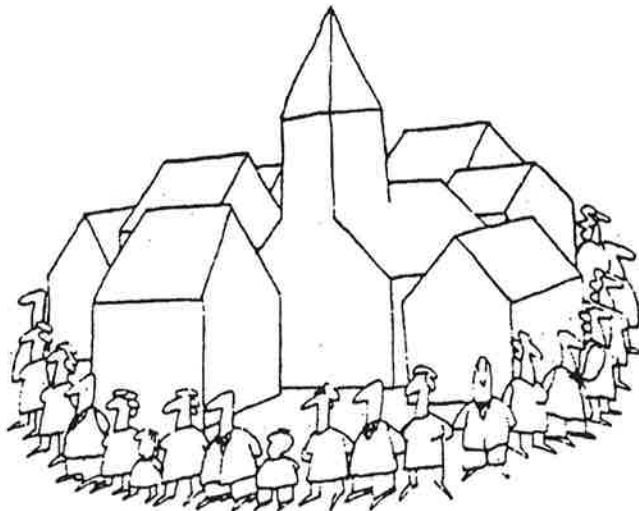


Impressions of the Dutch Social Defence Network

I first heard about the Dutch social defence network in 1984 when I received a letter from Lineke Schakenbos, international contact for the network. In Australia at the time there was only limited awareness of social defence: just one group (Canberra Peacemakers) and a few other individuals took an active interest. The Dutch operation was much grander, with a network of ten groups on different topic areas.

Nearly a decade later, in April and May 1993, I took a trip to the Netherlands in order to find out more about Dutch activities to promote social defence. I was able to speak with several of the leading figures in the Dutch network and to gain a better understanding of the history and organisation of activity there. This is a report of my impressions of the network. It can be no more than impressions since I have not carried out an in-depth study. Nor could I, not knowing the Dutch language. While spoken language is not a barrier (most Dutch people speak English excellently) many important books and other documents have not been translated into English.

Before proceeding further, it is important to distinguish between social defence and nonviolent action. Social defence means organised nonviolent action—rallies, strikes, boycotts, noncooperation, alternative institutions, fraternisation, etc.—as a method of resisting military invasions or coups. Social defence would be either a full replacement for the army or a supplement to it. Nonviolent action, by contrast, is a more general category: it can refer to action against police, corporations, racism, male violence, etc., as well as against military threats. In practice, different people in the Dutch network have different ways of defining social defence. Some prefer a broader conception, bringing it closer to nonviolent action generally, whereas some see it exclusively as an alternative or supplement to military defence.



In the Netherlands, as in Australia, it is possible to distinguish the following:

- the peace movement, which is not necessarily committed to nonviolence;
- the nonviolence movement, interested in promoting awareness of and use of nonviolent action, and specifically in running workshops on nonviolent action;
- the social defence movement.

Support in the Netherlands for the peace movement is impressive. Although activity is far less now than in the mid 1980s, membership in groups remains high. Churches play an important role in the peace movement as they do elsewhere in Dutch society. Pax Christi has some 16,000 members, mostly Catholics. It includes many articulate people but is organised hierarchically, and at the top there is some resistance to nonviolence because it is seen to have a low political impact. Then there is the Inter-Church Peace Council (IKV), which covers nine churches (Pax Christi officially represents the Roman Catholic Church), has 2000 paying members and 15,000 on its mailing list. Also important is Women for Peace (Vrouwen voor Vrede or VVV). It produces a newsletter of forty A5 pages six times per year, which goes to 3000 members. This is not to mention other groups.

The nonviolent action training network seems similar in activity to Australia, with perhaps five to ten active trainers in the country. This, at least, is my impression, which would have to be verified by closer study in both the Netherlands and Australia! There is a national network of nonviolence organisations.

A national network is much easier to organise in the Netherlands than in Australia, simply because of size of the country. With a population nearly as large as Australia's, the Netherlands has an area only half that of Tasmania. Furthermore, the rail network is dense and efficient compared to Australian cities. That means that a group on a particular topic can be formed with members from all around the country, with as much ease as bringing people together from across Sydney or across Melbourne.

The social defence network was set up with a series of theme groups: women, research, the military, civil servants, churches, trade unions and others.

