Literature as Resistance

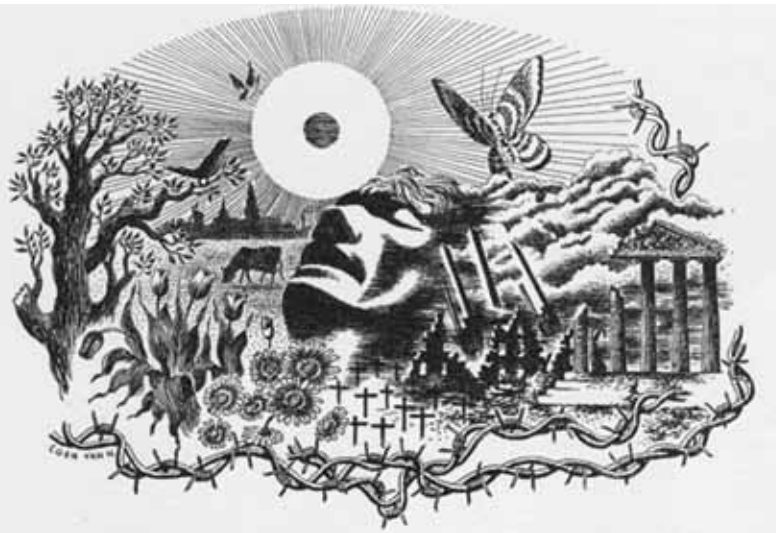
Dutch Clandestine Literature (1940-1945)

[JEROEN DEWULF]

'Clandestine literature' is a general term for all literature that was published without permission from the German authorities during the occupation in the Second World War. Some of these works – which certain scholars refer to as 'illegal literature' – openly challenged the occupier and encouraged resistance, whereas other books only dealt with general themes that for specific reasons were in defiance of the regulations imposed by the Nazis. Nevertheless, in both cases the authors and printers were risking their lives in defence of freedom of the press, thought, and artistic expression. At least 700 men and women of the underground press would perish during the occupation.

Shortly after liberation, in June 1945, an exhibition about clandestine literature was inaugurated by Martinus Nijhoff at the Amsterdam City Museum. The organizers highlighted the important contribution of this literature as opposition against Nazi propaganda. They even presented it as the conscience of the Netherlands. Significantly, one of the rooms was reserved for those who had lost their lives for the sake of freedom of the press. Entering this room dedicated to the martyrs of resistance literature had almost sacral significance.

The exhibition later travelled through Europe, where clandestine literature was given a new function: it no longer served to fight German propaganda, but to promote the image of the Netherlands as a nation of heroes who had bravely resisted the German occupiers. Accordingly, Herman de la Fontaine-Verwey solemnly stated in November 1945 in *Le Monde* that this resistance had not only saved the Dutch nation, but also Dutch literature. This self-confident, patriotic perspective on the occupation characterized the early reception of clandestine literature.



DE ACHTTIEN DOODEN

Een cel is maar twee meter lang
en nauw twee meter breed,
wel kleiner nog is het stuk grond
dat ik nu nog niet weet,
maar waar ik naamloos rusten zal,
mijn makkers bovendien,
wij waren achttien in getal,
geen zal den avond zien.

O lieflijkheid van lucht en land
van Hollands vrije kust -
eens door den vijand overmand,
vond ik geen uur meer rust;
wat kan een man, oprecht en trouw,
nog doen in zulk een tijd?
Hij kust zijn kind, hij kust zijn vrouw
en strijdt den ijdelen strijd.

Ik wist de taak die ik begon
een taak van moeiten zwaar,
maar 't hart dat het niet laten kon
schuwt nimmer het gevaar;
het weet hoe eenmaal in dit land
de vrijheid werd geëerd,
voordat een vloek'bre schennershand
het anders heeft begeerd.

voordat die eeden breekt en bralt
het misselijk stuk bestond
en Hollands landen binnenvalt
en brandschat zijnen grond,
voordat die aanspraak maakt op eer
en zulk germaansch gerief,
een land dwong onder zijn beheer
en plunderde als een dief.

De rattenvanger van Berlijn
pijpt nu zijn melodie;
zoo waar als ik straks dood zal zijn,
de liefste niet meer zie
en niet meer breken zal het brood
noch slapen mag met haar -
verwerp al wat hij biedt of bood,
de sluwe vogelaar.

Gedenkt, die deze woorden leest,
mijn makkers in den nood
en die hen nastaan 't allermeest
in hunnen rampspoed groot,
zooals ook wij hebben gedacht
aan eigen land en volk,
er komt een dag na elke nacht,
voorbij trekt ied're wolk.

