

The Dutch Police and the Explosion of Violence in the Early 1980s

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The first half of the 1980s is by far the most violent period in Dutch post-war history (Duyvendak, 1992).

Demonstrations ~~opposing against~~ the eviction of squatters from occupied buildings and against nuclear power plants invariably culminated in battles with the police. On 30 April 1980, the day Queen Beatrix was inaugurated, Amsterdam turned into a battlefield: all over the city, protesting youth clashed with the riot police over and over again. ~~Using brute force~~ In February 1981, the largest ever police force in Dutch history evicted ~~with brute force~~ squatters and thousands of their supporters from a small area in the Nijmegen city centre that was destined to become a parking lot. All involved, especially ~~of course~~ the demonstrators and the police personnel, were deeply impressed. After the clashes, official evaluation studies were produced and members of the protest movements presented their point of view in books and movies (Wietsma, Vonk, Van der Burght, 1982; Commissie Heijder, 1987).

~~Recently, t~~ Thirty years later, relevant archives were opened and historians started to focus their attention on this period. It now becomes possible to put the events in a broader context and to assess them from a broader perspective. Below, we will argue that the explosion of violence and its containment can best be understood as the effect of the non-simultaneous carry-over of the cultural changes that started in the late sixties. The new outlook and the new manners started to penetrate the police much later than elsewhere, right at the moment a back-lash occurred in politics and society. That belated penetration would decisively influence the settlement of the clashes. The manners which had ~~provided~~ rebellious youth in the first half of the 1970s ~~grip on society~~ enabled the police a decade later to successfully handle the disintegrating youth movement and to contain the violence relatively smoothly.

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~~[A]~~ New challenges, old police strategies

In the early 1960s, while the standard of living rose rapidly, Dutch society ~~came alive, had come in motion.~~

Disturbances no longer only led to irritation and a quick restoration of public order, but also to positive appraisal,

imitation, and social change. ~~Through music and movies, often of American origin.~~ A new generation of young people discovered ~~in music and movies, often of American origin,~~ a ~~fresh~~ new youth culture ~~that, not only~~ withdrew from paternalistic family relations and religiously segregated organizations ~~but began and started~~ to propagate passionately new, post-materialist values. In 1965 and 1966, this youth came into sharp conflict with the police several times. ~~For example,~~ ~~The~~ wedding of Princess Beatrix in Amsterdam was severely disrupted; in June, 1966, Amsterdam was the scene of major riots. The authorities charged that the police leadership and moved the beacons quickly (Kennedy, 1995). One should understand 'the signs of the times', it is called in Dutch governmental circles, and ~~they~~ eagerly wanted to show that they did. Public finances enabled them to meet the new desires. Increasing the well-being of the population became the main political objective. This ~~had~~ still ~~had~~ to be reached by planning, as was practice since the war, but room was made for public participation in policy making. This way the government ~~strived wanted~~ to meet the demands for participation in society and ~~this way it while~~ ~~hoping ed~~ to contain the unrest. ~~too~~. Nevertheless, there were many social conflicts like demonstrations and occupations. Often, the activists won. When that was not the case, as in the evacuation of the psychiatric institution, *Dennendal*, and the construction of a subway line through the Amsterdam *Nieuwmarkt*buurt, it created upheaval. The demise of the religiously compartmentalized society and the social and economic globalization, however, seemed unstoppable (Hellema, Wielinga, Wilp, 2012).

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The confrontation with the protesting youth left the police disconcerted. At leading positions were officers who had embraced an Anglo-Saxon professional *ethos* that focused on law enforcement, put criminal investigation and traffic policing centre stage and expected much from car patrolling and ~~computer~~. They were innovative but had a blind spot for public order policing. This mode of policing was still based on experiences from the 1930s and the German occupation (Proot, 1965). ~~This explained Hence~~ the rigid reaction to the protesting youngsters. The failure of the Amsterdam police was a painful surprise for them. The immediate dismissal of the Amsterdam Chief of police and the nomination of a commission of investigation, fully consisting of outsiders, were ~~perceived experieneed~~ as attacks on their professional dignity. The prominent innovator and Nijmegen chief of police, Frans Perrick, thought the activism of young people undermined public authority, ~~and~~ -signaled an increase in crime. ~~He and~~ feared a politicization of police management. ~~To~~ ~~In~~ his opinion, the only way out for the police would be a return to a neutral, independent position (Perrick, 1971). The new social-democrat Amsterdam mayor and former Minister of Justice, Ivo Samkalden, shared his conviction and put his police force under tight central leadership. Only ~~the~~ The Hague's

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chief of police, Kees Peijster, and his Groningen colleague, Karel Heijink, considered the clashes a wakeup call for the police ~~making them ready and were prepared~~ to reform their forces. ~~For example,~~ Peijster started ~~for example~~ to enroll large numbers of women in his force (Meershoek, 2012).

