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# Dutch Repatriation from the Former Third Reich and the Soviet Union: Political and Organizational Encounters and the Role of the Netherlands Red Cross

*Regina Grüter & Anne van Mourik\**

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**Abstract:** »Niederländische Repatriierung vom ehemaligen Dritten Reich und der Sowjetunion: Politische und organisatorische Zusammenstöße/ Begegnungen und die Rolle des niederländischen Roten Kreuzes«. The repatriation of approximately 300,000 displaced Dutch persons from across Europe might seem rather straightforward compared to the problems regarding the mass displacement of millions of Europeans as a result of the Second World War. However, poor planning due to controversies in the Dutch government in exile caused "structural errors" in the repatriation scheme itself. In addition, in the Netherlands, liberation and repatriation coincided while the population in the western part of the country needed immediate relief. Due to these circumstances, the repatriation of Dutch nationals was chaotic. The result was that the reputation of the Dutch government and the Netherlands Red Cross (NRC) was questioned by those repatriated and their communities. Nevertheless, the majority of the Dutch displaced persons (DPs) were brought home by the end of September 1945, while an estimated 6,000 Dutch nationals were still in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The repatriation of Dutch nationals held in the Soviet Union was particularly problematic as a result of the absence of a repatriation agreement with the Soviet Union and poor diplomatic relations, intensified by the advance of the Cold War. Eventually, by the mid-1950s, repatriation was considered complete.

**Keywords:** Repatriation, World War II, Red Cross, displaced persons, Cold War, The Netherlands, Soviet Union.

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## 1. Introduction

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During the German occupation of the Netherlands, almost one million of the total population of less than nine million had fled their homes or had been

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evacuated within the country's borders. Moreover, an estimated 650,000 Dutch citizens were taken to the Third Reich, either as deported Jews (approximately 107,000); deported Roma and Sinti (246); political prisoners (approximately 29,000); prisoners of war (POWs; approximately 10,000); or forced laborers (approximately 500,000). Moreover, more than 20,000 men had joined the German military forces and were engaged in the struggle on the Eastern Front. In addition, 65,000 members of the Dutch National Socialist Party left the country in September 1944 when Allied forces approached the Dutch border. Although approximately 230,000 laborers returned during the occupation, and an estimated 30,000 national socialists returned before the general liberation, the fate of thousands of Dutch citizens was unknown when the war ended. Ultimately, the number of Dutch displaced persons (DPs) was approximately 300,000 (Bossenbroek 2001, 105-7). They were scattered throughout the former Third Reich, from occupied Germany and liberated France and Belgium to countries in Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. The majority – more than 90% – were forced laborers (Lagrou 2000, 87-8). With the cessation of hostilities, the priority was to bring them all home.

Within the broader picture of the refugee situation that emerged in Europe at the end of the war, Dutch DPs represent a small minority. Indeed, compared to the situation millions of Europeans faced after the collapse of the Third Reich, the position of the Dutch DPs was rather uncomplicated – most simply wanted to go home. However, this was in stark contrast with the millions of people who could not, or would not return home, and whose resettlement proved extremely problematic. Refugees fleeing new communist regimes and ethnic Germans expelled from Eastern European states and regions joined the already high numbers of DPs from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who resisted returning to their countries of origin. Many ended up in assembly centers and transition camps mainly in Germany and Austria – where some of them would remain for years – waiting or negotiating their resettlement in countries where often they were not particularly welcome.<sup>1</sup>

However, this situation does not apply to repatriates returning to liberated countries further west. For example, France and Belgium had been liberated in 1944 and thus had the opportunity to prepare for repatriation immediately after, if not even before, the German surrender. In addition, French and Belgian military forces collaborated with the Allied forces and were present in Germany – an advantage the Dutch did not share (Bossenbroek 2001, 109). As for the repatriation of Norwegian and Danish citizens, many former prisoners had been repatriated before the end of the war by the rescue operations organized by

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<sup>1</sup> Gatrell (2013) sums up and analyzes the broad scope of mass displacement issues in Europe both during and after the war (89-117), and the specific displacement problems encountered by Jewish survivors and refugees (118-24). Proudfoot (1957, 201-3, 239) gives a general oversight including (statistical) information on the Dutch repatriation.

Count Folke Bernadotte, the Vice-President of the Swedish Red Cross (Proudfoot 1957, 308-9). The majority of the remaining Danish and Norwegian DPs in Germany and Eastern Europe had been repatriated by the end of June 1945 (Danes) or the end of September 1945 (Norwegians; see Proudfoot 1957, 203-4).

