

Wageningen Student Life under Nazi Occupation 1940-1945

Lecture Studium Generale Wageningen by city archivist Bob Kernkamp

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It was here in Hotel De Wereld, “The World”, that on the 5th of May 1945 the German army in the Netherlands surrendered to the Allied Forces and that -in this very room- the capitulation was signed by general Blaskowitz. What better place to present my little talk on Wageningen student life under Nazi occupation?

Before I start, two things:

- Although at the time Wageningen University was technically not a university, I will refer to this institution as Wageningen university.
- The official name of this country is The Netherlands, but it is usually called Holland, which is easier to say. In my talk I will use both names, and in all cases I mean the entire country.

Origins and start of WWII

The 2nd Worl War started September 1939, when Germany under Adolf Hitler invaded Poland, after which the UK and France declared war to Germany, but effectively that had not much impact at the time. September 17 Russia invaded Poland from the east, and on Oct. 6 the Polish army surrendered. Russia then went on to occupy parts of Finland, and the countries Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bessarabia and part of Roumania. The attack in september was not a surprise to the world. Many people had already feared the outbreak of war. Even Holland had mobilized all its forces from August 28, 1939. One infantry regiment was stationed in a school in Wageningen.

Prior to that Germany had occupied Austria in March 1938 in what was euphemistically called “Anschluss”, that is a “unification” or political annexation. Although it could be argued that *this* was the start of the 2nd WW, there was no fighting involved, and it is generally regarded as “just a prelude”.

This of course begs the question: what was Hitler up to? It would take too much time to dive deeply into this complicated matter. One of Hitler’s main points was that Germany had been done wrong by the other European countries after the First WW and that this wrong had to be righted. Germany had been a large empire under the Kaisers, and Hitler wanted to re-establish this empire - and if possible enlarge it to the size of the erstwhile Roman Empire. One of the corner stones of his ideas was that people could be divided into races, and that there was a stratification to these various races. The best race was, of course, the germanic race: people with blue eyes and blonde hair. These people were not just the highest rank of mankind, but even hovered over the other people: they were the “Übermensch”. Related people of other countries were “brother-people”. Because of their race and German language, Austrians were naturally brothers and sisters and Austria was almost automatically annexed - without too much resistance either. The unification of the Austrians into the German empire (Reich) was already announced in Hitler’s book “Mein Kampf”, published in 1924. After the invasion, a plebiscite was held, in which the Austrians were expected to support the Anschluss. The lay out of the ballot paper is shown on the next page. The voting rights of 10% of the voters had been abrogated previously, among whom all the Jewish Austrians.



Hitler held the Jews responsible for everything bad and abject. In Hitler's view they were not even real people. They were guilty of everything that had ever gone wrong in Germany, and the rest of the world, Hitler maintained. Jews were not to be trusted and had to be eradicated from the face of the earth. There were many Jews in Poland, which was one of the reasons for attacking the country. Another, more important, reason was that parts of Poland were regarded as German and therefore had to be re-united with the German Reich.

One other so-called Germanic country was Holland. It was inhabited by a germanic people and should become part of the Reich. In this view, the Dutch should have treated the German invasion of the Netherlands on 10 May 1940 as a friendly gesture. Strangely enough, the Dutch took umbrage and fought back.

During the 1st WW the Netherlands had succeeded in remaining neutral. In 1940 the Dutch expected to stay neutral again and to be able to "sit the war out". They were wrong. On a lovely spring day, May 10th 1940, the German army invaded Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. The Dutch army wasn't well-prepared. There were only a few strongholds that resisted the German forces. One of those was the Grebbeberg, the hill west of Wageningen. From this vantage point the Dutch army shot and bombed the Germans, who, coming from the east, could not progress beyond Wageningen. To prevent the Germans from using the church tower on the Markt as a strategic viewing point, Dutch soldiers threw bombs at it. As a result, the tower, the church and most of the immediate surroundings were destroyed.