In 1977, both developments reached a turning point. During the previous four years, the Netherlands were ruled by a progressive government that met many left-wing expectations but gradually started to disappoint its grassroots supporters. The government declared to strive for a fair distribution of power, knowledge, and income but turned out to be powerless against the economic crisis. It had put an end to a radical experiment in the already mentioned psychiatric hospital and its Minister of Justice stubbornly refused women the right to abortion. In 1977, the leftwing parties won the elections, but were unable to form a coalition government. A right-wing government of Christian-democrats and Liberals was installed. The change of government coincided with a change in public opinion. Rising unemployment aroused pessimism ~~and~~; the news about the development of a so-called neutron bomb awakened fears of a revival of the Cold War. Among young people, the punk movement came into fashion, propagating 'no future' and preaching self-reliance.

~~[B]~~ Increase or reform the police? Facing the crisis

~~While~~ Thus, in 1977, the optimistic, reformist culture of the 1960s came to an end in politics and society. ~~It~~ then only began within the police. ~~The~~ ~~S~~ starting point was the report, *Politie in Verandering* (The Changing Police), released shortly before the elections (Heijink, 1977). Three years earlier, the Minister of the Interior had asked the police leadership to calculate how much the police had to be expanded in order to perform its tasks properly. The main chiefs of police had selected their best young officers for the job, but these had given their own twist to the honorable task. According to the report, the police didn't need more personnel but had to decentralize their organization. The police had to join the rapidly changing society, exchange the rigid internal hierarchy for smooth, functional relationships, and create small teams in all police districts. The existing strength of the police would then suffice. The minister was not amused. But ~~the police~~ ~~their~~ peers ~~within the police~~, who were daily confronted with the rigid hierarchical relationships, embraced ~~this~~ ~~eir~~ call for change. Some succeeded to start small experiments in their own force, others started to study sociology or law in their spare time, ~~and~~ a few became members of a political party. (Meershoek, 2007).

The 1970s ~~was~~ ~~were~~ a quiet decade, compared with the turbulent second half of the 1960s. There were riots in The Hague, Rotterdam, and in Amsterdam but these were limited in time and scope. Much attention ~~was given to~~ ~~attracted~~ the kidnapping of the French ambassador by Japanese terrorists and the train hijackings and hostage taking by young Moluccan militants.¹ These were radical actions, unprecedented for The Netherlands, and they incited the government to create some small antiterrorist units. ~~However,~~ ~~but~~ their impact on the police organization was small. Many police officers served ~~in riot squads~~ on these occasions, ~~in the riot squads~~ but these ~~officials~~ only guarded the surroundings. That was not considered useful police work. ~~Afterwards,~~ ~~I~~ in governmental circles, ~~it was afterwards~~ ~~even they even~~ seriously considered ~~to~~ relieving ~~e~~ the police of that task, transferring it to the military, and dissolving ~~e~~ the riot squads.

~~Quite unexpectedly,~~ ~~F~~ things changed in 1980, ~~quite unexpectedly,~~ ~~It all began starting~~ in Amsterdam. There, for some years, youngsters ~~who that had~~ wanted ~~for example~~ to study in the city, ~~for example,~~ and had trouble finding accommodation to their liking, squatted buildings that were kept empty for speculation or were abandoned to enable urban renewal. This phenomenon attracted large scale public attention when squatters who had moved into three vacant, colossal buildings along the *Keizersgracht* in the city centre, refused to leave it ~~even with a on~~ court order. They announced ~~that they were going~~ to defend the building with all means available. The mayor hesitated to instruct the police to evacuate the buildings out of fear ~~of to sparking violence, make deadly victims.~~ In February, at the start of the weekend, squatters ~~violently~~ recaptured ~~violently~~ a squatted building that had been evacuated by the police, expelled the police from the area, and erected barricades in the streets. For one weekend, anarchy reigned in a small part of the city. Immediately after the weekend, the police and the *gendarmarie* set the streets free again with brute force (Duivenvoorden, 2000). Everybody expected that revenge would be taken at the already announced inauguration of the new Queen on the 30 April. The Amsterdam police rapidly started to buy ice hockey clothing in Canada for their riot squads.