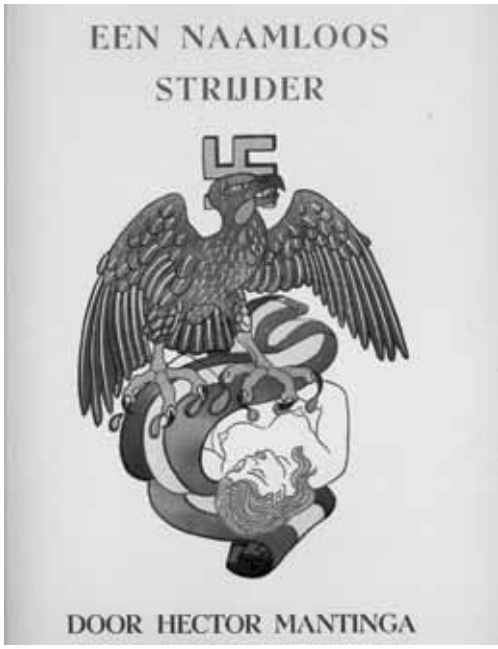
Ik zie hoe 't eerste morgenlicht
door 't hooge venster draalt -
mijn God, maak mij het sterven licht,
en zoo ik heb gefaald,
gelijk een elk wel falen kan,
schenk mij dan Uw genâ,
opdat ik heenga als een man
als ik voor de loopen sta.

JAN CAMPERT†

Broadsheet publication of Jan Campert's poem 'De achttien dooden' (Song of the Eighteen Dead), which commemorated the first eighteen Dutchmen executed by the Germans for their involvement in resistance activities, 1943. Source: University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

Twenty years later, the heroic image of Dutch behaviour during the Second World War was corrected. No other work had a bigger impact on this change in perspective than Jacques Presser's *Ashes in the Wind* (Ondergang, 1965). In light of the fact that some 73% of the Jewish population in the Netherlands had been transported to Nazi death camps, the largest percentage in Western Europe, Presser denounced the self-congratulatory attitude to Dutch behaviour during the war as completely inappropriate. With Presser's book in hand a new generation, too young to have experienced the war, debunked the heroic perspective of the past. Clandestine literature was also remembered in this discussion. This renewed interest was notorious in the work of journalist Adriaan Venema. In a five-volume study *Writers, Publishers & their Collaboration* (Schrijvers, uitgevers & hun collaboratie, 1988-1992), Venema saw it as his task, if not his mission, to prove how intellectuals, many of them in leading positions, had hypocritically taken advantage of the aura of resistance in order to hide their involvement in acts of collaboration. These accusations cast a dark shadow on the immaculate image of clandestine literature. What had once served as an illustration of Dutch bravery was now looked at with distrust, as if every clandestine publication was a potential fraud.

By the turn of the century, a history that traditionally had been portrayed as black and white, became increasingly seen as 'grey'. In allusion to the Dutch tendency to call members of the Resistance 'the whites' and collaborators 'the blacks' (in reference to the colour of Nazi uniforms), historian Chris van der Heijden argued in *Grey History* (Grijs verleden, 2001) that the real history of the Netherlands during the occupation should be characterized by the colour grey of accommodation. In this 'grey' perspective, there was no place for the role of the Resistance, and hence no interest in clandestine literature. This lack of interest made it possible for several of the most precious clandestine publica-



It has been said that in Dutch clandestine printing, the love of freedom was inextricably linked to the love of beauty. The quality of the printing, binding, layout, and illustration of most publications is indeed impressive, especially when taking into consideration the difficult circumstances in which they were made. Because of the poor quality of the paper, printers did their utmost to make up for this deficiency by paying special attention to the typography, the use of an original font, or the preparation of an attractive title page. Famous examples are the illustrations made by Pieter Starreveld for the publication of Albert Helman's poems *De dierenriem* (The Zodiac, 1942) and Sebastiaan (Sebastian, 1944), as well as for the poem *Een naamloos strijder* (An Anonymous Fighter, 1944) by the Jewish poet Maurits Mok who lived in hiding and published his clandestine work under the pseudonym Hector Mantinga. Source: University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

tions to be sold to foreign libraries such as the British Library in London, the Charles D. McCormick Library at Northwestern University (Illinois), and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

This is all the more surprising considering the historical importance of this literature. In no other country under German occupation had more clandestine literature been published than in the Netherlands. In *The Free Book in an Unfree Time* (Het vrije boek in onvrije tijd, 1958), Dirk de Jong identified over a thousand titles. Perhaps even more impressive than the number of books was the unprecedented popularity of clandestine literature, poetry in particular. We know that during the Occupation no fewer than 40,000 copies of anthologies of Resistance poetry were sold. They are among the rare examples where literature unites a popular and an intellectual expression.

