commander had been assigned, the colonial army General Karel van Lennep (1866–1923).<sup>34</sup> Before long every major city, and numerous smaller towns, had their own militia. The Amsterdam example was typical in assigning a colonial army veteran general to lead the militia. Ultimate authority over the BW rested with the mayor, however, who decided whether and when to mobilise the volunteers. The revolutionary scare provided the impetus for the rapid development of a nation-wide network of paramilitary units, with each local node supported financially and militarily by the government. While the immediate threat from the SDAP quickly waned, continued unrest in Germany spurred expansion of the BW nevertheless. The Spartacist Revolt of January 1919 in Berlin started what became a civil war in Germany,<sup>35</sup> which encouraged expansion of the militias. In 1919 government ministers actively encouraged civil servants to join the BW;<sup>36</sup> in May, parliament voted to expand the BW in spite of Troelstra's protests,<sup>37</sup> so that by the end of the year the militias were firmly entrenched. In a parliamentary confrontation with Troelstra in 1920, the Catholic Minister of the Interior asked, 'When will you undo your actions, your actions of November 1918, when you cut through the tablecloth between nation and government; or are you still led by your intentions to seize power?'.<sup>38</sup> That year the 'Anti-Revolution Law' was passed, which prohibited the *preparation* of a revolution.<sup>39</sup> Counter-revolutionary suspicions of the SDAP remained a key motivation for supporting and funding the BW for years to come. In 1928 the Queen attended the tenth anniversary celebrations of the BW at the Colonial Institute. The annual report for the year claimed the SDAP was still intent on power and revolution, calling Troelstra's mistake 'merely a question of pace'.<sup>40</sup>

1919–20 both institutionalised the BW and solidified its position in Dutch politics. Its dependence on the Ministries of the Interior and War was settled, as was its relationship to the police as an ideologically reliable auxiliary force. It was *de jure* separate from the military but had tangible connections through its military officers and commanders, not to mention the *de facto* militarisation of certain branches. The decision to mobilise the BW remained with the royally appointed mayors. The militias then were ostensible civilian organisations with some practical and formal military connections, free from direct democratic oversight. Its political fortunes were determined by support in government and parliament, where the confessional parties appeared as the strongest supporters of the BW – not least the Calvinist ARP and the CHU, which were proactive in organising counter-revolutionary resistance in November 1919. Unsurprisingly, the socialists were the militias' most persistent critics.

The size and distribution of militias around the country followed a predictable pattern, with the largest formations in the major cities, particularly The Hague, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. Hundreds of smaller formations existed in the countryside, some of which were formed years after the initial years of revolutionary turmoil. Circa 800 militias had been established within half a year of 'Troelstra's mistake'.<sup>41</sup> The majority of these ended up loosely organised in the national Dutch League of Volunteer Civil Militias (*Nederlandschen Bond van Vrijwilligen Burgerwachten*, NBVBW), which incorporated 632 militias by 1922, counting 91,873 members.<sup>42</sup> Membership had

<sup>34</sup> Letter, Minister of the Interior to the Mayor of Amsterdam, 's-Gravenhage, 13 Nov. 1918, Archive of the Mayoral Cabinet (5168), 2.2.1:924(a), Amsterdam City Archive (*Stadsarchief*).

<sup>35</sup> Hannsjoachim W. Koch, *Der Deutsche Bürgerkrieg: Eine Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Freikorps, 1918–1923* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1978).

<sup>36</sup> See for instance: Letter transcript, Minister of War to Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade, 's-Gravenhage, 10 Apr. 1919, in Archive 'Crisisinstellingen 1914–1926' (2.06.079), inv. no. 399, NL-HaNA.

<sup>37</sup> Hagen, *Politicus uit Hartstocht*, 712–13.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in: booklet, Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten, *Annual Report of 1920*, Amsterdam, 8, in Archief Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok br B 24060), NL-HaNA.

<sup>39</sup> Hagen, *Politicus uit Hartstocht*, 728–9.

<sup>40</sup> Booklet, Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten, *Annual Report of 1928*, Amsterdam, 4–5, in Archief Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok br B 24060), NL-HaNA.

<sup>41</sup> Booklet, Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten, *Annual Report of 1919*, Amsterdam, 10, Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok br B 24060), NL-HaNA.

<sup>42</sup> Letter, van Neppen to Queen Wilhelmina, 1922, 2.2.1:934(k), Amsterdam City Archive.

its ups and downs over the years, but it seems reasonable to estimate a total membership of over 100,000 for much of the interwar period. The ability to arm and train this membership depended on funds which could come from private sources but was included in the annual state budget. Surviving documents in the IBW archive show that funding in the early 1920s was in the hundreds of thousands of *gulden*, with the bulk of the money going towards training and ammunition.<sup>43</sup> The four major cities received vastly more funding than the other militias by an order of magnitude.<sup>44</sup> However, the BW did not escape budget cuts in the early-to-mid 1920s, and throughout the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>45</sup> These funds afforded the BW at times grandiose headquarters, shooting galleries and training grounds, vehicles, and weapons.

The BW was variously organised depending on place and size but could include branches of infantry, motorised units, medical formations, administration, propaganda departments, heavy weapons units, and so forth. Members typically wore a uniform when training, had the right to carry a weapon when called in, and could be summoned for duty by the mayor during a crisis (revolution). Membership was typically for those over the age of twenty-one. It is difficult to get an overview of the social composition, but snapshots of mobilisation documents indicate the presence of numerous working- and lower middle-class members. The majority were men, but women participated extensively in the militias, particularly as nurses in medical units. While women were systemically excluded from leading positions, photographic and other evidence shows the militias were by no means *Männerbunde* (male leagues).<sup>46</sup>

The NBVBW was founded at a meeting in Amsterdam on 3 March 1919.<sup>47</sup> The league worked to unify and coordinate the organisation of the various militias, advise and help with paramilitary training, hold lectures and issue periodicals, and use its powers to promote a sense of citizenship and mutual collaboration among subjects of all classes.<sup>48</sup> Alongside the inspector of the BW, appointed by the Minister of Internal Affairs,<sup>49</sup> the league was the only central institution of the BW, though its function was ultimately advisory. It also played an important function as a national representative of the local BWs, regularly in conversation with the inspector and the government, particularly about key matters like the budget. As such, it was broadly representative, although it took until 1929 for Rotterdam to join the league, at which point it claimed nearly all BWs were members, excepting a few small communities.<sup>50</sup>