To break the Dutch army and moral, the Germans then decided to deliver a final coup de grace: on May 14th the Luftwaffe raided the important international port of Rotterdam. The next day, the Netherlands surrendered and the country was occupied by the Germans.

Did many people in Wageningen die in those events in May 1940? Not really: the Dutch had acknowledged the strategic situation of Wageningen, and had ordered the evacuation of the entire city by the early morning of May 10. In the harbour off the river Rhine 32 barges had already been lying in wait for this since the 20th of April. About 13.400 of the 14.500 inhabitants (that is 85%) were evacuated on board these ships, 7% were either mobilized or made their own way out, and I presume there will have been quite a contingent of students among them, going back home to their parents, and the remaining 8 percent was supposed to live outside the danger zone. The evacuation was well organized and went smoothly. By the time the Germans reached Wageningen, there was hardly a soul in sight.

Under occupation



When the inhabitants of Wageningen were allowed back after a few days, they found their city heavily bombed and many houses damaged. In the centre, the church and three sides of the market square had been shot to smithereens. In total 132 buildings in Wageningen were ruined and more than 600 were damaged, over a hundred severely so. As far as we know, only 3 inhabitants were killed. Two of them were employees of the university. A few hundred German soldiers had died on Wageningen soil. Between 17 and 20 May most evacuees returned to the city. There was a positive mood: despite the fact that the country had been at war (for five days), and much damage had been done to the city, the general spirit was to pick life up again in the best possible way. The nazi occupation quickly started clearing up all the debris, and strangely enough, in co-operation with the staff of the Dutch forces, rapidly planned to resurrect the church, the market square, and other damaged buildings in Wageningen. The first Christmas service in the rebuilt church was celebrated in December 1943, which is surprisingly swift, given the circumstances. Also, the housing and shopping area around the church was rebuilt soon.

And so the Netherlands started a five year period under nazi occupation. All seemed quiet at first. As I said, most people planned to take up their daily routine again. The Germans considered the Dutch a “brother-country” that would be largely co-operative. The first event that made clear to both parties that actually there was a war going on, was when Dutch citizens commemorated the birthday of Prince Bernhard, the queen’s son-in-law, on the 29th of June 1940. The prince always wore a white carnation and all over the country people wore a carnation on that day. The gesture was not appreciated by the nazis. They issued a warning that any future provocations would meet with severe measures.

At the beginning of the new academic year, Wageningen University lectures commenced as usual. Around the same time the nazis began with their oppression of Jewish people. In October 1940 they made it compulsory for any person working for the authorities (which included all university employees) to state how many Jewish parents and grandparents they had, the so-called “Ariërverklaring” or declaration of Arian descent. Most civil servants complied with this regulation. In November all Jewish employees were suspended and a few months later discharged. Not many people protested against these measures. Only two professors in Wageningen openly protested, and they were fired forthwith. One of these was professor Olivier, an active member of a national organisation called the Committee of Vigilance of Intellectuals against National Socialism, which had been founded as early as 1936.

Effects on students' lives

In 1940 the academic world in Wageningen counted 22 departments with 168 staff (among whom 25 professors and 5 lecturers) and 659 students. Given the total amount of Wageningen inhabitants of 14.500, only 4.5 % of the population were students. (In comparison: Wageningen now has 37.000 inhabitants, and the university has some 9000 students). Most students were members of one of the local students' clubs. The oldest and largest was Ceres, founded in 1878, of which almost half the student population was a member. The other clubs were Ceres' female counterpart WWSV (the Wageningen women students society; only 4%), the Catholic club Franciscus Xaverius, the Reformed club SSR and the general club Unitas. For the time being, the German occupiers left these students organisations alone.