Clandestine Printing "De ondergrondse pers" (The Underground Press). Cartoon by Karel Links making reference to the inefficacy of German measures to eradicate the illegal press, *De Moffenspiegel* (The Hun's Mirror, 1944), Source: University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library.

Dutch clandestine books

The biggest and by far the most important Dutch clandestine publishing house was *De Bezige Bij,* founded by Geert Lubberhuizen. Lubberhuizen was linked to a group of students from Utrecht University who had formed a committee to help Jewish children in hiding. The group saved the lives of some 400 children. Without Lubberhuizen's financial support such success would not have been possible. In 1943 he had published an illustrated broadsheet of Jan Campert's highly dramatic poem *The Eighteen Dead* (De achttien dooden) about a group of Resistance members who were executed by the Nazis. Some 15,000 copies of the broadsheet were sold, which brought in so much money that it could secure not only the subsistence of the Jewish children, but also the financial basis for a clandestine publishing house. Unlike its French counterpart *Les Éditions de Minuit,* whose concern for saving the 'honour of French thought' was reflected in the high literary quality of its publications, *De Bezige Bij* published anything that could bring in money, from a Dutch translation of John Steinbeck's *The Moon Is Down,* poems by Edgar Allan Poe and Guy de Maupassant, to postcards with caricatures of the Nazis and calendars with pictures of Queen Wilhelmina.

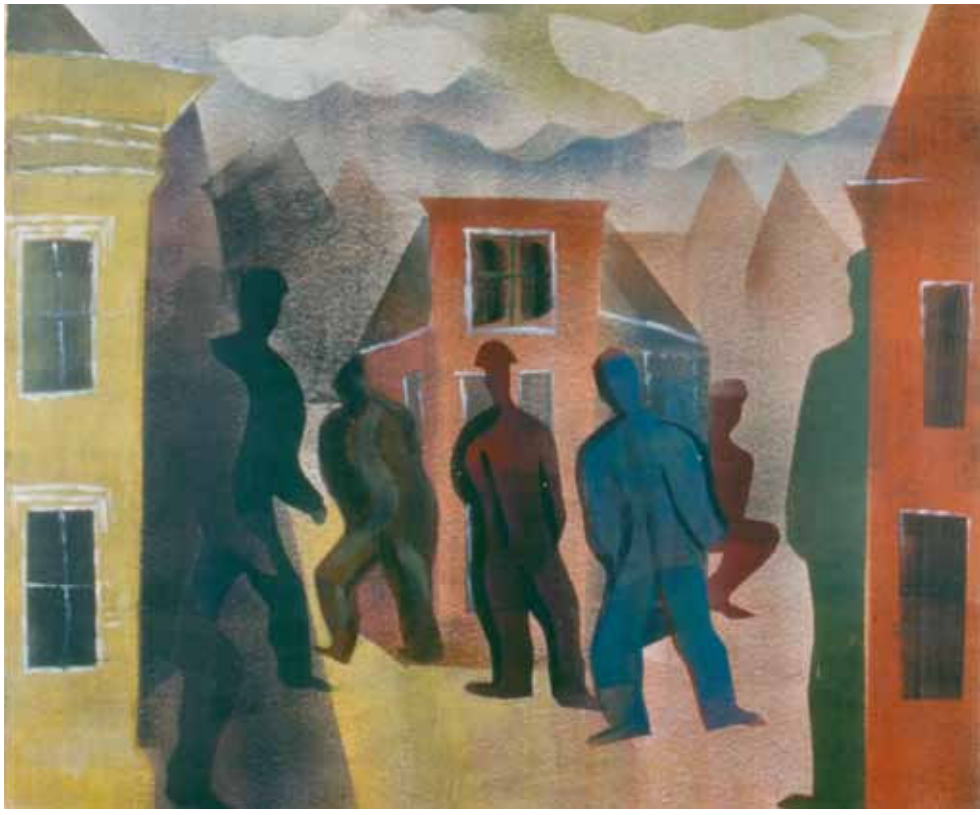
Another prominent clandestine printer was Alexandre A.M. Stols, who had a network of contacts all over Europe, particularly in France. During the war Stols edited a series of beautifully printed poetry editions, entitled *Halcyon,* which he even managed to sell in Germany. To avoid problems he antedated his publications and/or indicated a non-existent place of publication. In his fertile

imagination, Stols came up with names such as *The Somerset Press, Sidcot or Gerard Leeu, Gouda,* the latter actually being a fifteenth-century printer of incunabula.