As noted, the militias had a confusing and overlapping relationship to the LS. Essentially, the militias were understood as an auxiliary to the police, while the LS was an auxiliary to the military – as such, the former was under civil and the latter under military command. Civilians were encouraged to volunteer for the former, while retired military or military on leave were to join the latter. The BW acted locally, while the LS could be deployed anywhere. Where the militias constituted a paramilitary formation, the LS was simply military, and was supposed to have priority in command and military equipment. In practice, their shared *raison d'être* – simultaneous and impromptu organisation, and

<sup>43</sup> See for instance: Preliminary budget for the year 1923 ('Ontwerpbegroting voor het jaar 1923'), appendix to message of the IBW, 20 Dec. 1922, no. 2007, changed after input from the Minister of Internal Affairs, Archive Inspecteur der Burgerwachten (2.04.53.03), inv. no. 1, NL-HaNA.

<sup>44</sup> Letter, the pensioned Lieutenant-General to Minister of State and Minister of Interior Affairs, 's-Gravenhage, 23 May 1933, Archive IBW, inv. no. 1, NL-HaNA.

<sup>45</sup> See the annual reports in: Archive Minister of Internal Affairs: Brochures Collection, NL-HaNA.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance the Amsterdam BW annual report for 1934, 14 May 1935, in 2.2.1:955, Amsterdam City Archive.

<sup>47</sup> Letter, Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten (Karel van Lennep) to Minister of the Interior Affairs, Amsterdam, 5 Mar. 1919, NA: The Hague, Archive Ministry of Interior Affairs: Department Domestic Government, B24057, inv. no. 1084.

<sup>48</sup> Article 2 in Concept Statutes of the NBVBW, Archive Ministry of Interior Affairs: Department Domestic Government, B24057, inv. no. 1084, NL-HaNA.

<sup>49</sup> Does, *Als 't Moet*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> Booklet, NBVBW, *Jaarverslag over 1929*, Amsterdam, 6–7, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

that they were both to some extent under military command – meant that there was confusion about the divisions of tasks, hierarchy, and the legal nature of the two organisations.<sup>51</sup>

It is then not very shocking that the BW was inconsistently militarised from the outset. The case of Amsterdam is illustrative. The use of live ammunition by the militias was initially controversial in November 1918, and resisted by the mayor in correspondence with the Minister of Internal Affairs (Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck, 1873–1936). The commander of the Amsterdam militia, General van Lennep, on the other hand, pushed for faster and heavier weaponisation. By 1920, the mayor complained that the Amsterdam militia had ‘a large number’ of heavy machine guns, as well as hand grenades; van Lennep had accomplished this through private negotiation with the military authorities.<sup>52</sup> An undated list detailing the strength of the BW in the Netherlands’ primary defensive perimeter, ‘Fortress Holland’ (*Vesting Holland*), indicates that smaller militias were mainly equipped with rifles and secondly carbines, and in some cases revolvers, sabres, and *klewangs* (Indonesian broad swords).<sup>53</sup> Photographs of the militias, reproduced in periodicals and newspapers issued by the BW or NBVBW, prominently feature the heavy weapons of the larger militias, visualising a force almost indistinguishable from the professional military. The core part of daily BW activity was rifle and pistol shooting exercises, which were marked with sharpshooting competitions that were extensively celebrated in BW publications.<sup>54</sup>

There was another side to the BW paramilitary coin: strikebreaking, underscoring its counter-revolutionary and anti-labour politics.<sup>55</sup> The government recommended that mayors use the BW to secure electricity, gas, and water works in the first instance, as well as communication and transport hubs.<sup>56</sup> In the early 1930s the BW started to organise a department dedicated to keeping essential services running, the Economic Emergency Aid (*Economische Noodhulp*, ENH), headed by J.J. Cramer, and clearly modelled on the German Technical Emergency Aid (*Technische Nothilfe*, NT),<sup>57</sup> like many other strikebreaking organisations in Northern Europe.<sup>58</sup> One secret letter from the IBW to the Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior in 1930 refers explicitly to the organisation of ‘a technical emergency service (*technischen nooddienst*)’.<sup>59</sup> The shift from a paramilitary to an economic counter-revolutionary response started in 1923. After several years of severe budget cuts (in 1922 the BW received only 36% of the public funding they had in 1919), and a changing assessment of the revolutionary threat, several larger BW units decided to also focus on the organisation of food supplies and combating social unrest in a more general sense.<sup>60</sup> The ENH was explicitly understood as the flip side of a paramilitary counter-revolutionary response.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Transcript, Minister of Defence, ‘s-Gravenhage, 18 Mar. 1935, Archive Ministry of Internal Affairs: Department of Internal Government, inv. no. 1096; pamphlet, ‘De goede richting,’ on the relationship between BW and LS, C.J.M. Ruys de Beerenbrouck archive (2.21.244), inv. no. 12, NL-HaNA.

<sup>52</sup> Letter, Mayor of Amsterdam to Minister of the Interior, Amsterdam, 12 January 1920, 2.2.1:930(g), Amsterdam City Archive..

<sup>53</sup> List, ‘Burgerwachten in de Vesting Holland,’ IBW archive, inv. no. 2, NL-HaNA.

<sup>54</sup> See any of the booklets in: Archive Minister van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok br B 24060), NL-HaNA.

<sup>55</sup> Even if this function was also opposed by some prominent figures, including Karel van Lennep; see: letter, Karel van Lennep to Mayor of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, 29 Jan. 1919, in 2.2.1:925(b), Amsterdam City Archive.

<sup>56</sup> Ontwerp, personal and confidential, Minister of Domestic Affairs, Minister of Justice; Minister of Defence; Minister of Water Management, ‘Guide for the Mayor,’ ‘s-Gravenhage, 2, Archief Commissie voor Vervoersmogelijkheden (Ministerie van Waterstaat), 2.16.61, vol. 11, NL-HaNA.