Like the rest of the Dutch people, students were not undividedly anti-nazi, especially in the 1930s. Several had been members of the Dutch national-socialist party NSB. The NSB was the Dutch counterpart of Hitler's NSDAP, the National-Socialist German Labourers Party. However when founded in 1932 by a certain Anton Mussert, who within the party had totalitarian power, there was no mention of Hitler's racial ideas or antisemitism. In fact, Jews could become members as late as 1939. Soon the movement had its own semi-military organisation, with men proudly marching about in black uniforms. They greeted one another with outstretched arms, but instead of the German "Heil Hitler!" they said "Hou Zee!" (which sounds like hurrah, but was supposed to mean "hold your course"). The NSB rejected individuality and claimed instead that the common good were leading. One national party was better than many different and always bickering political parties. And of course that party was the NSB, with one strong man, Mussert, at the helm. During the war, NSB-members openly terrorized Jewish and other people and collaborated as much as possible with the nazis.

In Wageningen of around 1934 approximately 20% of all members of the largest students organisation Ceres, sympathized with the ideals of the NSB, which at the time was a lawful political party. This in itself was remarkable, because unlike today, in those days students and politics were two separate worlds. When nazi-Germany became more aggressive over the years, many students left the NSB and their esteem for Hitler Germany waned away; in 1940 only two Ceres-members were a member of the NSB. By that time there were more NSB members among the members of students' club Unitas, founded in 1935. The 1938-39 rector magnificus of the university adhered to nazi ideals too, and professor Mees, who became rector magnificus in 1942, was an NSB member.

In 1940, there were only 6 Jewish students and 3 Jewish employees at Wageningen university. as we already saw, the employees were suspended in November 1940. Most students protested with a one-day strike. Two professors protested: Smit was immidiately fired, the more prominent Olivier was reprimanded but did not keep quiet after that, was taken into custody half a year later, and after 11 months of imprisonment was fired and banned from Wageningen.

One year later, October 1941, the nazis issued a decree that no Jews were allowed as members of non-economic organisations - such as students' clubs. All non-economic organisations had to post signs saying "Voor joden verboden"; forbidden for Jews. In the student world there was a strong feeling that ethnicity or creed were no reasons for discrimination, and certainly a foreign oppressor had no right to issue this sort of decrees. Of course there had been debates about these issues, but the general feeling was as mentoined. Only in the students club Unitas there were so many members who sympathized with Hitler Germany, that half the members terminated their membership in October as a direct result of the discussion about membership of Jewish students.

By the end of the month most students' clubs in Holland decided to end their activities and abolish themselves. The members of Ceres for instance, decided during an emotional assembly on the 31st of October to officially suspend all activities, after which they all terminated their membership in writing. There was only one students organisation that remained active: Unitas, where half of the members supported nazi ideas - the other. In March 1942 the nazis appointed a former Wageningen Student, engineer Rispens, as "attorney for the Wageningen students organisations". His task was to merge all

these organisations into one. He installed himself in the club house of Ceres, but faced with clubs that had almost all suspended their activities, and hardly had any members, he quickly found that there was nothing he could do, so after a few months he left Wageningen for his home in Den Dolder, taking some furniture from the Ceres club house with him.



Club building of students association Ceres

Although their official meeting places were abandoned and the organisations were dormant, students continued to meet at the university, and, in the privacy of their respective rooms. Here, they soon started thinking of ways to sabotage the nazis. Most students were averse to nazi ideas and ideals. In those days, there were no government grants for students, so almost all came from relatively well to do families and a mainly right wing (but definitely not pro nazi) liberal, background. People who were of independent means AND minds. By nature, students were intelligent and questioning people. The Germans knew that too, and regarded them with suspicion. Justly so, for many an act of resistance involved students.

As early as summer 1940, the Dutch Students Federation was founded. This was a national organisation whose aim was to be the advocate of all students in the Netherlands in all contacts with the German occupiers, but also to coördinate any actions against the nazis. Eventually, this did not work and in 1941 the Federation was terminated. They were replaced by the Raad van Negen; the “Council of Nine”, which in its first stage existed of representatives of nine Dutch universities. They acted not only as representatives of all Dutch students, but also acted as moral guideline for the students. The active students’ resistance was organized secretly.