Stols also supported the German refugee Heinz Horn, who under the pseudonym Wolfgang Cordan founded *Die Kentaurdrucke* that clandestinely published German classics. Together with Wolfgang Frommel, another German refugee, and the Hungarian K. Kollár, owner of the scholarly publishing house *Panthéon,* Cordan clandestinely published an elitist type of German literature, including authors such as Hölderin, Herder, and Stefan George. These books sold surprisingly well. Ironically, some German soldiers were among their clients and helped them to survive the war by sharing food parcels.

Until 1942, an exception to publishing regulations was made for publications that needed fewer than five pounds of paper; such publications did not need approval by the Chamber of Culture, whose task it was to push along the Nazification of Dutch literature. Bookseller A.A. Balkema took advantage of this situation by launching a series of minuscule clandestine books, which he accordingly called *De Vijf Ponden Pers.* He published mostly foreign poets for a list of trusting subscribers. One of Balkema's most dangerous clandestine publications was *Ten Little Grumblers* (Zehn kleine Meckerlein, 1943), published in German in an edition of forty copies. The satirical text by an unknown

The third edition of the Geuzenliedboek (1945), an anthology of resistance poerty, begins with an illustration representing the Dutch 'spirit of resistance' against the Spanish (on the left) and the Germans (on the right). University of California Berkeley, Bancroft Library.



Hendrik Werkman, *The Army of the Wanted,* printing-painting based on the poem 'Het leger der gezochten' by Toontje Berger about the secret activities of the Dutch resistance, 1944. Source: Francine Albach, Amsterdam.

author had been smuggled out of a concentration camp in Germany. Written and illustrated in the spirit of a children's book, the text ironically reworks the popular song *Zehn kleine Negerlein,* the German version of the old American song*Ten Little Niggers* in which the victims one by one disappear.

In terms of artistic quality, the work of printer Hendrik Werkman was truly exceptional. It was his ambition to combine graphic design with new technologies such as offset printing and photography. He therefore joined the publishing house *De Blauwe Schuit* that had been founded, in November 1940, by Ade Zuithoff, Adri Buning and August Henkels. Strictly speaking, De Blauwe Schuit was not a clandestine publisher since Werkman's name was mentioned in the colophon. Hiding his identity would have been impossible because the illustrations were so unique that they could easily have been identified. Among the most famous editions by *De Blauwe Schuit* is the beautifully illustrated *Hasidic Legends* (Chassidische Legenden, 1941), based on Martin Buber's edition of Jewish mystic tales. In March 1945 the police raided Werkman's office; he was summarily arrested and executed.

There were hundreds of similar small-scale (and often dilettantish) clandestine publishing houses all over the Netherlands. Their print numbers were usually limited; in 25% of cases, fewer than a hundred copies per book were printed. As the use of noisy printing machines implied a serious risk, most of these publishers used lithography as their printing method, often in combination with a primitive hand press, a hectograph, a platen press that had to be

powered by foot or, as a last resort, a mimeograph. Another problem was paper shortage. The Chamber of Culture had a monopoly in the distribution of paper for book printing and used it as a weapon to impose its will. Consequently, clandestine books were usually thin. This also explains why most of the production of clandestine literature consisted of poetry and short stories.

Relevance of clandestine literature

Most Dutch literary histories exclude clandestine literature; they tend to focus in detail on the avant-garde literature in the 1930s and from there immediately jump to the rebellious postwar generation led by Willem F. Hermans, Gerard Reve, and Anna Blaman. The war itself, precisely the period in modern Dutch history when literature was most popular, barely receives any attention.

As a result, Dutch literary scholars have traditionally looked at 1945 as a "Year Zero," as if to say that then Dutch literature restarted from scratch. In reality, many of the "new" tendencies were already present in clandestine literature. Blaman's openly lesbian novel *Lonely Adventure* (Eenzaam avontuur, 1948), for instance, was preceded by her clandestinely published short story *Encounter with Selma* (Ontmoeting met Selma, 1943). Rein Blijstra's libertarian sexual morality, his relativistic approach to a 'hero' of the resistance, and particularly his deep-seated cynicism in *Upon Further Acquaintance* (Bij nadere kennismaking, 1944) make him, together with Blaman, a herald of changing moral values in Dutch literature that scholars traditionally — though mistakenly — date as beginning in 1947. Blijstra's other clandestinely published novel *Sharks near Nabatu* (Haaien voor Nabatoe, 1945) is also exceptional because of its anti-colonial message. With this novel, Blijstra pointed to a discussion that would flare up in Dutch society soon after the Liberation: how can a country that justified its resistance as a fight for freedom still defend the rightness of a colonial empire?