This article focusses on the resettlement of Dutch DPs after the war, which was considered “unsystematic,” or “a structural error” by some Dutch officials shortly after the war (Bossenbroek 2001, 114, 143-5) and a failure by many repatriates and historians (de Jong 1988, 110-32; Lagrou 2000, 92, 96). The first subsection addresses the Dutch repatriation in general: the complicated planning of the repatriation by the government in exile; the ensuing chaotic preparation for the repatriation; the repatriation itself, including the role of the Netherlands Red Cross (NRC); and finally, the phase of tracing scattered Dutch citizens who remained in Eastern Europe after the general repatriation was concluded. The second subsection comprises a case study of the repatriation from the Soviet Union. This theme is of particular interest as it exemplifies the difficulties faced in the postwar period and how they were intensified by the onset of the Cold War. Although the Cold War influenced the situation for repatriates and DPs of other nationalities, the particular problems the Dutch faced were mainly caused by the failure to secure a repatriation agreement with the Soviet Union, and the ensuing diplomatic complications to which this oversight led.

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## 2. The Repatriation of Dutch DP's: Plans, Preparations, and Practices

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The Dutch government in exile started planning for repatriation at an early stage. The first sign of awareness of the future need for repatriation was a concept resolution signed by the Minister of Social Affairs, J. van den Tempel, on October 30, 1942. He was alerted by reports of the large numbers of forced laborers sent to Germany and advised the cabinet to appoint a commission to investigate the matter. Six months later, on May 1, 1943, the Hondelink commission was installed. In June that year, the commission produced an interim report proposing that a military organization should carry out the repatriation, as the process would take place in collaboration with the Allied occupation forces in Germany. However, in a contradictory move, the final Hondelink report in February 1944 proposed that a civilian agency was to organize the repatriation, although “practical reasons” might call for a temporary military intervention. The report stated that preparations for the repatriation of 586,000 people should be made and, in order to avoid any risk to Dutch public health, the border should be closed until the repatriates had undergone medical checks. Furthermore, quarantine measures were to be taken. No provisions were made

for the transportation of the sick, or for providing food and clothing to the hundreds of thousands of Dutch people outside the country – this task instead being left to international aid organizations (Beening 2002, 28-9).

The adjustments in the final Hondelink report were recommended by Van den Tempel. They reflect a controversy that had developed within the Dutch government concerning the nature of the repatriation scheme. The issue was whether the repatriation should be a military or a civilian operation. Van den Tempel, a social democrat, was in favor of a civilian agency conducting the operation, not least as he had ambitions for the role of the social democrats in the economic and social reconstruction of Dutch society after the war, and thus insisted that his ministry would carry out the repatriation (Beening 2002, 23-7). In preparation for the phase immediately after the liberation, the government founded the Military Authority in order to take over administrative responsibility in the Netherlands in the period between the liberation and the return of the government. Van den Tempel's opponents in the cabinet were in favor of the Military Authority to carry out the repatriation. It would only focus on the situation in the Netherlands itself. The assumption was that most Dutch citizens would return of their own accord or with the help of the Allies (Beening 2002, 28-30).

What was the effect of these opposing opinions and the ensuing political controversy within the government on the preparations for the repatriation? Based on recommendations in an interim report dated October 1943, Van den Tempel appointed G. F. Ferwerda, a former director of the Unilever Company, as head of the Repatriation Commission. On January 6, 1944, Ferwerda presented his plans. He estimated the number of repatriates to be 615,000. The ambition was to employ 6,700 members of staff and bring the Dutch repatriates home within three months after the liberation. A rigid bureaucratic registration system was part of the scheme, however, it did not include collaboration with Allied military forces in occupied Germany (Beening 2002, 30-3). While Ferwerda was working out his plans, the chief of the Military Authority, Major (later General) H. J. Kruls, presented his plan in December 1943. The plan assumed that between 200,000 and 700,000 people would return of their own accord in an unorganized repatriation. These repatriates would be collected in small reception centers on the Dutch side of the border, then led to larger centers for registration and medical checks, and then further on to hospitals, quarantine camps, or home (Bossenbroek 2001, 88). Thus, Dutch arrangements for repatriation resulted in two separate agencies without any systems in place for their collaboration: Ferwerda's civilian agency coordinating repatriation activities in the former Third Reich; and Kruls's military organization, operating within the Dutch borders.

On November 9, 1943, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was founded in Washington. Its G-5 (Civil Affairs) Division would take responsibility for DPs and refugees. The Netherlands was one