<sup>57</sup> Michael H. Kater, ‘Die “Technische Nothilfe” Im Spannungsfeld von Arbeiterunruhen, Unternehmerinteressen Und Parteipolitik,’ *Vierteljahrshfte Für Zeitgeschichte* 27, no. 1 (1979): 30–78; Andreas Linhardt, *Die Technische Nothilfe in der Weimarer Republik* (Norderstedt, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Kunkeler, ‘Counter-Revolutionary Strikebreaking in Interwar Europe,’ 2024 .

<sup>59</sup> Secret letter, no. 10, IBW to Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs and Agriculture, ‘s-Gravenhage, 15 May 1930, IBW 11:15.

<sup>60</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1923*, Amsterdam, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>61</sup> Letter, Board of the Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten (secretary) to Commander of the Civil Militia, ‘s-Gravenhage, Feb. 1932, CVM archive, inv. no. 14; see also letter, the pensioned Lieutenant-General to Commanders of

### Performance and Ideology of the *Burgerwacht*

If during unrest I was ever appointed Commander of military supplies in Amsterdam, then my first measure would be to disarm the Amsterdam Civil Militia, since I regard this body in its current incarnation as sooner a danger than support for the military authorities.<sup>62</sup>

The revolution never came to the Netherlands, but that does not mean the *Burgerwacht* remained idle in the interwar period. It was considered provocative and ill-advised to use the army to suppress internal unrest, while expanding the police force to meet political threats cost money – this made the BW ostensibly a suitable alternative. There are several examples of the militias being deployed, including during border incidents, and a factory strike in Maastricht.<sup>63</sup> But most important was the Amsterdam Jordan Riot (*Jordaanoproer*) of July 1934. While the riot was primarily caused by frustration over unemployment during the drawn-out Great Depression, an official assessment of the partial mobilisation of the BW contextualised it with reference to the revolutions of 1789, 1917, and 1918.<sup>64</sup> In spite of over fifteen years of organisation and training, partial mobilisation of the BW proved difficult. The prepared plans only accounted for a complete mobilisation, which could therefore not be used; at first only a hundred members from the elite ‘Orange Department’ (*Oranje Afdeling*) were summoned. Not every member obeyed the summons, some because they were fearful of losing their jobs if they stopped working to quell the riots. Some had gone on holiday, others could not be reached at work. Unable to fully rely on the postal or telephone system, BW staff had to personally find members to mobilise them, which proved slow work – it took about three hours to gather the small number of militia members that the police had requested. Even then, the BW truck that would take them to their location had been placed in storage due to budget cuts, and the car battery needed to be charged first. Calling for further backup (2,700 summons were issued in total) proved incredibly inefficient, taking up a lot of resources with limited returns. Since BW members were grouped by city district rather than branch, it was difficult to avoid summoning unsuitable members – infantry was required, but many members were non-combatants. Budget cuts meant that lists of members’ training backgrounds were not maintained, causing further error. And there were legal issues. The police, not the mayor, had requested BW assistance, which was not in accordance with militia statutes. Morale proved another problem: many were angry that they had been summoned to sacrifice their valuable time in a moment of less than national emergency. Some members used their own personal sidearms, which led to inconsistency in the required ammunition, while not everyone could be equipped with the required carbines. It appeared that the all-women Nursing and Maintenance branch – tellingly dismissed by some of the men as unnecessary – was the only thing to run efficiently, providing the infantry with essential food supplies at a low cost throughout the day and night. The Amsterdam BW leadership recognised the branch had to be substantially expanded.<sup>65</sup>

There was a great gap between the claimed importance of the BW and its usefulness in practice. The 1934 annual report of the NBVBW regretted the lack of training that had been in evidence during the BW actions in Amsterdam, as well as Rotterdam that year. Organisation had suffered, as some militias had been idle over the years and could no longer be deployed effectively.<sup>66</sup> ‘One has come to realise

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the VBW of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, ‘s-Gravenhage, ‘s-Gravenhage, 12 Apr. 1930, IBW archive, inv. no. 11, NL-HaNA.

<sup>62</sup> Lieutenant-Colonel of the Dutch army, quoted in: booklet. O. Schut and A. G. Bruessing, *De Vrijwillige Burgerwacht Amsterdam. Gezien in het licht der feiten*, 1939, IBW archive, inv. No. 7, NL-HaNA.

<sup>63</sup> Report mobilisation BW in Maastricht, 1 Aug. 1929, Maastricht, Oct. 1929, IBW archive, inv. no. 10, NL-HaNA.

<sup>64</sup> Appendix, attached to writing from the Commander of the BW [Boeree], 20 July 1934, no. 249, K.G. ‘34, 2.2.1.935, Amsterdam City Archive.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–8.

<sup>66</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1934*, ‘s-Gravenhage, 4–5, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

more and more, that for the preparation of the fight against a revolution, the civil militias too, at least a part of them, will need more training, something which had for years before been generally regarded as adequate.<sup>67</sup> Given the stakes that the Dutch state envisaged for the mobilisation of the BW, this was rather damning. There is also no evidence that the BW was in any way integrated with the rest of the state security apparatus, such as the secret intelligence services; during the interwar period, they were mainly motivated by suspicion of the left.<sup>68</sup> While the Amsterdam police regularly cooperated with intelligence, feeding them info on revolutionary activity for instance, the BW appeared to be out of the loop.<sup>69</sup> Broader counter-revolutionary mobilisation plans imagined violent and large-scale responses with armoured cars and artillery, modelled on the ultra-violent *Freikorps* (volunteer army) suppression of the Spartacist revolt in Berlin and Munich in 1919.<sup>70</sup> While this was reflected in the training manuals of the BW,<sup>71</sup> the actual deployment of the BW demonstrates it was laughably unfit for such a purpose.