Meanwhile, Japan had become active at war as well. In December 1941 they attacked Pearl Harbour, dragging the US into the war, and one month later they invaded the Dutch Indies. A rather large percentage of Wageningen students was born in the Dutch Indies, where their fathers would work for the government or have a role in tropical cultures, such as the rubber, rice or sugar industries. With the outbreak of the war, these students soon lost contact with their parents on Sumatra or Java or on one of the other islands. And once the Dutch Indies were occupied by the Japanese from January 1942, there remained literally no contact at all. You can imagine how hard that must have been for these students; emotionally, but also financially they were to face several big problems. There is no doubt in my mind that not knowing the fate of their families in the Indies will have driven many students into the resistance.

Forced labour and the Declaration of Loyalty

In 1942 the Germans started sending workmen from the Dutch metal industry to German arms factories, where they would be “of more use”. Also, the Germans obliged Dutch men of the age group of 18 to 23 years to work in the so-called Arbeitseinsatz or forced labour service. Among them, the nazis calculated, would be 6000 students. In Dec. 1942 the German occupiers ordered the making of lists of all men between 22 and 27 years of age. This led to students strikes all over the country. In Wageningen, the rector magnificus, prof. Mees, prevented this by letting the Christmas holidays start earlier. In Utrecht the administration of the students at university was set on fire.

Due to these actions, but probably more because of the unanimous opposition from the universities, even from prof. Mees, the nazis cancelled their plans. But in 1942 several temporary professors had not been re-appointed, others were arrested and held captive for several months. It is easy to imagine that students were not really much at ease anymore. Their very existence had now become threatened.

To know which men could be sent to Germany, and to be able to compile the ordered lists of young men, the nazis needed the government’s administration known as “population registers”. Hindering the nazis in obtaining this information would obviously be a good thing. Therefore a small group of four people, among whom one student, decided to steal the population registers from Wageningen city hall. In the night between Jan. 2 and 3 of 1943, these four men broke into city hall and stole all personal record cards. One of the men worked at city hall and got hold of the key, so the four men could gain entry without any noise. To make it look like a burglary, the actually broke a small window pane at the back of city hall! The thousands of record cards they then hid in burlap sacks under the chicken coop of their headquarters at the farm called Wolfswaard near the river Rhine, which to this day is a students home. Next time you visit city hall, notice the plaque commemorating this act of resistance on your right hand just before you enter. This abduction of the population register was the first of its kind in the Netherlands - soon these registers “disappeared” from various other government administrations in Holland as well.