In the morning of 30 April 1980, the accumulated social tensions came to ~~an outburst a head~~ as a result of an uncoordinated police action against a symbolic occupation by squatters (Hofland, 1980). The riot squads and the mounted police had lost all ~~of their attempts to combat the squatters,~~ ~~deterrent effect.~~ Within a few hours, all over the city, police and protesters were caught in small and large battles. Around the Dam, where the inauguration took place, the police had to defy a ~~barrage rain~~ of stones. Many police officers suffered serious injuries. Immediately after these so-called *Kroningsrellen* (Coronation Riots), a new Amsterdam police leadership started to evacuate

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systematically major squatted buildings.² By force and with special technical means, such as hoisting cranes, building after building was cleared. The still growing squatter's movement offered vigorous resistance. The campaign exhausted the police force.

~~FCI~~ Crisis and searching for a new approach

The *Kroningsrellen* deeply impressed the government and created solid political support for a review of public order policing. Several evaluation studies were conducted, there was funding for adequate protective clothing of the riot squads and young police officers were enabled to organize a conference to discuss alternative approaches to public order policing (Rapport studieconferentie Warnsveld, 1980). A new approach was not developed by mayors or politicians but by police officers, contemporaries of the authors of the report *Politie in Verandering*. They had been leading the riot squads. The mayors and police leadership, not knowing a way out of the difficulties, offered them full liberties to experiment. A demonstration against a nuclear plant in Almelo in 1978 that had proceeded peacefully thanks to close contact with the protesters, informing them in advance of police actions and keeping the riot squads out of sight, served as an example. An intellectual source of inspiration was the study *Niet alleen met stok en steen* (No only by stick and stone) by Gerhard Dijkhuis which adapted all kinds of American therapeutic insights to address hostility and aggression for police use (Dijkhuis, 1982). It also instructed police officers how to deal with the impulses and temptations of their own men and; how they could stop escalation of violence and de-escalate upcoming conflicts with demonstrators. The young police officers were willing to offer protesters opportunities to attract public attention. The new approach required ~~from~~ the police to plan their actions on the basis of previously collected information about the protesters, a scenario and officially accepted guidelines how to deal with violent demonstrators. The commander should be assisted with an experienced staff. Because the Dutch police was organized locally, the approach was implemented step by step.

Meanwhile, there were fierce confrontations between the police and demonstrators, squatters, and other activists outside Amsterdam too. In February 1981, squatters defended a series of houses in Nijmegen that were deemed to be had-to-be destroyed in favour of a parking lot. The local police did not cope with the situation and the conflict escalated. Shortly before the planned evacuation, police and *gendarmarie* (*Koninklijke Marechaussee*) from all over the country rushed to their assistance, among them the officers that had designed the new approach. They established a new staff and hastily created a plan. However, prepared a scenario but they could not prevent violent confrontations. In September, a blockade of the nuclear power plant at Dodewaard was organized. A year earlier,

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fifteen thousand people had made the same effort but the action was rained out after a day. This time, forty thousand protesters showed up, stayed there for several days, and faced considerable police violence. ~~Afterwards, there was in nearby Arnhem.~~ ~~Following this,~~ a large demonstration against the police violence ~~erupted in nearby Arnhem.~~ Within the police ranks too, critical voices could then be heard.

The new approach in public order policing slowly gained ground. At the end of 1980, a well-known squatted building in Amsterdam (*De Grote Wetering*) was evacuated by force. For the first time, the riot squad was assisted by so-called arrest teams: plainclothes policemen who unexpectedly arrested violent squatters. ~~Half a year later,~~ during a demonstration in Almelo, ~~half a year later,~~ the police leadership was supported by a staff of experienced police officers and was acting according to an officially accepted scenario, based on previously collected information about the purpose and background of the demonstrators. At the same time, the members of the riot squads ~~received got~~ new equipment ~~including:~~ white helmets, wicker shields, and protective clothing. The innovations did not ~~create make~~ an immediate end to the violence, but they enabled the police to act more boldly and to better control the upcoming conflicts. That proved to be the case in September 1982, when the Utrecht police successfully evacuated the forest of Amelisweerd that was occupied in protest against the construction of a highway (Meershoek, 2007).