As these examples show, the prejudice that clandestine literature has little more to offer than a simplistic celebration of patriotism needs to be reconsidered. In fact, a considerable part of this literature consists of translated work. Several foreign authors were even published in their native tongues. Among these authors we find Kafka, Heine, Baudelaire, Dickinson, even Omar Khayyam and the African-American James Langston Hughes — hardly names that reflect a reactionary, nationalistic conception of literature.

Clandestine literature also contains the first Dutch ego-document on the Holocaust. Long before Anne Frank's diary was published, letters written by Etty Hillesum from Westerbork Camp were printed clandestinely in the 'Tarnschrift' *Three Letters by the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym* (Drie brieven van den Kunstschilder Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym, 1943). Another fascinating "Tarnschrift" is Albert Helman's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Aldus sprak Zarathustra, 1944), an ironic portrait of Germany and the Germans composed of quotes taken from German literature.

Irony was also the weapon used by A. van Atten, who ridiculed the German propaganda in poems he published under the pseudonym Hein van Oranje. In *Wretches* (Stumpers), a caricature of one of Arthur Seyss-Inquart's speeches on the great future that awaited the Netherlands under German guidance, he writes: 'The Afsluitdijk? The work of wretches, / that was the best we Dutch could do. / Reducing Rotterdam to ruins - / that's what men of action do!'

The use of printing machines for clandestine literature implied a serious risk because the occupiers had precise information about the existing printers. Printing machines were loud, cumbersome, technically sophisticated, and used a lot of energy, which made secret printing almost impossible. It is not by chance that many more printers and graphic designers lost their lives for the sake of clandestine literature than did authors. As there was often not enough electricity to keep the machines going, it had to be tapped illegally from other lines or replaced by manpower. A typically Dutch solution was the production of electricity by bicycle. Here we see clandestine publisher Bert Bakker demonstrating after the war how a bicycle was used to produce electricity for a printing machine. Source: Francine Albach (Amsterdam).

When reading clandestine literature with an open mind, even non-believers can be impressed by the poetic expression of rock-solid faith among Christian resistance fighters. Few poems in Dutch literature contain a more radical confrontation with existential questions than those of Herman Salomonson in *School for Recruits* (Recrutenschool, 1941). Salomonson, who as a 'crusader of Christ' fought Nazism until the bitter end, openly condemns the cowardice of all those who before the invasion spoke loudly about resistance but became silent as soon as danger threatened: 'On the cold stones of the cell / truth rises from sounds of death! / O God and Father, through your stern chastisements, / the talk of idle mouths, / worn out in the usage of the day, / appears against the background of the Cross's truth.'

The assumption that critical voices about the general passiveness of the Dutch population during the occupation were only heard long after the liberation is, in fact, a myth. Those voices were to be heard loud and clear in clandestine literature by authors who not only anticipated the rebellious post-

war generation in their criticism but who did so at a time when protest could have deadly consequences. This was the case of the young resistance fighter Jaap Sickenga, who shortly before his execution in May 1942 harshly condemned the general apathy in Dutch society: 'A different death / threatens us / than one from lead — / Indifference. / He who suffers from it / dies before his time.'

One of the most touching resistance poems is Martinus Nijhoff's new version of *The Children's Crusade* (De kinderkruistocht). While the previous version dealt with a topic from a vague past, *Modern Children's Crusade* (Moderne kinderkruistocht) points angrily at the passive and sometimes even collaborative attitude in Dutch society vis-à-vis the children's drama that is taking place before the public's eyes: 'People hurried on, / vengeance has no time for compassion. / They chased them, laughing at the Jew / who so loudly laments and cries out in his need.'

Perhaps more than anything else, however, the real importance of clandestine literature lies in the fact that faith in the written word could be maintained. It is remarkable that the belief in the power of literature reached its height in the Netherlands precisely at a time when German propaganda misused literature in such a way that the old perception of printing as an ally of humanism was completely corrupted. In postwar Germany, writing poetry after Auschwitz came to be seen as a barbaric act. Dutch intellectuals might have been disappointed with the sometimes poor aesthetic quality or reactionary morality of their clandestine literature, but they did not share Adorno's radical pessimism. In the occupied Netherlands, clandestine printing had been able to produce a contrast to the abuse of literature by Nazi propaganda. It was perhaps not as bright as some had hoped, but at a time of total darkness, even the smallest flame sheds a lot of light. ■