Given this unfitness, combined with the rather vast sums of money that had been poured into the militias, it is perhaps not surprising that the BW was the subject of an investigatory commission in 1935. The Froger Commission, headed by the IBW (Reserve Colonel W. Froger) and therefore under the authority of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, particularly focused on Amsterdam, which was the topic of a scathing report presented to parliament in 1939. The principal accusation targeted the commander Colonel Henri Rynier Boerée (1873–1949), the son-in-law of the previous commander, Karel van Lennep, who died in 1923. The BW of the capital was found to be a top-heavy organisation, with 440 officers, 250 non-commissioned officers, and 140 corporals. Boerée was paid an excessive salary of f 8,000,<sup>72</sup> via the ‘Karel van Lennep’ institute, which he chaired. Yet in practice the militia was run by the head instructor, J.A. Brederode, who was in turn deemed negligent, and criticised for ‘keeping a group of ladies from the Medical Branch busy with shooting revolvers’, instead of training combatant men.<sup>73</sup> The report inevitably pointed to the woeful performance during the Jordan Riot, and how some members did not even know how to handle a rifle. The commander was accused of busying himself with vanities and hobbies, like leading spectacular uniformed parades through the streets of the capital.<sup>74</sup> Given the diversity and relative independence of the militias, there is no reason to suspect the Amsterdam militia was entirely representative although, as seen, the NBVBW did consider there to be general problems with the readiness of the institution. Additionally, every BW was affected by the severe funding cuts: the national budget for the BW had been enormous in the years immediately following 1918 but was quickly cut down to a fraction of that, which caused numerous organisational problems. If resources did not remotely match what was deemed necessary for the revolutionary days of 1918–19, then it was perhaps inevitable it would be unprepared for revolution in the present. Finally, there was also less interest in the BW in the 1930s compared to the preceding decade. The threat of socialist revolt and communist subversion seemed much less imminent, especially in the days of a growing fascist menace.<sup>75</sup> The declining interest, funds, and questionable use of the BW begs the question: why did it persist?

<sup>67</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1936*, ‘s-Gravenhage, 4–5, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>68</sup> Constant Hijzen, ‘Geheim Gewroet in Het Duister? Percepties En Maatregelen Ten Aanzien van Veiligheidsdiensten in Nederland, 1918–1989,’ *Tijdschrift Voor Geschiedenis* 125, no. 3 (2012): 332–49 (336–38).

<sup>69</sup> Constant Willem Hijzen, ‘The Perpetual Adversary,’ 178.

<sup>70</sup> See for instance: Manual for the suppression of unrest, no. 39, 1932, in Archive Internal Government, inv. no. 1096, NL-HaNA.

<sup>71</sup> Booklet, O.A., 1934, 27, 125, 127, 2.2.1:953, Amsterdam City archive.

<sup>72</sup> For reference, the national subsidy to the Amsterdam militia was f16 000 at that point.

<sup>73</sup> Booklet. O. Schut and A.G. Bruessing, *De Vrijwillige Burgerwacht Amsterdam. Gezien in het licht der feiten*, 1939, 11, IBW archive, inv. no. 7, NL-HaNA.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–13.

<sup>75</sup> Constant Hijzen, ‘Geheim Gewroet in Het Duister?,’ 339–40.

The first and most important reason was anti-Bolshevism, as ideology and paranoia.<sup>76</sup> The BW had been founded to counter what was seen as, in the words of one contemporary Dutch politician, ‘an international movement against the existing legal order’.<sup>77</sup>

Ten years ago, when, with the murderous lightning speed of an electric spark, one state after another was set ablaze and destroyed, also in our country a plumber [Troelstra] almost set a fire in the top of the building of our government. The fire was put out, but the plumbers continue their work. Communists and social-democrats remain as dangerous for the community as fire near dynamite.<sup>78</sup>

Part of the *raison d'être* of the NBVBW was the perceived necessity to meet the great threat on a national level. ‘One sees in Germany, how the Revolution starts up time and again. ... Therefore it is necessary that we – also in this country – constantly and uninterruptedly try to find out what is “brewing”.’ Mutual collaboration of the militias was necessary to ‘isolate “contaminated areas”, and thus prevent that the “movement” – in case it does start somewhere – progresses too far’.<sup>79</sup> The conception of Bolshevism and revolution as a calamitous conflagration that threatened to swallow Europe and Western civilisation itself was common in mainstream right-wing newspapers of the 1910s and 1920s and reproduced in the publications of counter-revolutionary organisations, including the BW. Bolshevism was described by the conservative Catholic press as ‘a disaster for humanity’, ‘no longer a Russian or German, but rather a European threat against civilisation’, and a ‘national plague (*volkspest*)’.<sup>80</sup> In *The Defence*, an anti-Bolshevik paper, ‘evidence’ was given of ‘the socialisation of women’. A warning was issued that the calm in the Netherlands was deceptive.

Nevertheless not a day goes by in which the activities can be seen of those who search and wait for the opportunity to make the revolution burst forth, and unchain the most horrifying of civil wars, for the purpose of seizing power, let Red Terror rule, and submerge Holland in a bloodbath.<sup>81</sup>

The same paper cited approvingly the official periodical of the BW, *Netherlands Advance! (Nederland Vooruit!)*, which warned women in similarly patriarchal tones of the slavery that the Bolsheviks threatened to impose and carried articles about ‘Bolshevik atrocities’ and reports on the notorious Munich *Geiselmord*, when Red Guards executed ten hostages, including civilians, in the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic.<sup>82</sup> The NBVBW published an endless stream of anti-Bolshevik propaganda in this vein, the production of which is described in its annual reports. Texts like ‘What the Bolsheviks want in the Netherlands’, ‘Bolshevism and the horrors in Russia’, and ‘Bolshevism and its consequences after 15 months’ were distributed at a low cost or for free, and the weekly periodical was used to keep people ‘informed about the Bolshevik movement abroad’. The Amsterdam authorities produced a poster, with the text ‘Support the lawful authorities – Before it is too late!’, featuring a red-scarfed man aiming his gun at the viewer, holding a knife in his other hand. Behind him a woman lies

<sup>76</sup> A useful reference point here is: Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, ‘Bolshevism as Fantasy: Fear of Revolution and Counter-Revolutionary Violence, 1917–1923,’ in *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*, eds. Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 40–51.

<sup>77</sup> ‘Haagsche Burgerwacht,’ ‘s-Gravenhage, Dec. 1918, 1, Archive E.B.F.F. Wittert van Hoogland, inv. No. 239, NL-HaNA.

