

## The French Revolution Abroad: The Netherlands

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### French Revolution and the Netherlands

When studying as an undergraduate at Leiden University in the 1990s, the French Revolution was hardly on the menu. The first-year overview courses discussed extensively Antiquity, the Late Middle Ages (in particular the Burgundians and their states), and above all the Early Modern Era. Much emphasis was placed on the Reformation, absolutism and, of course, the Dutch ‘Golden Age’ of the seventeenth century. The eighteenth century was hardly treated, and the French Revolution was briefly mentioned as an obligatory topic, to be passed over quickly. In the next semester, the courses taught by the professor of modern history, a specialist in French history *nota bene*, started around 1870 and continued until the present. Most Early Modernists in the department were specialists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and their modern colleagues in Dutch and ‘general’ (*algemene*) history were mostly interested in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a particular emphasis on the Second World War. At present, this situation has changed, and important historical research is being conducted at Leiden on the *Sattelzeit* 1750–1850, but I will come to that later in this contribution.

The content of my 1990s undergraduate history program was not a coincidence, nor can it be regarded only as the result of individual research interests of staff members. The emphasis on the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, as well as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, reflected, and still to a large extent reflect, a larger Dutch national historical narrative. The sixteenth-century Dutch revolt against Philip II is still regarded as the foundational moment of the Dutch national state, that is the interpretation of the Netherlands essentially as a Northern Calvinist (Dutch) nation state. The Dutch generally also tend to view themselves as a people with an uneventful and peaceful history and are generally unaware that the modern Dutch nation state was crafted in a violent cradle of civil war, *coups d'état* and foreign invasions in the decades around 1800.

The era of the French Revolution, including the Batavian Revolution of 1795–98, was for a long time covered in silence. This historiographical forgetting had everything to do with the outcome of the Revolutionary events in the Netherlands, the annexation of the Netherlands by Napoleon in 1810. The ‘adoption’ of the Netherlands by France was the culmination of increasing French influence in the period 1795–1813. The invasion of the French Revolutionary soldiers made the downfall of the stadholderate and the establishment of the Batavian Revolution in 1795 possible. As the Amsterdam historian Niek van Sas, among others, has argued, the Batavian Revolution was an important turning point in Dutch history. The old Dutch Republican system, a complex institutional arrangement with autonomous cities and sovereign provinces, was replaced by a unified nation state and a (rudimentary) centralized bureaucracy, although some institutional remnants of the old republic continued to

exist. Surprisingly, the foundation of the Dutch nation state, parliament and constitution in the Revolutionary decade hardly left a strong imprint on the national memory. Even Dutch history students in general do not know who designed the first Revolutionary Dutch constitution or who were the architects of the *coup d'état* of January 1798.

In the Napoleonic era, the independence of the Batavian Republic was increasingly curtailed by Napoleon. In 1806 he installed his youngest brother Louis as King of Holland. In 1810 he deposed his brother and annexed the Netherlands, governing them from Paris. The Netherlands had ceased to exist as an independent state. As a result of the downfall of the Napoleonic empire after the Russian invasion, Dutch independence was unexpectedly restored. The son of the last stadholder returned from exile to become King Willem I of the Kingdom of the United Netherlands. The French and Batavian revolution was consequently covered in silence in the Orangist restoration state after November 1813.<sup>1</sup> The Batavian Revolution was regarded in the national image as an era of foreign domination, national humiliation and economic hardship. The return and survival until this day of the House of Orange, claiming to represent the Dutch national tradition, has meant that there was no place for the Revolutionary events in the national past.<sup>2</sup>

The Batavian Revolution was praised for the first time in an official ceremony during the commemoration of two hundred years of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the *Ridderzaal* (Knight's Hall) in The Hague in 2013. The Amsterdam historian Niek van Sas underscored the importance of the Batavian republican legacy in his formal speech to the King and the Dutch parliamentarians. In my view, Van Sas still overlooked the French, in particular Napoleonic, contribution to the making of the Dutch nation. Very few Dutch historians do research, for instance, on the Napoleonic decade. An important exception to this general Dutch neglect, is French 'émigrée' Annie Jourdan, who worked at the University of Amsterdam for many years. She played an important role in re-interpreting the Dutch past in the Revolutionary decades as part of cultural transfers, in particular with France, comparing the Batavian Revolution with the American and French ones<sup>3</sup>.

