

Wageningen Student Life under Nazi Occupation 1940-1945

Lecture *Studium Generale* Wageningen

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Origins and start of WWII

Let us start with some background information. In March 1938 Germany occupied Austria in what was euphemistically called "*Anschluss*": 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".

One of the corner stones of Hitler's 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 from 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*) had already been announced in Hitler's book "*Mein Kampf*", published in 1924. After the invasion, a plebiscite or referendum was held, in which the Austrians were expected to support the *Anschluss*. The lay out of the ballot paper is shown here. The lay out is slightly "suggestive"... The voting rights of 10% of the voters, mainly jews, had already been cancelled or denied, a clear indication that the Nazis were keen to predetermine the nature of society they were absorbing.

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 great offence to the idea that they should be absorbed and fought back.



Wageningen was evacuated that very first day of German invasion. 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 those, going back home to their parents, and the remaining 8 % was supposed to be living outside the danger zone.

The evacuation was well organized and went smoothly. By the time the Germans reached Wageningen several hours later, there was hardly a soul in sight.

Although the evacuation had been well planned, the Dutch army had been less prepared. 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. There were only a few strongholds that resisted the German forces. One of those was the Grebbeberg, the hill west of Wageningen. From this elevation 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 artillery bombed it. As a result, the tower, the church and most of the immediate surroundings were destroyed. The Dutch held out for five days bombing the Germans in Wageningen from their vantage point on the Grebbeberg. But the heavy German response to this ended the fierce resistance and ushered a period of German occupation of the Netherlands. Rotterdam was bombed flat and the Nazi leadership threatened to do the same to other major cities if the Dutch resistance on a.o. the Grebbeberg was not immediately ended. With their outdated guns and poor equipment the Dutch surrendered.



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 100 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 the 17th and 20th of 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.

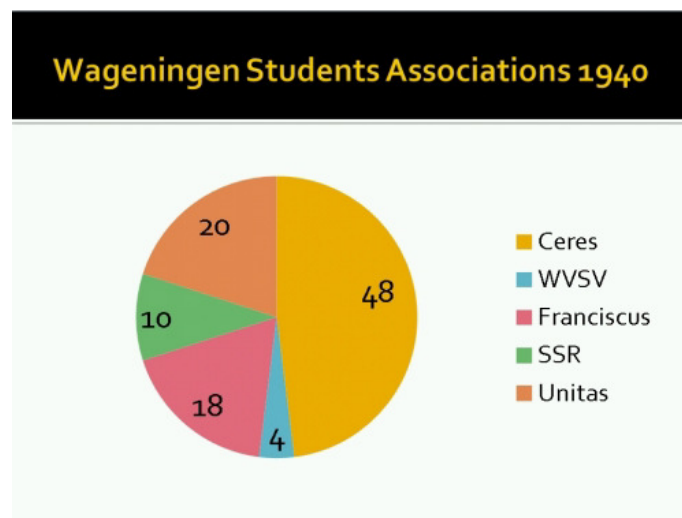
And so the Netherlands started a five year period under nazi occupation. The Germans considered the Dutch a “brother-country” that would be largely co-operative. The first event that made clear to both parties that actually there was a war going on, was when Dutch citizens commemorated the birthday of 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 that day. The gesture was not appreciated by the nazis. They issued a warning that any future provocations would meet with severe measures.

After the summer of 1940 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 then 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.

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 37,500 inhabitants, and the university has some 10,000 students). Most students were members of one of the local students’ associations. 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 WVSV (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 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. Nevertheless, the movement soon started 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 hurray, but was supposed to mean “hold your course”). During the war, NSB-members openly terrorized Jewish and other people, mostly Roma, Sinti and homosexuals, 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 regarded as two separate worlds, and students had nothing to do with politics. Intellectual aspirations were considered separate and above anything going on in daily life. There was little sentiment that the intellectuals should play a role in society or be leaders in public opinion. When nazi-Germany became more aggressive over the 1930s, 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, prof. Jeswiet was openly pro-Germany, and professor Mees, who became rector magnificus in 1942, was an NSB member. Still, at the university these were a minority.

In 1940, there were only 6 Jewish students and 3 Jewish employees at Wageningen university. In November all Jewish employees were suspended and a few months later discharged. This went not by unnoticed: on November 27 most Wageningen students went on strike out of protest. Five professors in Wageningen openly protested; one of them, prof. Smit, was fired. A more prominent anti-nazi scholar, Professor Olivier, had been 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. He was only reprimanded, but did not keep quiet after this, was taken into custody by the Nazis half a year later, and after 11 months of imprisonment he was fired from his academic post and banned from Wageningen. (A bizarre aspect of his exile was that it may well have saved his life: his wife and son died in their home when their quarter of Wageningen was bombed in September 1944).

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. This was a matter of principle which led to the decisions of most Dutch students clubs to end their activities and abolish themselves or at least suspend their activities. There was only one students organisation in Wageningen that remained active: Unitas, where 50 % of the members supported nazi ideas, chose to continue and suspend the two Jewish members - the other half terminated their membership in October.

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. 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, and of course still are, intelligent and questioning people. The Germans knew that too, and watched them with suspicion. Justly so, for many an act of resistance involved students.

Meanwhile, Japan had joined the war. 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 December 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 Utrecht the university administration of the students was set on fire. In Wageningen, the rector magnificus, prof. Mees, prevented any students actions by letting the Christmas holidays start early. I should add that in 1941 all rectores magnifici were declared personally responsible for order at the Dutch universities.