<sup>78</sup> Speech, held by P. Kasteel, for the occasion of the 12½ year anniversary of the Heerlen Burgerwacht, 4, Ruys de Beerenbrouck archive, inv. no. 12, NL-HaNA.

<sup>79</sup> Preliminary statutes of the NBVBW, §8: II, VII, Arch. Internal Government, inv. no. 104, NL-HaNA.

<sup>80</sup> Newspaper clipping, ‘Binnenland: Het Bolshevistisch gevaar,’ *De Tijd*, 12 Mar. 1919, in Gybland-Oosterhoff archive, inv. no. 124, NL-HaNA.

<sup>81</sup> ‘De revolutionaire bedrijvigheid in Holland,’ *De Verdediging: Officieel Orgaan van den Anti-Bolsjewistischen Bond*, 1:5, 16–31 May 1919, in Gybland-Oosterhoff archive, inv. no. 124, NL-HaNA.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–4; for an analysis of the rumours around the murder of hostages during the short-lived Munich Soviet, see Eliza Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe: The Deluge of 1919* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chap. Rumor and Terror.

dead, while buildings stand ablaze in the background. 337,000 copies were made and distributed among employers, Christian labour organisations, and others.<sup>83</sup>

The enormity of this threat justified the continued maintenance of the counter-revolutionary paramilitary, which was conceived of as *vigilance*. Dutch socialists were believed to be in contact with Moscow<sup>84</sup> and biding their time to strike and seize power, even if they were but a minority. As such, the BW had to always be prepared, guarding the borders from foreign infiltration, local communities from unrest and sabotage, and the cities from riots and terror. In 1928 the NBVBW complained that the threat no longer seemed as great after a decade, but that ‘the holy ideal is: *working preventively*’.<sup>85</sup> The idea of a vigilant bulwark against the devilish threat of Bolshevik terror was presented in a heavily gendered discourse of patriarchal guardianship.<sup>86</sup> While the LS would fight the enemy around the country and across borders, the BW would defend their community, home, and family, taking up arms to maintain order and protect wives and children from arsonist socialists and rapacious communists, who were associated with the great evils of robbery, sex work, and politically active women.<sup>87</sup> The excessive militarisation of the BW, given that it was largely supposed to be an auxiliary to the local police, spoke to its function as the embodiment of state authority (*gezag*). The spectacle of uniforms, swords, explosives, and machine guns was a performance designed to impress the local population, ostensibly to work preventatively but doubtlessly also satisfying to its performers. In the words of one officer:

I deem access to machine guns to be a necessity. In 1918, when I was with my company in Rotterdam, I still remember the marvellous impression which the machine guns, placed in front of the City Hall, made on the population. The moral impression is great then, and what can by this alone be prevented [*sic*].<sup>88</sup>

### The *Burgerwacht* and the European Radical Right

Though the BW strenuously maintained it was an apolitical association, it was obviously very much an ideological one, and as such can productively be placed in the broader history of the European radical right. As shown, the BW was inseparable from the virulent anti-Bolshevism of the time. Anti-Bolshevism became something of a synecdoche for a host of anti-labour, authoritarian, reactionary, and even fascist ideas and values, and the BW was by no means isolated from these. Accordingly, this part will examine the ways in which the BW was caught up in radical right politics, not just in the Netherlands but internationally as well.

The alleged presence of fascists in the ranks of the BW is one of the more studied aspects of this organisation,<sup>89</sup> particularly in relation to the National Socialist Movement (*Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging*, NSB), which saw a degree of quite impressive growth in 1931–5. This led to the NSB’s placement on an official list of ‘revolutionary’ organisations, membership in which was deemed irreconcilable with a member’s duties as a *burgerwacht*, i.e. to protect state and authority. The ever-expanding

<sup>83</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1919*, Amsterdam, 11–13, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA; a copy of the poster can be found in 2.2.1:927(d), Amsterdam City Archive.

<sup>84</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1928*, Amsterdam, 5, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>85</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1927*, Amsterdam, 8, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>86</sup> For an analysis of the portrayal of revolution and Bolshevism as gender anarchy, see: Ablovatski, *Revolution and Political Violence in Central Europe*.

<sup>87</sup> See the various articles in the BW publications, such as ‘Samenwerking tusschen de Burgerwachten,’ *Nederland Vooruit!*, 15 May 1919, in.

<sup>88</sup> Letter, Officer [sign. illegible] to IBW, Valkenburg, 11 Dec. 1931, Archive IBW, inv. no. 11, NL-HaNA.

<sup>89</sup> Slaa and Klijn, *De NSB*; A. A. de Jonge, *Het Nationaal-Socialisme in Nederland: Voorgeschiedenis, Ontstaan en Ontwikkeling*, 2nd edn (The Hague: Kruseman, 1979).

list of organisations mainly targeted the revolutionary left at first, but by December 1933 included an extensive selection of fascist and other radical right groups.<sup>90</sup> The NSB was by far the most prominent among these.<sup>91</sup> A response to a 1933 letter of protest from NSB leader Anton Mussert (1894–1946) shows that bans on fascist groups were ultimately decided on the basis of the party programme and statutes, as well as the actual actions and pronouncements of party leaders and members.<sup>92</sup>

In the 1930s (and current historiography) this subject tended to be framed as a threat of *infiltration*, suggesting parties like the NSB, akin to communists, tried to secretly plant their members in the BW, as preparation for a coup or a civil war. This is, however, not supported by the archival material. Rather, it seems more natural to assume that many people in the BW already had fascist sympathies. Internal BW documents stated as much, and in the early 1930s the Inspector of the BW, Lieutenant-General R.B.A.N. de Quay, wrote that he saw no inherent contradiction between the goals of the BW and fascism. Citing the example of one Rotterdam militia unit which was composed of a majority of fascists, he noted they were nevertheless willing to swear loyalty to the Lawful Authorities (*het Wettig Gezag*).