In recent years, a moderate popular surge of interest in the (post-) Revolutionary decades can be observed. Several TV documentaries helped audiences to visualize the Napoleonic experience in the Netherlands. As part of the series on the nineteenth century ('The Iron Century', 2015), the producers devoted an episode to the legacy of Louis Napoleon, with the 'very French' Jourdan as expert commentator. Also, a special series was produced, entitled 'Napoleon in Holland' (2019), with the well-known actor and film star Huub Stapel as lead actor, but also featuring several Dutch historians (myself among them), which brought Napoleon to many Dutch living rooms. Even a friend of my children in primary school told me that he had become fascinated by the French Revolution and Napoleon after seeing the documentary, demonstrating the uses of television for interesting future generations in French history (as well as the Internet and games, of course).

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<sup>1</sup> On the Dutch and Europe culture of forgetting after 1815, see M.M. Lok, "Un oubli total du passé?" The Political and Social Construction of Silence in Restoration Europe (1813–1830)', *History and Memory* 26,2 (2014), 40–75.

<sup>2</sup> M.M. Lok, 'The Establishment of the Orange Monarchy in 1813–1815: A National myth', *The Low Countries* 21 (2013), 208–17.

<sup>3</sup> Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004); *La Révolution batave entre la France et l'Amérique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2008); and *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Flammarion, 2018).

## Scholarly Research on the French Revolution

As sketched above, the circumstances of doing historical research on the French Revolution are not ideal from either a societal or academic perspective. Nonetheless, much research on the Revolutionary era is now being conducted in relatively small Dutch academia (the thirteen Dutch universities with ca. 300,000 students can perhaps be compared to the Greater Paris or London university system). Most Dutch historians do not work directly on the French Revolution, but investigate the Revolutionary era as a whole, with the French Revolution as main event. Reinhart Koselleck's periodization of the *Sattelzeit* 1750–1850 is still widely accepted among Dutch academics. I will give a few examples. At Leiden University, Judith Pollmann and Henk te Velde conduct a research program on the institutional continuity during the Revolutionary era. Also at Leiden, Alicia Schrikker works on the colonial dimension of the Revolutionary age. In Utrecht, Beatrice de Graaf leads a large European-funded Research program on the construction of a European security culture in the early nineteenth century in response to the perceived threats of renewed Revolutionary violence.

Utrecht historians Ido de Haan, Rene Koekkoek and Annelien de Dijn investigate the political and intellectual history of the Revolutionary era. De Dijn, for instance, devoted her inaugural professorial lecture on the idea of equality in the French and American revolutions and will publish a book shortly on the idea of freedom, prominently figuring the French Revolution. At Radboud University Nijmegen, Lotte Jensen has published on anti-Napoleonic literature in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, Wyger Velema, Annie Jourdan, and Niek van Sas have supervised many PhD candidates researching the political culture of the Revolutionary era. Martijn van der Burg, Mart Rutjes, Joris Oddens, and Johan Joor (all Amsterdam) wrote important PhD dissertations on the Franco-Dutch transfers or *Histoire croisée* in the early nineteenth century. Martijn van der Burg (Open University), a former student of Annie Jourdan, continues to research the administrative history of the Napoleonic Netherlands. A number of names and institutions could undoubtedly be added.

My own research interests in the French Revolution follows a somewhat unusual trajectory. I wrote an MA thesis at Leiden on Spanish sixteenth-century political thought and then pursued an administrative career as policy advisor for some years. I was invited by Ido de Haan to become a PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam, writing a thesis on 'Political reconstruction in France and the Netherlands after 1814'. In my thesis, I decided to focus on the role of Napoleonic administrations (nicknames 'girouettes' and 'windvanen' in contemporary discourse) in this political transition, no doubt influenced by my own experience as a government official.<sup>4</sup> My archival research brought me to Paris, where I was able to live for a half-year near the Canal Saint Martin in 2004–2005 (next to many shorter

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<sup>4</sup> M.M. Lok, *Windvanen. Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en Franse Restauratie, 1813–1820* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), with a summary in French and English. Parts of the contents of this book have also been published as articles, such as the following selection: M. Lok & N. Scholz, 'The Return of the Loving Father: Masculinity, Legitimacy and the French and Dutch Restoration Monarchies (1813–1815)'. *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 127(1), 19–44; and M. Lok, '« Renouer la chaîne des temps » ou « repartir à zero » ? La mémoire des guerres de religion et la temporalité en France et aux Pays-Bas (1814–1815)', *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, no. 49 (2014/2), 79–92.

research visits), and to study in the National Library and the National Archives. This stay in that majestic, yet still intimate, city was a wonderful experience and one of the best parts of being a graduate student in French (comparative) history.