of the 44 nations that signed the agreement. Furthermore, in May 1944, the Dutch Ministers of Foreign Affairs and War signed the “Civil Affairs Agreement” with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). This meant that the Allied commander-in-chief of SHAEF was in charge of the civilian administration in the Netherlands during the military phase of the country’s liberation. The Military Authority under Kruls’s leadership was to collaborate with SHAEF. The Minister of War signed a second agreement with SHAEF in September 1944, passing the ultimate responsibility for refugees within the Dutch borders and DPs outside the Netherlands to SHAEF. SHAEF could delegate these tasks either to UNRRA or to the Dutch government in exile, who were to work according to SHAEF’s procedures. For this purpose, special liaison officers would be posted with the Allied forces in Germany. However, a formal resolution by the Dutch government, also signed in September 1944, agreed with Van den Tempel’s policy: the repatriation was to be carried out under the Minister of Social Affairs and the Minister of the Interior. This resolution did not include collaboration with SHAEF or UNRRA. By this time, Kruls had appointed liaison officers in the Military Authority. The result of the resolutions with the Allied agencies and the two Dutch repatriation schemes was organizational chaos. The military effort was confined to Dutch territory, while Ferwerda’s Repatriation Service, which was to collaborate with the Allied forces in the former Third Reich, was set up as a civilian agency. The deadlock between the two competing Dutch views on repatriation was “solved” by a compromise: Kruls’s liaison officers were appointed as repatriation officials in Ferwerda’s Repatriation Service (albeit without military status) and SHAEF was willing to accept civilian repatriation officials despite their non-military status (Bossenbroek 2001, 90-5).

At the commencement of the liberation of the southern part of the Netherlands in September 1944, the Military Authority started its repatriation activities directed by B. G. van Os van Delden. For the time being, he was stationed in Brussels. Ferwerda was not yet permitted to cross the English Channel because of his civilian status. He had to direct the repatriation of large numbers of Dutch DPs from liberated France and Belgium from London. By April 1945, he was still not properly equipped: he had four small trucks and two motor bikes at his disposal, and no ambulances. In May, Ferwerda’s repatriation officials – the initial number of 6,700 was reduced to 60 – were still hardly able to carry out their assignment. They did not have military status, and depended entirely on the willingness of Allied military staff to help out. SHAEF questioned their competence, as the Dutch officials lacked equipment, means of transportation, and adequate communication lines with Ferwerda’s office (Bossenbroek 2001, 90-5, 100-1, 109). By the end of May, the government decided to concentrate all repatriation activities – both inside and outside the Dutch border – under Van Os van Delden’s responsibility, and to dismiss Ferwerda. However, Ferwerda successfully challenged his dismissal, although his activities were

confined to areas in which SHAEF was not operational. Van Os van Delden took over repatriation activities in Germany and, with the consent of SHAEF, the repatriation officers were finally given military status (Bossenbroek 2001, 136-7).

## 2.1 The Repatriation of Dutch Citizens

The course of the liberation complicated matters considerably. While the southern part of the country was liberated, the northern part was still occupied. In particular, people in the western provinces yearned for liberation. On May 5, 1945, three days before the German capitulation, these areas were finally liberated. By this time, the Nazi camps had been liberated and France and Belgium had already taken up relief and repatriation activities. For the Dutch, liberation and repatriation coincided. However, Nazi atrocities in the remaining occupied part of the country increased considerably, and hunger and starvation struck the population. Chaos ensued, with general destruction, military inundations of areas near the frontlines, and increasing numbers of refugees and people roaming the countryside in search of food bringing Dutch society to a standstill. Hundreds of thousands of people required immediate medical aid and food (Hitchcock 2008, 98-129).

This situation had three practical effects on the repatriation process. First, the coinciding of liberation and repatriation meant that there was hardly any capacity to bring Dutch nationals home immediately after the German surrender. There had been plenty of time for planning (and arguing about) the repatriation, but there had been little time for practical preparations. Second, because of the destruction and chaos, Kruls had advised the Dutch government in exile and SHAEF to close the borders to repatriates until the situation had improved. The result was that early Dutch repatriates were confined to collection centers in France, Belgium, and border cities in the Netherlands until June 1, 1945, when transport to the western part of the country was once again permitted. Finally, there was a less conspicuous effect: the Military Authority, as well as the international and national relief agencies in the Netherlands, focused on the immediate needs in the country itself. Between September 1944 and the general liberation in May, the Military Authority, SHAEF, and international relief agencies in the liberated south joined their efforts to prepare emergency relief for the western part of the country (Grüter 2017, 261-4). The core focus was to address the hardship of the population there, while the needs of DPs seemed less acute. In addition, as stated above, one of the early considerations of the Military Authority was the “unorganized repatriation” from the former Third Reich. This focus caused a backlog in both practical preparations and the repatriation itself. While the liberation of France and Belgium before the end of 1944 enabled early preparations for the repatriation of their citizens, the Dutch lagged behind due to the poor condition the country faced after the late general

liberation and their dependency upon the Allied agencies. Moreover, the main focus of the Allies was to defeat the German forces, not to care for the DPs or to arrange their repatriation (Lagrou 2000, 99-103; Bossenbroek 2001, 109-10).