From that it may be deduced that there are different sorts of fascists, and that these should not be treated in the same way. Among persons with fascist tendencies there can be elements which, in my opinion, can be kept in the Civil Militias; in keeping with the nature of the matter only those who support Lawful Authority.<sup>93</sup>

This partial prohibition against fascists in the BW ranks does imply an ideological shift. While it can be difficult to trace meaningful change over time in an ‘apolitical’ institution like the militias, it is evident that the threat profile that the counter-revolutionary apparatus was intended to meet had changed in the 1930s. Here the BW appeared to be in line with other security organisations in the Netherlands; Constant Hijzen argued there was increasing concern in Dutch intelligence about fascism, even if the left remained their focus.<sup>94</sup> However, de Quay’s words in 1932 underscore that the basic ideological premise of the BW remained the same: reaction, against fascism if necessary. Absolute obedience to the state and government, law and order, remained unquestionable.

Politically active figures on the radical right also worked at key levels of the BW. The involvement of van Gybland-Oosterhoff, in the 1930s chair of the radical right VNH, has already been noted.<sup>95</sup> More closely involved, however, was J.J. Cramer, a former colonial civil servant who was most important for developing the EHD, the strikebreaking arm of the BW. Cramer was also secretary of the National League Against Revolution (*Nationale Bond Tegen Revolutie*, NBTR), a little known radical anti-Bolshevik group founded in 1920. By the early 1930s the NBTR was bracketed with other far-right groups as a potential security threat for the BW,<sup>96</sup> but in the 1920s it still worked very actively with the BW. (Not just the BW worked with the NBTR – secret government mobilisation documents in case of revolution or strike include members lists of the league to summon for an emergency.)<sup>97</sup> The NBVBW annual reports show the militias used propaganda material from the NBTR, invited speakers from the organisation to give lectures, and even considered merging its fledgling newspaper with that of the

<sup>90</sup> IBW: 3; Letter, Nederlandsche Bond van Vrijwillige Burgerwachten to Bestuur der Burgerwacht, The Hague, 2 Dec. 1933, IBW, inv. no. 13, NL-HaNA.

<sup>91</sup> See Archive Ministry of Interior Affairs: Department Domestic Government, B24057, inv. no. 1097, NA: The Hague.

<sup>92</sup> Letter to Mussert, The Hague, May 1933, B24057: 1097, NL-HaNA.

<sup>93</sup> Letter, Inspector of the Burgerwachten to Minister of State and Minister of Domestic Affairs, ‘s-Gravenhage, 11 July 1932, 5, IBW:13, NL-HaNA.

<sup>94</sup> Constant Hijzen, ‘Geheim Gewroet in Het Duister?’, 339–40.

<sup>95</sup> The statutes of the VNH included among the fundamentals of the organisation the powerful maintenance of order and authority, strengthening national defence, rejection of the class struggle, and organic-corporativism ‘as a means to fight the degenerated parliamentary-democratic structure’. Booklet, ‘Statuten en Huishoudelijk Regement’, Verbond voor Nationaal Herstel, in Gybland-Oosterhoff archive, inv. no. 151, NL-HaNA.

<sup>96</sup> Meeting minutes of the Daily Command, 10 Dec. 1932, The Hague, 1–2, IBW:7.

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. the list of members of the NBTR, in Archive of the Commissie Vervoersmogelijkheid 1919–1939 (Ministerie van Waterstaat), inv. no. 14, NL-HaNA.

anti-Bolshevik group, *I Will Uphold (Ik Zal Handhaven, after the state motto Je Matiendrai)*.<sup>98</sup> No doubt Cramer was key to this, as he was an influential functionary of The Hague militia and also on the youth propaganda commission of the NBVBW.<sup>99</sup> It was also through him that the BW was connected to the Geneva-based International Entente Against the Third International (*Entente Internationale contre la III. Internationale*, also known as *Entente Internationale Anticomuniste*, EIA), an anti-communist organisation founded by Swiss lawyer and civil militia leader Théodore Aubert and Russian Red Cross leader Georges Lodyginsky. The archives of the EIA show Cramer corresponded with Aubert and asked him to supply the BW with anti-communist materials for its propaganda.<sup>100</sup> This helped funnel a range of rabidly paranoid anti-Bolshevik propaganda to BW members, much of which originated from other far-right groups around the world.

The politics of the Dutch civil militias were therefore framed not by a narrowly provincial or even national perspective but the international context of the struggle against Bolshevism, illustrated by paranoid stories of communist spies and the atrocities of the Central- and East-European civil wars. ‘The *spirit of revolution*, which has committed so much *evil* and which of late had approached our borders, *threatens* to also *make its victims* on the soil of the fatherland’.<sup>101</sup> The maintenance of the BW was constantly justified with reference to developments abroad, and the contagious threat of Bolshevism – especially if economic circumstances deteriorated again.<sup>102</sup> In this regard the Dutch institution was sensitive to events in the colonies, particularly the Dutch East Indies. (It is worth noting that a large proportion of military commanders of the BW were drawn from the colonial army, which may have also facilitated a more international view point.) The growth of the Indonesian communist movement, with ties to the Dutch sister party, as well as Dutch socialist support for Indonesian independence, fit neatly into the paranoid anti-Bolshevik worldview that was being promoted in the pages of periodicals like *Netherlands Forward!* or *The Dutch Civil Militia (De Nederlandsche Burgerwachter)*.<sup>103</sup> The increase of Indonesian communist militancy, strikes, and eventually a revolt in 1926–7, which ended in the mass arrest of some 13,000 people, also brought home how international the leftist threat was.<sup>104</sup> To raise awareness of the influence of ‘propaganda from the Bolshevik side on the Native population of the Dutch Indies’, the NBVBW mass-distributed free copies of a special issue on the colony that year, among both Dutch and Indies audiences.<sup>105</sup>

Thus it should come as no surprise that the BW had transnational connections to foreign governments, and paramilitary and strikebreaking groups, especially in Britain and Germany, which had a significant influence on the organisation.<sup>106</sup> One of the first and most important was the aforementioned *Technische Nothilfe*, on which Cramer clearly modelled the EHD. The TN, an offshoot of the Berlin *Freikorps*, tried to spread its model of counter-revolutionary strikebreaking early on; in 1920 Fritz Haber – better known as the father of chemical warfare – made particular efforts to bring the TN to the Netherlands (unsuccessfully) via his colleague Albert Einstein.<sup>107</sup> Direct contact

<sup>98</sup> See for instance: booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1928*, Amsterdam, 7, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>99</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1927*, Amsterdam, 10, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>100</sup> Letter, J.J. Cramer (as Secretary of the NBTR) to Théodore Aubert, ‘s-Gravenhage, 18 July 1927, in Archive of the Entente Internationale Anticomuniste, vol. 3117, Bibliotheque Nationale Genève, Geneva. With thanks to Ghita Bordieri for translation from the French.