The women's group, with five or six active members, is the most active. It has had most success in promoting the idea of social defence and nonviolence among members of Women for Peace. For example, this year eighty women attended

a one-day workshop on violence in daily life.

The research group has four to five active members. As its name implies, the group pursues research into social defence. It meets every two months or so, typically to discuss an article written by one of the members. A few of the articles by members have been published.

The military group has three to four active members. Its aim is to promote the idea of social defence in the Dutch military.

The civil servants group aimed to encourage civil servants to be prepared to resist a hostile power that has taken over the government. (The memory of the Nazi occupation from 1940-45 remains fresh.) The main outcome of the group was some papers on the issue. The group has not been active for the past couple of years. The groups dealing with churches, trade unions and other topics never really got off the ground.

Social defence research

Before commenting further on the network, it is worthwhile mentioning research on social defence in the Netherlands, which has a fascinating history. A key figure is Johan Niezing, Professor of Peace Research at the Free University of Brussels for the past twenty years. He has long been committed to social defence, not for idealistic reasons but because it seems to him to be the most pragmatic alternative to the horrors of military methods. Although Niezing works in Belgium, he is Dutch by origin and his book on social defence is in Dutch.

In the late 1970s, a small radical party was part of a coalition government in the Netherlands. (Dutch governments are always coalitions, partly due to the voting system with proportional representation.) A member of this party was made science minister, and Niezing was his chief scientific adviser. As a result, the acceptance of proposals to fund ten social defence research projects was set as a condition for continuing the coalition. A committee, chaired by Niezing, was set up to oversee the ten projects. But

then there was a change of government. Funding was dramatically reduced so that there was enough for just one project. (One way that this cutback was justified was on the basis of a critique of the Niezing committee proposals by social scientist Koen Koch.)

The one project was a study coordinated by Alex Schmid of Leiden University. Schmid's book, resulting from the study, argued that an invasion by a determined military power (specifically, the Soviet Union) could not be stopped by nonviolent means. (In retrospect, now that the Soviet threat to western Europe has collapsed in the wake of the largely nonviolent 1989 revolutions in Eastern Europe, this analysis seems quite shortsighted.) Thus ended a promising possibility for sustained research on social defence.

(Schmid went on to set up the Interdisciplinary Research Project on Root Causes of Gross Human Rights Violations, with the Dutch acronym PLOOM, at the University of Leiden. This is a vitally important social science enterprise, whose core funding remains precarious.)

Although the Niezing committee was disbanded in 1987, it took until 1993 before its original proposals, having been updated and augmented by Giliam de Valk, were published in English. Niezing himself played a key role in ensuring that this publication took place.

The civil servants group also had trouble in raising money. They had done some interviews in Rotterdam and prepared for training civil servants for social defence. Rotterdam officials then organised a meeting to inform civil servants about training, but gave it so little publicity that hardly anyone attended. The lack of attendance was then used by the officials as an excuse to avoid providing any further support for the project.

The background to the network

How exactly did the network get started? There appear to be several roots. In the 1970s at the Technical University of Twente, there was a group, mainly composed of students, working on social defence. There were two subgroups. One focussed on research, doing summaries

of articles. The other decided to learn how to do social defence in a practical fashion, so they did interviews with civil servants in the city of Hengelo. After the members of this group dispersed (most received degrees in 1980 and left to work elsewhere), the group was reconstituted as a national one, involving some people who had been involved for a long time. Indeed, there has been interest in social defence in the Netherlands since the 1920s. Some of those people were still active after World War II, and this has contributed to the current strength of the Dutch network.

Another group, the Centre for Nonviolent Response, had been active since the 1970s. They organised a meeting on social defence in the early 1980s and had more people than they could cope with. Afterwards there was a meeting in September 1983 with the other group (which had interviewed civil servants), along with other interested people (especially from Women for Peace) and the network was formally established in 1984. It really just formalised connections between groups that were already active.

Another important organisation is *Stichting Voorlichting Actieve Geweldloosheid* (SVAG), or in other words the Foundation for Information on Active Nonviolence. Headed by Evert Huisman, it has been active for nearly thirty years and has a mailing list of 2,500 people. Among other things, it has published a large amount of material on nonviolence, both original works and Dutch translations from other languages, and has provided an invaluable service in circulating ideas about social defence.