However, many forced laborers had already taken their chances during the increasing chaos and destruction in Germany and had crossed the eastern Dutch border before the end of the war. Red Cross branches and aid committees set up by the local population took care of them. The sick were taken to Red Cross emergency hospitals, while others tried to reach their homes with false identification documents provided by members of the underground resistance (Grüter 2017, 241-2). Despite this, most repatriates had to wait until the liberation of the Netherlands in May 1945 and many Dutch camp survivors saw their fellow survivors from other countries being repatriated, while they had to wait for aid and transportation. In some cases, French, Belgian, and Polish officials appeared in the liberated camps weeks before Dutch repatriation officials – if they ever came at all. As a result, frustrated and critical articles written by early repatriates or family members of those who had not yet returned began to appear in Dutch newspapers. Besides the main reproach – the failure to send parcels to Dutch internees during the war – another harsh criticism was that men and women who could have survived if only they had been repatriated in time, had died in the liberated camps due to lack of timely aid.<sup>2</sup> However, the Dutch historian Martin Bossenbroek (2001) suggests that making a causal link between late Dutch repatriation activities and the death of Dutch concentration camp prisoners after the liberation is too simplistic. At Bergen Belsen, for example, many survivors died because of the rich food given to them after British forces liberated the camp, while in other examples, such as Buchenwald and Dachau, the condition of 40 and 70 survivors respectively was so poor that it was impossible to transport them. A number of these survivors succumbed while receiving medical care in the liberated camps (Bossenbroek 2001, 112-4).

Despite these complex circumstances, according to Proudfoot (1957), SHAEF managed to repatriate over 325,000 DPs claiming to be Dutch nationals between May and the end of September 1945, leaving only 5,902 Dutch nationals still in need of repatriation. At the same time, an estimated 30,000 survivors returned of their own accord (Proudfoot 1957, 201-3, 239). They returned on foot, with “borrowed” bicycles, or by hitching rides on freight trains. Additionally, the International Red Cross, national Red Cross societies, and the consulates of other nationalities also assisted Dutch DPs. Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef (2006) provides an account of her own repatriation that is exemplary of the problems many DPs encountered. She and her fellow Jewish survivors of the Libau labor camp reached Prague of their own accord and with

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Koos Vorrink and Ed Hoornik, former political prisoners (see Bossenbroek 2001, 66-8, 107).

help of individuals. In Prague, a Czech partisan took them to a relief center, however, their stay was only temporary. As they roamed the city, looking for food and shelter, they met two former Dutch POWs, who told them they would soon be picked up by a Dutch repatriation delegation. However, Dutch repatriation officials did not appear, nor did the NRC. The Swedish and Belgian consulates provided them with identification documents and organized a train to Pilsen, where the Russians handed them over to the Americans. After spending several nights at the train station, American Army trucks picked them up and transported them to Bamberg. Another week of waiting ended with their transportation on a freight train to the Netherlands. When the train finally arrived at the station in Maastricht, their frustrations came to a head when Red Cross volunteers handed out coffee to the repatriates on the train. As if they had agreed upon this beforehand, they simultaneously grabbed the cups and threw the coffee into the faces of the Red Cross women. “This was our sweet revenge. You must understand that we returned wild, without sense of norms and reality,” Ronnie stated in a lecture for a delegation of the NRC board on September 19, 2005.<sup>3</sup> Their feelings of abandonment were focused on the NRC, as was the case for many survivors. Their expectations had been that at least the NRC would come to their aid.

## 2.2 The NRC’s Role in the Repatriation

So, what was the role of the NRC? Its ambitions were the consequence of the humanitarian role of the organization. Two years into the occupation – towards the end of 1942, when the deportation of the Jewish population had been going on for five months – the Secretary General of the NRC, H. K. Offerhaus, became aware of the need for a future repatriation mission. He took a striking and entirely private initiative and requested his family doctor, A. Polak Daniëls, to prepare for a relief expedition to the Dutch Jews, which was to be sent to the east as soon as the Nazis were defeated. Dr. Daniëls sent a letter to the Dutch envoy in Switzerland, requesting him to forward the letter to the government in exile in London. Offerhaus also set up a committee that secretly prepared a scheme for the repatriation of all Dutch citizens being held in the Third Reich. Contacts in the underground sent the plans to London. In the early months of 1945, also in strict secrecy, the board of the NRC made further plans for the repatriation. The plans focused mainly on the reception of repatriates and included setting up emergency hospitals, reception camps, and quarantine facilities. Yet despite their efforts, neither the NRC committee nor Polak Daniëls received a reply, and it was not until after the liberation that it became clear that the Dutch government had not been interested in the plans drawn up by the NRC. Days before the general liberation, representatives of the government

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<sup>3</sup> An abridged version of the lecture was published in the *Auschwitz Bulletin* (2006).

appointed a new board (Grüter 2017, 386-7). This new board had to deal with the reality that neither the government nor the Allied agencies had involved the NRC in their plans. It took some time and pressure by the NRC and former resistance workers to finally realize NRC participation (Grüter 2017, 305-6, 414-6).