<sup>101</sup> Pamphlet, ‘Jonge Mannen van Rotterdam,’ Nederlandsch Jongelingsverbond, (1918?), Archive Gybland-Oosterhoff, inv. no. 125, NL-HaNA (emphasis in the original).

<sup>102</sup> See ‘The Counter-Revolution goes on Holiday,’ 10–11.

<sup>103</sup> Ruth T. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2006), 58, 232–3.

<sup>104</sup> McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, 353.

<sup>105</sup> Booklet, NBVBW annual report, *Jaarverslag over 1926*, Amsterdam, 7, Archief Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken: Collectie Brochures (Blok nr B 24060), inv. no. 89, NL-HaNA.

<sup>106</sup> These connections are entirely comparable to, and overlapping with, the ones identified in: Kunkeler, ‘Counter-Revolutionary Strikebreaking in Interwar Europe’, 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Linhardt, *Die Technische Nothilfe*, 466.

was established by 1922. A report from the archives of a secretive government commission which prepared plans against strike- and revolutionary action, the esoterically named Commission for Transport Possibilities (*Commissie Vervoersmogelijkheid*, CVM), writes that the TN *Hauptstelle* (headquarters) had already corresponded with the Chief Inspector of the Amsterdam police, who was invited to an international conference in Hamburg.<sup>108</sup> The experiences and expertise of German police and military counter-revolutionary actors also influenced the BW. In February 1920 the IBW stated the need for ‘a corps of unconditionally loyal men, specially prepared and trained for the suppression of unrest and the breaking of resistance. ... Thus, an institution in the spirit of the Berlin “Grüne Polizei”’.<sup>109</sup> In fact government counter-revolutionary mobilisation plans generally seemed to owe a lot to the German experience of the Spartacist revolt, and the *Freikorps* actions in particular. For instance, the 1932 ‘manual for the suppression of unrest’ seemed to draw heavily on the Berlin *Freikorps* account, ‘Erfahrungen aus den Straßenkämpfen in Berlin’,<sup>110</sup> in terms of both specific tactics for street combat, and ultra-violence as a strategy for counter-revolutionary warfare.<sup>111</sup>

British anti-strike measures were another influence on the BW, especially after the 1926 General Strike. CVM records show the Dutch government planned to send police and military representatives to London in June 1926 to speak to the British authorities.<sup>112</sup> The following year, the so-called study commission reported that they spoke to Major Twistleton-Wykeham-Fiennes, at the time Organisational Secretary of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies (OMS), a strikebreaking organisation with ties to the British fascists. Assessments were made of a variety of British counter-revolutionary organisations and measures for their suitability in the Netherlands.

Whether the system of the *special constables* [English in original] deserves preference above the system of the civil militias is a question which deserves more attention. Our people are not a ‘Law-abiding people’ [English in original], our penal system operates slowly, and to nurse the expectation that our people will have deference for the ‘special constable’ armed only with a stick – simply because he is the representative of the authorities – seems to us like unjustified optimism.<sup>113</sup>

A 1935 Dutch report on food distribution logistics in Amsterdam notes that a report on British government responses to the 1926 strike directly influenced the BW, specifically that the British distribution system was taken over by The Hague militia in its entirety.<sup>114</sup> Britain and Germany were not the only countries studied to help organise the BW; in 1933 an envoy to Stockholm reported to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Internal Affairs, who included an appendix ‘regarding the study in Sweden of the question of private armed associations’, which was forward to the IBW.<sup>115</sup>

These foreign connections place the BW in an international network of similar counter-revolutionary institutions and organisations, which under the banner of anti-Bolshevism mixed

<sup>108</sup> Secret report for CVM, ‘De oorzaken der Duitse Spoorwegstaking, de daarmede in verbandstaande Regeeringsmaatregelen, en de Technische Nothilfe’ (The causes of the German railway strike, the government measures in connection with it, and the *Technische Nothilfe*), footnote 1, in Archive of the Commissie Vervoersmogelijkheid 1919–1939 (Ministerie van Waterstaat) (2.16.61), inv. no. 34, NL-HaNA.

<sup>109</sup> Letter no. 117, Inspector of the BW to Minister of Internal Affairs, ‘s-Gravenhage, 2 Feb. 1920, Archive Ruijs de Beerenbrouck, inv. no. 12, NL-HaNA.

<sup>110</sup> Jan-Philipp Pomplun, *Deutsche Freikorps: Sozialgeschichte und Kontinuitäten (para)militärischer Gewalt zwischen Weltkrieg, Revolution und Nationalsozialismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023), 181.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Handleiding voor het beteugelen van woelingen,’ nr 39, 1932, Archive Binnenlands Bestuur, inv. no. 1096, NL-HaNA.

<sup>112</sup> E.g. letter, Minister of Water Management to H. Polis, ‘s-Gravenhage, 15 June 1926, CVM archive, inv. no. 9, NL-HaNA.

<sup>113</sup> W.G. van Ermel Scherer; H. de Ranitz; H. Polis, Report on the journey to England by the study-commission, ‘s-Gravenhage, Jan. 1927, 33, CVM archive, inv. no. 34, NL-HaNA.

<sup>114</sup> Appendix I, to report by the commission for the conveying and formation of the economic service of the Amsterdam Civil Militia, 4, IBW archive, inv. no. 15, NL-HaNA.