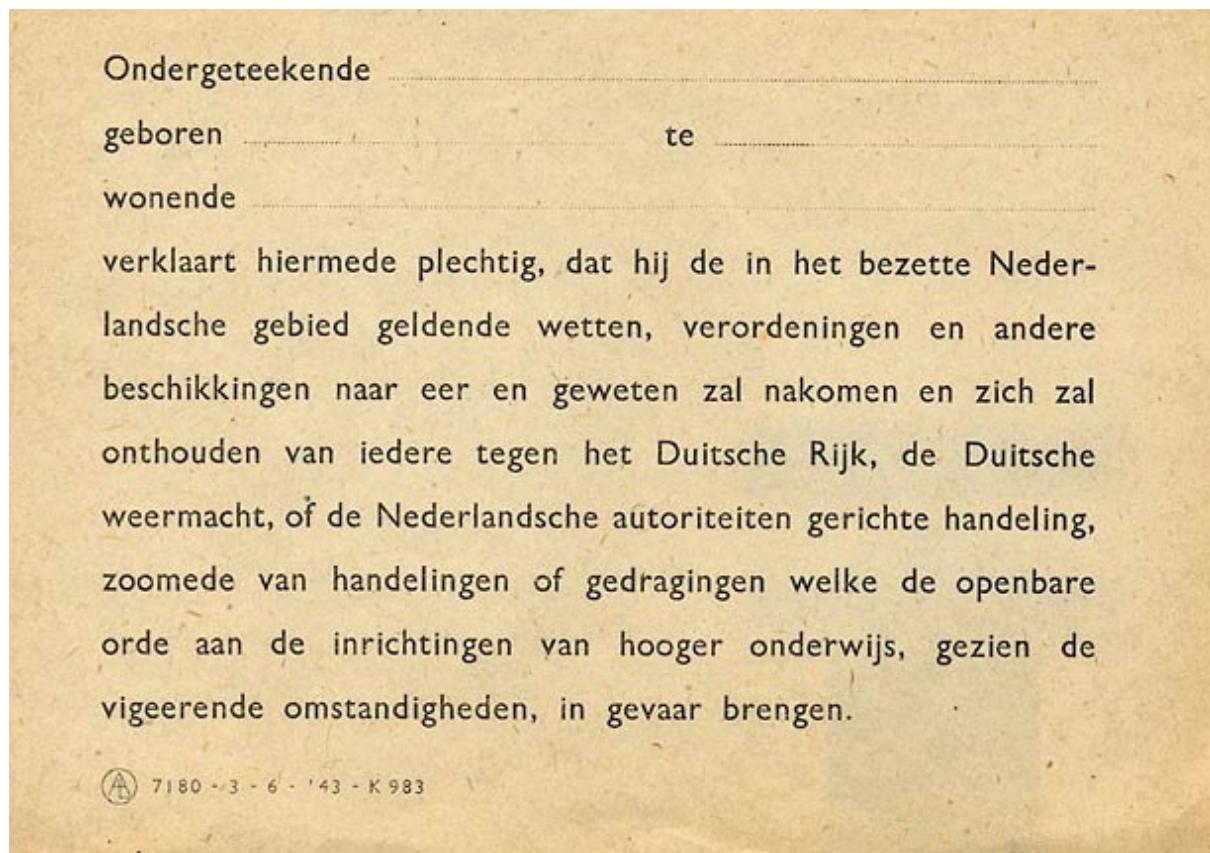
Wolfswaard

The nazis were enraged. They decided that students must have been responsible, and on Jan. 8 they rounded up 20 students in Wageningen and imprisoned them in the Amersfoort concentration camp. One of them died of an infection about a month later, the others survived but had to endure a harsh regime for several months before they were released. As a result, hundreds of students fled from Wageningen. And not without reason: one month later 43 Wageningen students were sent to a concentra-

tion camp in Vught as retaliation for the killing by the resistance of general Seyffardt. He had been a Dutch general who collaborated with the nazis and was shot to death in The Hague on Feb. 5, 1943.

From that moment on, Dutch students kept a low profile and Wageningen university could hardly be called a learning institution anymore. The Germans felt their grip on this rather important and potentially dangerous group of people slip, and told the universities that students who returned to their normal study routine would not have to be afraid of being transported off to Germany. There was one condition: they would have to sign a so-called Declaration of Loyalty to the Third Reich, in which they declared to abstain from any actions against it. Those who would not sign, would be sent to Germany to work there. These forced workers lived in very bad circumstances, often had to work in dangerous places and received no payment or food. Several actually died from incidents at the factory or from diseases.

This led to heated discussions amongst students. What harm would it do to sign the declaration? At least you could continue with your studies. What would happen if you did not sign and did not want to be transported off to Germany? That would surely mean going into hiding. And who knew what effect that might have on your relatives? The nazis would surely put pressure on them if you disappeared? Nobody wanted to bear the responsibility of their father or siblings falling into the hands of vengeful nazis. The Dutch government in exile (London) however made it very clear in radio broadcasts that in a free after-war Holland there would be no place for those who would sign the declaration.



Initially, hardly anybody signed the declaration. The Council of Nine, the representatives of all Dutch students, had strongly advised against it. One week after its introduction, only 7 students had signed the declaration of loyalty. The Germans then ordered the universities to send the declarations to the students. Although the university's senate, its highest governing body, decided against it, Prof. Mees complied and had the declaration forms sent to all Wageningen students. Eventually, on the last day signing was possible (May 4), 154 of all Wageningen students had signed, i.e. 21% of the total of 700.