In November 1981, the Amsterdam police successfully managed a massive demonstration against nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, they still met with violent resistance when they entered with force into squatted buildings to remove the inhabitants. The most violent confrontation ~~occurred happened~~ in October, 1982, when, ~~by surprise,~~ they cleared ~~by surprise~~ the heavily defended occupied building, *Lucky Luijk*. The Amsterdam mayor had secured the support of public opinion in advance by designating the building for youth housing. Afterwards, the supporters of the occupiers arrived late and ~~reved lived~~ their anger up by destroying windows of public buildings (Meershoek, 2007). However, the unsuccessful, violent defence raised within the squatters' movement ~~created~~ a debate about the use of violent means. It proved to be the beginning of the end of the squatters' movement.

In the summer of 1983, the peaceful parts of the squatters' movement and the anti-nuclear movement were boosted by the emergence of a mass protest movement against nuclear weapons. NATO had asked its member countries ~~(including the Netherlands)~~ to install cruise missiles on its air bases. Four months later, half a million people protested in The Hague against a positive decision by the government. Following a British example of the

Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, radical activists erected a tent camp beside the air base of Woensdrecht, where the missiles might be stored. Several times, the air base was hermetically sealed off from the outside world by massive demonstrations. The camp, which would remain in place for nearly two years, was a base of operations to start protest actions. ~~Additionally, it but~~ supported all kinds of protests elsewhere in the country ~~too~~. Nevertheless, the local police succeeded ~~in preserving to preserve~~ the peace by maintaining close contact with the protesters ~~to discover their motives, informing themselves about the motives of the activists and, The police also gave giving~~ them opportunities to raise public attention ~~of for~~ their goals, and using the other innovations as well. ~~In~~ these years, the training centres of the riot squads were set on new footing which completed the turnaround in public order policing.

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Around 1985, the protest movements were ~~extreme over the hill~~ but the loss of support combined with a hardening of the more radical parts. This was especially evident in the impoverished Amsterdam neighbourhood, *Staatsliedenbuurt*, where squatters controlled a significant part of the distribution of houses and thus blocked the renovation of the area. Meanwhile, police officers, belonging to the generation of the authors of *Politie in Verandering*, reached the leading position in the police forces. In Amsterdam, one of them became chief of the district, *Staatsliedenbuurt*. He created a neighbourhood team and introduced a new, de-escalating approach to regain control over the area. He was successful but, after several months, he was confronted with a back-lash too. The evacuation of an occupied building turned into a violent confrontation and, afterwards, one of the arrested squatters, the 23 year old Hans Kok, died in a police cell, the first and only fatality during these years. Furious public reactions followed, but these could not halt the decline of the squatters' movement. In the following years, more than one hundred buildings were evacuated peacefully in this neighbourhood and urban renewal could start there too (Meershoek, 2007).

~~[D]~~ Conclusions

The first half of the 1980s was not only the most violent period in post-war Dutch history, but also a time when public order policing changed most radically. Remarkably, this change did not involve a hardening of police practice, ~~(which given the heavy work load of the police and the violence they encountered might be expected)~~, but a diversification and flexibilization. The police got better equipment, but were not dehumanized. The strategy of the police was no longer focused on getting quick control over the battlefield, but on de-escalating the conflict by

~~making laying~~ contact with the protesters and offering them opportunities to present their message to a wider public and on planned repression if things ~~still nevertheless~~ got out of hand. This approach proved to be effective in the end.

This transformation of public order policing was developed and implemented by police officers who had joined the police during the second half of the 1960s, who were better educated than their superiors and who were offended by the inflexible approach of the latter towards their rebellious peers. When ~~these newer officers they~~ were commanding the riots squads at the beginning of the 1980s, they were offered ~~great much~~ freedom to act by these superiors who ~~did not know knew not~~ how to deal with the riots. The officers used this freedom to its full ~~extent. extend.~~ While they had the pleasant experience to realize their own ideas, to take the initiative and to act well prepared, feelings of being hit in the close spread within the protest ~~movements~~. These feelings were a source of violence and embittered resistance, resistance that was effectively contained. After the mid-1980s the squatters'! movement slowly disappeared and the number of riots fast decreased. The same officers ~~who that~~ had introduced the new approach to public order policing ~~in the Dutch police~~; then reached the top positions in the local forces and started to introduce ~~in the Dutch police~~ the kind of community policing that had been outlined in the report, *Politie in Verandering*. Thus the 1960s reached their completion in the police too.

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¹ These young Moluccans wanted to take revenge for the Dutch government's broken promises ~~of the Dutch government~~ towards their fathers serving in the Dutch colonial army and who had withdrawn with the Dutch from Indonesia when that ~~N~~nation became independent.

² The description is wrong. In The Netherlands, the monarch is not crowned but inaugurated.