<sup>115</sup> Letter, Prime Minister, Minister of Internal Affairs to Inspector of the BW, ‘s-Gravenhage, 14 Jan. 1933, IBW archive, inv. no. 13, NL-HaNA.

conservative law and order politics with reactionary anti-labour organisation and violent paramilitarism. Just how far the meeting between the government-backed counter-revolutionary organisation and the radical right could go is revealed by an exceedingly interesting report from 27 September 1920, by the Dutch Inspector of the BW, addressed to Ruys de Beerenbrouck, then Minister of Internal Affairs. The thirteen-page report was the result of a mission assigned orally to the IBW, to go to Munich and 'learn of the messages and wishes, of which the leaders of the "Organisation Escherich" wish to inform the Dutch Government'.<sup>116</sup> The text summarises conversations the IBW had with key figures in, and associated with, the organisation. Organisation Escherich, or Orgesch, was a Bavarian paramilitary organisation founded in response to the socialist revolts of 1919, and the Bavarian Soviet Republic in particular. While Orgesch is little-known now, it was a controversial organisation in the early 1920s, which combined a number of paramilitary Home Guards (*Einwohnerwehren*) under the leadership of Georg Escherich (1870–1941). It was disbanded in 1921, as an extremist group that contravened Allied demands for German disarmament.<sup>117</sup> Antisemitism was pervasive, as borne out by the report which notes the great threat from 'Asiatic Bolshevism', 'primarily under Jewish influence'.<sup>118</sup> The IBW's interviews revolved around the topic of the Bolshevik threat in Europe, the conditions under which it could spread, and the various possible (paramilitary) measures that could be used to meet it, though most of the contents are most accurately summarised as paranoid racist drivel. The report ends with a call for 'cooperation of all states that still possess the power and the means [which] can lead to the formation of a dam which will protect Western Europe against the Eastern danger. Left to itself Bavaria cannot do this.'<sup>119</sup> The conversations were with Escherich himself, sympathetic Bavarian state officials such as the Police President Poener, the leader of the Austrian sister organisation (Orga), and various officers. Remarkably, among the officers the Dutch civil militia inspector spoke to was *Korvettenkapitän* Ehrhardt. Hermann Ehrhardt (1881–1971) was best known as the antisemitic and anti-republican leader of the Ehrhardt Brigade, which refused to disband on government orders in March 1920, and occupied government headquarters that month as part of the Kapp Putsch. Needless to say, these were rather eyebrow-raising contacts for the Dutch government in its early years of counter-revolutionary organisation.

## Conclusion

The Dutch *Burgerwacht*, far from being a provincial and localised affair, was an internationally influenced and transnationally connected institution, which serves as a particularly large example of the interwar period's new breed of counter-revolutionary paramilitaries. From its inception in November 1918 it was mired in anti-Bolshevik politics that inevitably pushed the organisational ideology far to the right. However, there was room for ideological and political diversity in its ranks, and in any case there was doubtless significant variation among the militias depending on place and branch, even within the same city. Given the type of sources we have access to, it is probably not possible to reconstruct the ideological makeup of the BW rank-and-file. Rather, I have attempted to show that the Dutch BW is highly *relevant* to the history of the interwar European right, by showing where it fits in relation to an array of similar organisations which meant to deploy paramilitary violence and anti-labour tactics in the fight against 'Bolshevism'. Created in a moment of crisis via a series of ad hoc emergency measures, with the involvement of a range of state- and non-state actors, at both local and national levels, the BW solidified the rightist panic of 1918–19.

<sup>116</sup> Secret report 'regarding the "Organisation Escherich"', Lieutenant-Colonel IBW to the Minister of Internal Affairs, 27 Sept. 1920, Archive Ruys de Beerenbrouck, inv. no. 12, NL-HaNA.

<sup>117</sup> For German newspaper sources on the Orgesch, see for instance: 'Deutschlands Genesung,' *Rheinischer Merkur*, 20 May 1920; 'Severing gegen die Selbstschutzorganisationen,' *Volkswacht*, 28 July 1920; 'Noske gegen "Orgesch"', *Vorwärts*, 4 Aug. 1920; 'Die Mörderzentrale Bayern,' *Freiheit*, 10 June 1921; 'Orgesch und Einwohnerwehr,' *Kölnische Zeitung*, 12 June 1921.

<sup>118</sup> Orgesch report, 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Though in reality often underfunded and barely competent to match its ostensible aim, the BW was the manifestation of a patriarchal, paranoid, and authoritarian conception of law and order. A discourse of unbridled demonisation of the imagined enemy which conflated distant atrocities with domestic dangers, heroic masculinity defending hearth and home in crisis, and the asserted need for constant vigilance with a spectacular arsenal at the ready, made the BW a rather radical element in political life, well beyond its modest formal function (which, to remind ourselves, was essentially as an emergency auxiliary police). The BW was an ideological, more than a practical, institution. Or in the words of anti-revolutionary politician Colijn, it was above all of moral significance. If the BW had any practical significance to Dutch politics as a counter-revolutionary organisation, it was in the years 1919–20; beyond that it seems very doubtful that its size and budget meaningfully matched its use.

While the Great Depression sparked fears of leftist unrest again, the heyday of the BW's type of vigilant rightism was in the decade before. Major labour parties moderated their discourse and programmes all over Europe, and sooner collaborated with bourgeois parties against the new fascist threat than embark on the course for proletarian revolution.<sup>120</sup> The Netherlands was no exception. Accordingly, the BW shrunk steadily as it lost more and more funding and popularity, while the left-wing threat waned. Ironically, the great threat that overthrew Dutch government, inclusive of the civil militias, came from the far right. In July 1940 the BW received prompt notice from Hans Albin Rauter, the *Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer* who now ran the Dutch security apparatus, that the militias were to be liquidated immediately. The militias had already begun handing over their weapons to the Nazi authorities, and there was general agreement at a meeting in The Hague that month that the BW would not resist.<sup>121</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Kristian Mennen, 'Necessary Evil, Last Resort or Totally Unacceptable? Social Democratic Discussions on Political Violence in Germany and the Netherlands,' in *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1940*, eds. Chris Millington and Kevin Passmore (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 97–111.

<sup>121</sup> Meeting protocol, B.B. with the Inspection of the BW, 's-Gravenhage, 10 July 1940, 1, Internal Government archive, inv. no. 1115, NL-HaNA.