Generally speaking, the NRC became involved in three areas. First, its activities during the occupation and its preparation for the reception of repatriates during the final months of the war evolved into giving aid in emergency hospitals and reception camps on the Dutch-German border. In addition, local NRC branches sent several ambulance teams to Germany, however, they were not registered with either the Military Authority or SHAEF. Despite this, with the consent of the Military Authority, the NRC set up a “Red Cross Camp” in the former *Polizeiliches Durchgangslager Amersfoort* (Police Transit Camp Amersfoort), mainly for returning forced laborers. This was a natural development, as the German camp commander had handed over the camp to the NRC when Canadian troops approached. NRC volunteers and staff also worked in other reception camps in the border regions. When the official repatriation was still in a state of deadlock immediately after the liberation, several individuals appealed to the NRC to fetch survivors from Buchenwald and Dachau. The NRC sent twelve ambulances to repatriate those survivors whose medical condition allowed transportation (Bossenbroek 2001, 412).

The second area in which the NRC participated was in the repatriation from Germany – the assignment given to Van Os van Delden by the Military Authority. NRC assistance with his repatriation scheme was entirely initiated by members of the new board. They had close contacts with the *Grote Adviescommissie der Illegaliteit* (GAC; Dutch National Resistance Council). Dissatisfaction about the progress of the repatriation had spread across the country, and both returned survivors and the families of missing political prisoners were highly critical of the government and the NRC. In a letter to the Military Authority, the board stated that it regretted that it was not involved in the repatriation scheme and offered its assistance.<sup>4</sup> No reply came, however, following some pressure, Van Os van Delden decided to accept the offer. The next step was a formal agreement with the Allied authorities. On July 14, 1945, Van Os van Delden and a joint NRC-GAC delegation met in Frankfurt and signed an agreement with officials of UNRRA, which by this time had taken over repatriation activities from SHAEF. The NRC was the only private Dutch organization permitted to work in Germany and was now permitted to transport sick repatriates, and send tracing teams to Germany and Austria. The agreement enabled the NRC to set up offices in the Soviet zone in Berlin, Hamburg, Burgsteinfurt, Iserlohn, and Vienna, from where it sent tracing teams to the

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<sup>4</sup> Letter by NRC board to the Military Agency, May 21, 1945, 2.05.87/1230, National Archives, The Hague.

surrounding areas. These teams remained active until April 1949 (Beening 2002, 55; Grüter 2017, 421).

The third area of activity concerned the NRC's participation in Ferwerda's scheme – now confined to non-enemy countries. After Ferwerda had moved his office to The Hague, he assigned the task of transporting sick repatriates back to the Netherlands to the NRC. The board sent doctors and ambulance teams to Belgium and France, while NRC delegates visited the Scandinavian countries and repatriated Dutch citizens from Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.<sup>5</sup> The NRC also participated in a mission to Prague, led by G. A. Boon, a lawyer and former member of parliament. It located a total of 1,300 survivors from the Theresienstadt concentration camp in the cities of Bamberg, Pilsen, and Prague, and organized their return by train. In total, 675 children, sick, and elderly people were flown to the city of Eindhoven in the south of the Netherlands by the American Air Force. Boon and his staff remained active during the following months, roaming Central and Eastern Europe in search of people who had stayed behind. They managed to repatriate another 500 people (Bossenbroek 2001, 124-5).

Another mission was led by Dr. W. J. A. Willems, who had been a press officer at the Dutch delegation in Stockholm during the final phase of the war. He set up a Swedish-Dutch repatriation mission stationed in Warsaw from November 1945, which remained active for three years. At the suggestion of the Polish Red Cross, Willems was appointed an NRC delegate. This was of vital importance for the success of the mission, as it helped to avoid political problems and to secure the assistance of the Polish Red Cross (Leenders 1988, 36-8, 58). The ultimate result was the repatriation of 400 to 450 people, most of whom were considered “difficult cases” by the Dutch government: former forced laborers who had ended up in Eastern Europe; men who had volunteered in the German forces; and men who had married a German or Polish wife (Leenders 1988, 60; Bossenbroek 2001, 124).

Despite the ambitions of the NRC, it became clear that it was not prepared for this task and they received many complaints, such as those noted by Van Os van Delden. He had joined an NRC team on their journey to the French zone in August, and sent a long list of shortcomings to the NRC board: the departure was poorly organized; he personally had to pay for fuel; the identification documents were not in order; the uniforms and insignia of the team members were diverse; and their footwear was inadequate. The team resembled a “FFI [*Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*; French resistance in the later stages of the war] team of bandits.”<sup>6</sup> An inspection mission conducted by the NRC and the GAC three

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<sup>5</sup> Heusdens (n.d., 341-2, 347); list of NRC ambulance teams active in 1945, with destinations, dates, numbers of vehicles, and numbers of patients (Heusdens n.d. 347).