Comments

The Dutch social defence network has some dedicated activists, and Dutch social defence researchers have produced a considerable body of literature. But there is also a pessimistic side. With the collapse of the Soviet threat, interest in peace issues is in decline in the Netherlands (as in most western countries), and this includes social defence.

On the research side, things do not look bright. Peace studies programmes are being closed down in several universi-

ties. Johan Niezing retires this year and there is no one of comparable prominence in the social defence field to take his place. Social defence researchers such as Giliam de Valk and Joep Creyghton are currently unemployed. It is difficult to obtain funds for social defence research, so it is tempting to move into other fields, as Alex Schmid did. One of the few established researchers still interested in social defence is Professor Hylke Tromp of the University of Groningen.

The network groups are not tied so much to funding, but they do require commitment from their members. The groups on research and civil servants seem mainly to have remained at the level of discussion, producing some valuable writings but not otherwise taking the message to wider constituencies. It might also be mentioned that these groups have always been almost entirely male. By contrast, the women's group remains the most active and has continued to bring social defence to new people.

A highlight of my visit was a workshop on social defence at the Centre for Non-violent Change in Amersfoort, organised by Abel Hertzberger and Lineke Schakenbos, at which I was a featured speaker. I described some of the projects that we had done in Canberra and Wollongong, such as producing a slide show and interviewing telecommunications experts. Those attending seemed to appreciate the practical nature of our projects. In addition, they were surprised to hear that the groups carrying out these projects were so small. It was nice to find that our

efforts in Australia could provide some insight and stimulation to Dutch social defence activists, since for many years the activities of the Dutch network and, indeed, the very existence of the network have provided encouragement to us in Australia.

Promoting social defence can be a lonely task. The resources devoted to military methods remain vast, and most people still believe that military forces are needed. Furthermore, there is no guaranteed path to social defence. That's why every small project is important. We need to try out different approaches, see what works in each situation, and communicate our experiences openly and honestly.

I thank all those who talked to me about social defence in the Netherlands, including Joep Creyghton, Piet Dijkstra, Anton Heering, Evert Huisman, Johan Niezing, Herman Stegehuis, and especially Giliam de Valk and Lineke Schakenbos.

Recent Dutch books on social defence
J. P. Feddema, A. H. Heering and E. A. Huisman, *Verdediging met een menselijk gezicht: grondslagen en praktijk van sociale verdediging* (Amersfoort: De Horstink, 1982).

Evert A. Huisman, *Van geweld bevrijd: overleven door democratisering en ontwapening* (Zwolle: Stichting Voorlichting Actieve Geweldloosheid, 1987). An abridgement and translation of 7 chapters has been published as *Freed from violence: a nonviolent defence* (Zwolle: SVAG, 1989).

A. A. Klumper, *Sociale verdediging en Nederlands '40-'45* (Tilburg: H. Gianotten B.V., 1983).

Johan Niezing, *Sociale verdediging als logisch alternatief: van utopie naar optie* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1987).

Alex P. Schmid, in collaboration with Ellen Berends and Luuk Zonneveld, *Social defence and Soviet military power: an inquiry into the relevance of an alternative defence concept* (Leiden: Center for the Study of Social Conflict, State University of Leiden, 1985).

Hylke Tromp, editor, *Sociale verdediging: theorieën over niet-militaire verdediging als alternatief voor geweldpolitiek en nucleaire afschrikking* (Groningen: Xeno, 1979).

Giliam de Valk, *Strategie en sociale verdediging: een exploratieve literatuurstudie naar de fundamenteën van de strategie van sociale verdediging* (Zwolle: Stichting Voorlichting Actieve Geweldloosheid, 1988 [Masters thesis, University of Leiden]).

Giliam de Valk in cooperation with Johan Niezing, *Research on civilian-based defence* (Amsterdam: SISWO, 1993).

Contacts

Lineke Schakenbos, Normapad 4, 3816 EZ Amersfoort, The Netherlands. Phone: +31-33-755838. Fax: Gooi & Stricht Publishing House, Baarn, attn: Wil Rikmanspoel, +31-2154-20658.

Giliam de Valk, Van Ostadestraat 45H, 1072 SN Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Phone: +31-20-6756197.

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