Nationally, 15.5% of all students signed the declaration. Of those who did not sign, 150 reported for labour in Germany. The rest went into hiding, usually not in Wageningen, but elsewhere. I know that my uncle, who at the time was a student here, ended up in South Limburg, the most southern part of the Netherlands. In March all Dutch universities had stopped lessons as a result of the arrest of students and the compulsory declaration. After the summer holidays of 1943, they all resumed the curriculum, but nation wide only 1600 Dutch students showed up for classes. The previous year there had been more than 14.500 students in the Netherlands (11%). Some of the students who had gone into hiding, and had opportunity to go to Wageningen, would take clandestine exams in the private homes of professors.

1943-1945

In 1943 things began looking not so good for the nazi armies. The allied forces had started invading Europe. The Dutch prisoners of war of 1940, who had been released initially, were commanded by the nazis to report themselves again by the end of April and were transported away. This led to more young men going into hiding. In October 1943 the 21 years old Dutchman Iprenburg, who worked for the nazi Sicherheitsdienst, was shot in Wageningen by the resistance. He ended up in hospital, where he was shot again, and more effectively, by the also 21 years old student Henk Sijnja, one of the four men who had made the population register disappear earlier. The nazis counter-acted by killing the openly anti-nazi doctor Boes, director of the Wageningen hospital. The street Boeslaan is named after him.

By September 1944 the front had reached Wageningen. On 17 Sep 1944 the Wageningen neighbourhood Hamelakkers (Sahara) was bombed by the allied forces, whose aim had been the German soldiers on the Wageningse Berg. 40 Civilians died, among them the wife and son of prof. Olivier, who had been banned from Wageningen. The allied armies had reached the Betuwe, the area south of the river Rhine and started bombing the Wageningen nazi forces from there as well. On 1 Oct 1944 the nazis ordered everybody to leave Wageningen and to be gone by 6 pm that same day. For the second time the city was evacuated, but in no way as organized as in 1940. They did not return before 15 May, ten days after the end of the war and more than half a year after they had left. They found their city even more damaged than in 1940. The church towers of both the Reformed church on the Markt and the RC church in the Bergstraat had been blown up by the Germans and many other buildings had been damaged by the many bombardments of the British army. Over 3400 buildings were damaged, of which 700 severely; 137 had to be demolished.

The university opened its gates again on the 22nd August, with the returned prof. Olivier at the helm as rector magnificus. You can imagine the importance of that: the openly anti-nazi professor Olivier, who had warned for Hitler and his associates well before the war had started, who had been banned from Wageningen by the nazis, and who had lost his wife and son during the war, returning to Wageningen in this important job! In the end, 30 students and university personnel had died in the war, most of them as a result of their activities in the resistance. Among them one woman, who had worked from the Wolfswaard, a centre of resistance, helping Jewish people hide. And of course there was the glory of the fact that the German forces in the Netherlands had capitulated in Wageningen before the Canadian general Foulkes on the 5th of May 1945 in the exact same room we are sitting in now. Thanks to that fact (which eventually turned out to be not so much a fact as a mere staging to the benefit of general Foulkes and prince Bernhard of the Netherlands) Wageningen became a household name in Holland whenever the end of the Second World War was mentioned. To this day, every Dutch man or woman has two associations with the word Wageningen: the capitulation of the nazi army in Hotel De Wereld on May 5th, 1945, and the world famous university and research centre.

I hope that I have been able to instil some of the importance of this place in your minds, and been able to sketch the entirely different circumstances that other students, in other times, had to live in, to study in and survive in. You as today's students, and especially you who have now been here in this

room, should be proud of being a part of this legacy, and carry with you the reflection of how you have might have acted in those circumstances, faced with those choices.



The signing of the Capitulation Act in Hotel De Wereld, 5 May 1945