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Van Os van Delden to NRC Secretary General, August 14, 1945, 184/64, NIOD, Amsterdam.

months later still noted shortcomings, which were confirmed by team members themselves. One of them wrote that he felt the team resembled “a run-down bunch of beggars.”<sup>7</sup> However, not all shortcomings can be attributed to the NRC: the organization and communication by UNRRA and the British Search Bureau were chaotic, although the resultant necessary improvisation sometimes yielded good results (Wijnen 1967, 6-10; Grüter 2017, 422-3).

### 2.3 Dutch Endeavors Tracing Missing Persons

By the time Boon’s mission had started, the Dutch government considered the “mass repatriation” closed. Most surviving Dutch citizens had returned, and only a small number of people remained scattered in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Ferwerda’s Repatriation Service was closed down in October 1945 and a special Repatriation Unit in the Ministry of Social Affairs took over the remaining work. Its task was to trace and repatriate any remaining Dutch DPs and to collect information on the fate of missing persons and the burial locations of the deceased.

The Information Bureau of the NRC played a key role collecting and assessing this information. The bureau had been activated when the war started in 1939, on the basis of the 1929 Geneva Convention. Its main assignment was to collect information concerning the fate and whereabouts of soldiers and POWs of all nationalities on Dutch territory. During the occupation, it expanded its work for the benefit of civilians. To this end, it established the Correspondence Bureau and other sections to enable the exchange of Red Cross messages with family and friends outside the Netherlands, and the Dutch East Indies in particular (Grüter 2017, 88).

The main assignment of the Information Bureau after the liberation was to discover the fate of the missing and to provide this information to next of kin and government agencies. This meant a great expansion of its work, which was financed by the Ministry of Social Affairs.<sup>8</sup> In September 1945, it became the National Tracing Service. In this capacity it received the exclusive right – as far as Dutch victims and survivors were concerned – to collaborate with the Central Tracing Bureau (later the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen) and UNRRA, and from 1947 onward also with the International Refugee Organization. The NRC missions worked closely with the Information Bureau,

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<sup>7</sup> Letters by team member W. Cornelis, October 1945, 244/1702, NIOD, Amsterdam; Report on tour along NRC medical teams in Northern Germany, November 1945, 184/6, NIOD, Amsterdam.

<sup>8</sup> Statistics demonstrate the significance and workload of the bureau: incoming mail reached a peak in September 1945, when it received 27,209 postal items in a single week. In May and June 1946, the staff numbered 396 employees. By the end of 1947, the number had dropped to 174 (see van der Vosse 1948, 106, 228).

exchanging documents and other information they uncovered regarding the fate of the missing (Grüter 2017, 420-1, 424-8).

Despite the work of the NRC and the good intentions of the other parties involved, many problems arose. The Ministry of Social Affairs questioned the competence of the NRC and criticized it for its poor organization and disappointing results. In July 1947, the Ministry of Social Affairs decided to establish a special tracing mission – the so-called “*Missie tot Opsporing van vermiste personen uit de bezettingstijd*” (MtO; mission tracing persons who had gone missing during the occupation) – under its own supervision. The Ministries of Foreign Affairs, War, and Finance were involved, as were representatives of the NRC, the Information Bureau, and the Association of Ex-Political Prisoners. This decision resulted in a huge conflict between the NRC board and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Although initially the NRC had supported the reorganization, they disagreed with the division of the new roles, believing that the responsibility for the detection of missing persons should have been delegated to them. According to the NRC, it was the most suitable agency to gather information because of its cooperation with the international network of the Red Cross. The NRC board also accused the Ministry of Social Affairs of lacking a sense of reality about the poor working conditions the NRC staff had to cope with in the occupied zones, as they lacked proper means of transportation and office equipment. Their work was further impeded by having to comply with the rules of the Allied authorities, and budget cuts by the Ministry of Social Affairs. To prove their point, the NRC board wrote up a report with forty annexes about the complicated work of the NRC and Information Bureau and the good results it had yet achieved. The impasse ended following a written report from an impartial lawyer appointed by the Ministry of Social Affairs, which stated that its objections to the NRC were justified. The NRC formally ended its participation in the MtO in April 1948.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the criticisms of the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Information Bureau played a key role in establishing the fate of those who had not returned.<sup>10</sup> It also assisted a special committee appointed by the Ministry of Justice to provide death certificates for those who remained missing. This committee was appointed after special legislation was passed in 1949. The Dutch government aimed to establish the date and location of death – something that required a major commitment from the Information Bureau staff. Those who remained

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<sup>9</sup> NRC Report, May 10, 1948, General Documentation 35/2, Archive NRC, The Hague; G. W. ter Pelkwijk, Report: “Moelijkheden bij de Reorganisatie van de Opsporing van Vermisten in Duitsland,” “Opsporingswerkzaamheden” [Tracing activities], box 9, Archive NRC, The Hague.

<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1953, the Information Bureau had registered approximately 160,000 deaths of Dutch citizens due to the war in Europe, of whom more than 100,000 were Jewish. The fate of 16,360 people remained unclear (van de Vosse 1954, 95-6).

missing were pronounced dead and were officially included in the official Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (van der Vosse 1954, 72-3, 85).