One of the many things that struck me during my Paris *séjour* was the passion with which most French working in the archives spoke about the Revolution. Often people approached me smilingly when they observed I was working on documents from the period around 1800. However, when they learned that I was actually working on the Restoration era, smiles tended to disappear, invitations for coffee were usually retracted and one female co-researcher yelled at me angrily: ‘Monsieur, les Bourbons ont tué des Français!’. What a privilege, to work in a country that was so passionate about its own past, I thought!

I had pleasant conversations with and learned much from French historians such as Pierre Serna, Emmanuel de Waresquiel, Jean-Claude Caron, Jean-Philippe Luis, Bettina Frederking, Laurent Nagy and Emmanuel Fureix. On the whole, the fierce reputation of French historians (widespread among Dutch academics) as inward-looking and nasty was, in my experience, not deserved. On the contrary, all my encounters were pleasant and fruitful. I was also greatly helped by Annie Jourdan, who introduced me to French as well as many American (and even Colombian) historians working on the French Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

My own current interest in the French Revolution concerns the problem of moderation and radicalism (I have edited a book with Ido de Haan on this topic), as well as the Revolutionary historiography of Europe.<sup>6</sup> I am interested in the constructions of new historical regimes in the Revolutionary era, as well as the cultures of memory, as well as forgetting, that were to be the result of the Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I conduct research on the self-proclaimed opponents of the Revolution and its legacy. I have recently researched the papers of Charles-Alexandre Calonne in London and Oxford and I am editing a volume on the transnational counter-revolution and the cosmopolitan conservatisms in the era 1780–1840 (with Friedemann Pestel & Juliette Reboul).<sup>8</sup>

### **The Future of the French Revolution**

What is the future of the French Revolution in the Netherlands? I must confess that I do not entirely share the pessimism and gloom of many of my international colleagues, also because I believe it is not a constructive approach to the serious challenges facing academic research in the Revolutionary era. Without willing to trivialize the difficult situation of the humanities worldwide and pre-1945 history in particular, I think the Dutch case presents some hope. Even despite the unwelcoming circumstances and the threat of more budget cuts, I would like to argue that academic research in the Netherlands into the Revolutionary era is actually flourishing more than ever before, as was demonstrated by the list of prominent researchers

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<sup>5</sup> M. M. Lok & D. Gutierrez Ardila (External University Bogotá), ‘Las Restauraciones a través del lente ultramarino: estudio comparado de la supervivencia política en los Países Bajos y el Nuevo Reino de Granada (1810–1820)’. *Revista Universitaria de Historia Militar* (Fall 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Ido de Haan & Matthijs Lok, *The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History* (Palgrave Series in Political History: Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> M. Lok, ‘A Revolutionary Narrative of European History: Bonneville’s ‘History of Modern Europe’ (1789-1792)’, *History*, Issue 103.3, number 356 (2018), 434–50.

<sup>8</sup> To be published by Brill Studies in the History of Political Thought.

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above. To consolidate these gains, it is, in my view, important, especially for students as well for the wider audience in general, to relate the Revolutionary events to contemporary circumstances. This was also one of the main conclusions of the closing discussion of the conference of the Consortium on the Revolutionary era in Atlanta in March 2019, where several Dutch historians were present.

I myself teach not in a traditional history department, but in the Amsterdam European Studies department, which has made its name in studying contemporary problems from a longer historical perspective. Relating historical topics to contemporary political events has therefore become second nature for me. The French Revolution could, in my view, be used to highlight and discuss contemporary topics such as terrorism, radicalism and populism. This focus on contemporary political problems, of course, does not imply that we should not also do small-scale academic research, or that historical topics should only be viewed from the perspective of contemporary (political) phenomena. But as the Dutch political system, as well as that of many European countries, is now in a crisis as a result of the rise of antiliberal and populist parties, there is much need for interpretation of events. The French Revolution is the key event in modern political history and could be used to discuss our modern political system. It would certainly be a good idea if academics would not leave the interpretation of these crucial historical events only to politicians.

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