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". In Wageningen, a small group of four people, two of whom were students, decided to steal the local population registers from the 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. XXX The thousands of record cards were hidden in burlap sacks under the chicken coop of the resistance headquarters at the farm called Wolfswaard near the river Rhine. A commemorative plaque near the entrance of the city hall keeps alive the remembrance of this deed of resistance, which was followed in several other places in the country.



The nazis were enraged when they discovered the “break in”. 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 two and a half months before they were released. As a result, hundreds of students fled from Wageningen out of fear. And not without reason: the Dutch resistance had killed general Seyffardt in The Hague on Feb. 5, 1943 and barely a month after the register was stolen from the city hall, 43 Wageningen students were sent to a concentration camp in Vught as retaliation. Seyffardt had been a Dutch general who collaborated with the nazis and had been shot to death. Clearly the Nazis suspected that students were to be blamed, since they were presumed to be involved in the disappearance of the registry.

From that moment on, Dutch students kept a low profile and Wageningen university could hardly be called a learning institution anymore. The Germans tried to retain their grip on the universities by requiring each student to sign a so-called Declaration of Loyalty to the Third Reich, in which students declared to abstain from any actions against the Reich. Those who would not sign, would be sent to Germany to do forced labour there. These forced workers lived in very poor circumstances, often had to work in dangerous places and received no payment or food. Several 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 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 had actually announced that they would hold parents of students responsible for the actions of their children. Nobody wanted to bear the responsibility of their father or siblings falling into the hands of vengeful nazis. But the Dutch government in exile (in London) made it very clear in radio broadcasts that in a free after-war Holland there would be no place for those who had signed the declaration.

One week after its introduction, only 7 students had signed the declaration of loyalty. Eventually, on the last day that 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 Wageningen students who did not sign, 150 reported for labour in Germany, the rest, about 70 %, went into hiding. In March all Dutch universities had already 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 nationwide only 1600 Dutch students showed up for classes. The previous year, there had been more than 14,500 students in the Netherlands.

These were the official numbers. In reality, it was sometimes possible for non-registered students to take exams in a clandestine way, at the professor's house. Indeed at the time, it was not very much out of the ordinary for professors to give smaller group lectures at their homes, so visits of students to professors' houses were not that conspicuous. Also, you should bear in mind that the fact that Holland was occupied, did not imply that all life had come to a stand-still. Despite obvious impediments, both official and practical, many people tried to get on with their daily life as well as reasonably possible. Some people like Gerard Bolt, the later Wageningen professor, continued their studies at home, with stenciled papers instead of lectures. Bolt also followed some lessons at the agricultural school in Deventer.

In the autumn of 1943 Bolt worked on a mapping project in the polders around Zaltbommel. He still remembered the squadrons of flying fortresses passing over them in the skies, on their way to bombing German cities. Sometimes attacked by German fighter planes. He was also conscious of the pressure on his professor - since the young men in his charge were very vulnerable to being whisked away to work camps should they get caught. The field work could only continue until, half way November, rumours spread through the country about imminent razzias on students. His professor then told his students to find a safer place than the open air. Bolt was able to continue his studies in Deventer and elsewhere until 1944. All in all he passed away the time and got something out of it without getting caught but, he said, it was terrifying at times. Professor Bolt died in January 2015.

1943-1945

In 1943 things began going wrong 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 year old Cornelis Ipreburg, from Wageningen, who collaborated with the Nazi Sicherheitsdienst, was shot in the Kapelstraat in Wageningen by someone from the resistance. Ipreburg had infiltrated the resistance and reported back to the Nazis on several people who were then deported. The attack on Ipreburg was not successful: he ended up in hospital, and the Wageningen resistance decided that he had to be liquidated as soon as possible, for one reason because he could identify his attacker. Student Henk Sijnja, also 21 years old, was chosen to do the job. Six days after the initial attack, Sijnja dressed up in something that could pass for a German uniform, and entered the hospital in the early evening, but after dark, with a gun hidden in a bunch of flowers. He shot Ipreburg several times in his hospital bed, as a result of which Ipreburg died. Henk then fled from the building, finding a hiding place outside Wageningen. The Nazis counter-acted immediately: they killed the openly anti-Nazi doctor Boes, director of the Wageningen hospital on his own doorstep. The street called Boeslaan is named after him.

This assassination of Ipreburg may sound as a cold-blooded heroic action, but at the time, Sijnja told later, he had been bloody nervous. Not just because of the real possibility of getting caught, but also because of the fact that he was killing a fellow human being. He struggled with this at the time, and for many years after the war. It is the easy option to look at people as "good" or "bad" in a war situation, but in reality it never is that black and white and Sijnja never considered himself a hero.

By September 1944 the allied 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, as I already mentioned. 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 before 6 pm that day.

For the second time Wageningen was evacuated, but in no way as orderly as in 1940. The inhabitants 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 against Hitler and his associates well before the war, who had been banned from Wageningen by the nazis, who had lost his wife and son during the war, returning to Wageningen in this prestigious position!

In the end, 30 students and university personnel 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 glorious fact that the war in the Netherlands was formally concluded 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 Wageningen still is a household name in Holland associated with the end of the Second World War.

I hope that I have been able to instill some of the importance of this place in your minds, and been able to sketch the entirely different circumstances which 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.