Over subsequent decades, the Information Bureau continued its work, albeit on a much smaller scale. In particular, the fate of missing Dutch citizens in the Soviet Union remained unclear. The DPs who ended up there during the war and its chaotic aftermath became victims of the Cold War. This issue stands out in the history of Dutch repatriation because of the specific political problems that arose between the Dutch government and the Soviet authorities, as explored in the proceeding subsection.

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### 3. Bilateral Repatriation between the Netherlands and the Soviet Union

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Negotiations between the Netherlands and the Soviet Union over the repatriation of their citizens were extremely problematic. Stalin wanted the two million Russians living in the western occupation zones sent back to the Soviet Union – even if that meant they were to be repatriated against their will. This concerned not only POWs and forced laborers, but also Russian women who had married DPs from the West, and Russian soldiers and prisoners who had voluntarily joined the German forces. Their presence in the capitalist West was, in Stalin's view, an ideological blot that had to be erased as quickly as possible. These displaced Russian citizens had to return, either to face punishment or, if they were lucky, to be brought back in line with communist ideology. To achieve his goal, Stalin used the Dutch DPs held within the Russian sphere of influence as commodities with which to barter (Bossenbroek 2001, 119). However, the Dutch government refused to give in to this demand, causing a political tug of war with the Soviet Union over bilateral repatriation. How did the Dutch government deal with this issue and what did this mean for Dutch citizens in the Soviet Union and Soviet zone?

#### 3.1 Displaced Dutch Citizens in the Soviet Union and Soviet Zone

During the early phase of planning the repatriation, the government in exile was concerned about the fate of Dutch citizens who had ended up in the Soviet Union. In September 1943, the Dutch ambassador, Casper van Breugel Douglas, arrived in Moscow and attempted to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union on the issue of repatriation. In the beginning of 1944, he requested permission for a collaborative Red Cross and repatriation mission on Russian territory. His goal for this mission was to find out the number of Dutch civilians living on Russian soil, and to uncover how many of them had collaborated with the Germans. The Russian authorities replied three months later, informing him that there were only 15 Dutch citizens on their territories. This was an

enormous difference compared with the 20,000 to 30,000 the ambassador expected to find (Postma 2003, 170).

The exact number of Dutch DPs in the Soviet Union and Soviet zone remained unclear after the liberation. Until mid-1948, the Dutch government suspected that approximately 1,600-1,700 Dutch nationals were living behind Soviet lines. These estimations were based on information provided by the Information Bureau. After three years of investigation, this number was adjusted, and set at closer to 250. However, according to rumors, thousands of Dutch people were held in secret. By the next year, in 1950, the estimated number of Dutch nationals remaining in the Soviet Union and the Soviet zone had grown closer to 400 (de Groot 2007, 24).

We can divide the Dutch people who were being held in the Soviet Union into four groups: members of the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging (NSB; National Socialist Party); Jews, who had been deported to Eastern Europe; forced laborers; and men who joined the Waffen-SS. Among these, Waffen-SS members were also men who became POWs with the Red Army, at the end of April 1945. In April 1944, the Dutch Minister of Social Affairs, Van den Tempel, believed that the Soviet government would look favorably upon the early departure of displaced Dutch citizens, because it meant that Moscow would no longer be responsible for their welfare. As such, the large number of Dutch people being held in the Soviet Union was reason enough to sign a repatriation agreement. However, by the end of 1944, departures had still not begun and the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vyacheslav Molotov, was in no hurry to discuss a repatriation agreement.

### 3.2 Dutch Failure to Achieve a Repatriation Agreement with the Soviet Union

Why did Molotov not respond to the efforts of the Dutch ambassador to reach an agreement? Bossenbroek (2001) summarizes the more commonly stated reasons for the failure of reaching an agreement: Russia's dissatisfaction with the Netherlands over their late recognition of the Soviet regime (1942); Dutch colonial presence in the Indonesian archipelago; the absence of communists in the Dutch government; and the relatively large number of Dutchmen who had joined the Waffen-SS. In addition, he states that, according to popular literature, the absence of a repatriation agreement and inactive diplomacy between the Dutch and the Russian governments meant that there were no, or only very late, Dutch repatriation missions in the Soviet Union and Soviet zone (Bossenbroek 2001, 119).

However, Bossenbroek (2001) argues that the Soviet Union had a more opportunistic reason for neglecting the Dutch attempts to reach a repatriation agreement: the Soviet Union did not need a separate agreement with the Netherlands, because the country was under Allied control during this period. As

stated above, Dutch and Allied authorities had agreed that the Netherlands would remain under Allied control – administered by SHAEF and the Military Authority during the military phase of the liberation. During this period (which ended in July 1945) the Russians consulted with the British and the Americans, but *not* with the Dutch government (Bossenbroek 2001, 120). This resulted in the repatriation agreements of Yalta and Halle. At the Conference of Yalta in February 1945, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union agreed upon the principle of repatriating all respective displaced citizens on the stately basis of reciprocity – without offering them free choice (Tolstoy 1977, 19-20).

Another reason the Soviet Union was in no hurry to reach a separate repatriation agreement with the Dutch was that van Os van Delden had already begun repatriating Soviet citizens from the liberated southern part of the Netherlands in November 1944 on behalf of the Military Authority – without informing the Dutch government in London or Ambassador Van Breugel Douglas. Between November 1944 and December 1945, as many as 9,500 Soviet citizens and 4,600 Soviet soldiers were repatriated from the Netherlands (Postma 2003, 193). If Van Breugel Douglas had been informed, he could have potentially used this in his negotiations with Molotov, thus increasing the pressure on the Russians to come to a repatriation agreement.

Despite the problems, the Dutch government was not completely dissatisfied with the repatriation from the Soviet Union during this period. Between March and June 1945, approximately 1,200 displaced Dutch civilians, refugees, Waffen-SS members, and POWs traveled from the harbor of Odessa in Ukraine to the Netherlands with the assistance of the British. After the German capitulation, an exchange of displaced Western and Russian citizens took place along the demarcation line in Central Germany. Thanks to the efforts of the missions led by Boon and Willems, small groups of Dutch DPs were regularly returned from the Russian zone (Bossenbroek 2001, 124-5).

Many of these returning Dutchmen took their Russian wives with them to the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> However, the Soviet Union wanted *all* of its citizens returned, including these women, so it established a military Soviet repatriation mission in the Netherlands as part of SHAEF. The Russian repatriation officers exerted pressure on Russians living in the Netherlands who did not want to return to the Soviet zone by intimidating them, using violence, and even kidnapping people (Burgers 2004, 130; van der Linden 2013 13). These Russian activities in the Netherlands aroused increasing public outrage, which was reflected in Dutch politics. By this time the Dutch government had taken over SHAEF's responsibilities and was completely autonomous. In response to public outrage, the government progressively restricted the repatriation offic-

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<sup>11</sup> The historian Postma (2003, 174) estimated their number between 4,000 and 5,000.

ers' freedom of movement. The silent pragmatism of Van Os van Delden, which so perfectly fitted the Russian repatriation strategy of reciprocity, gradually disappeared from Dutch policy. Instead, Russian citizens living in the Netherlands were only repatriated on a voluntary basis. Naturally, this angered the Russian government (Bossenbroek 2001, 126). The return of displaced Dutch citizens from the Soviet Union ended abruptly in May 1946. The Soviet government claimed it had arranged for the repatriation of 35,681 Dutch DPs up to this point, but now it ceased its cooperation.<sup>12</sup> An explanation followed a few weeks later in which it was stated that, according to an *aide-memoire*, The Hague had failed to cooperate in the repatriation of Russian citizens and thus, in response, the Soviet Union had decided to suspend the repatriation of Dutch citizens (Postma 2003, 360).

The arrival of 350 Mennonites from Ukraine in the Netherlands – awaiting emigration to Canada – in July 1946 worsened the diplomatic relationship between the Netherlands and the Soviet Union. The NRC expressed concern that this group of women and orphans had minimal prospects in the Soviet Union. The Dutch government shared this concern, and therefore approved of the temporary presence of the Mennonites in the Netherlands. The Russian ambassador to The Hague was furious, informing Moscow that the Dutch government was sabotaging the repatriation of Soviet nationals (Postma 2003, 360).

### 3.3 Dutch POWs in Soviet Gulags

What exactly were the circumstances in which these missing persons (mostly POWs who had joined the Waffen-SS during the war) were living? Correspondence between Dutch officials regarding repatriation, held in the archives of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shows that there was an enormous lack of information on Dutch DPs, and that this caused tremendous frustration among the officials involved.<sup>13</sup> The Dutch authorities were completely in the dark about the number of Dutch citizens being held in the Soviet Union and the wider Soviet zone, because the Russian authorities refused to release information on their Dutch hostages.<sup>14</sup> One of the reasons for the creation of the MtO was to improve this situation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Exchange of notes in Moscow and The Hague on the repatriation of Dutch citizens from the Soviet Union and Soviet citizens from the Netherlands, 2.05.111/165, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>13</sup> Exchange of notes in Moscow and The Hague on the repatriation of Dutch citizens from the Soviet Union and Soviet citizens from the Netherlands, 2.05.111/164, 165, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>14</sup> Van Bosch Drakestein to Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Hague, August 2, 1946, 2.15.43/164, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>15</sup> Monthly report no. 1, MtO, August 14, 1947, 2.15.43/282, National Archive The Hague.

Since Dutch repatriation officers were now no longer allowed behind Soviet lines, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to gather as much information as possible from Western Europeans returning from the Soviet Gulags. In addition to information on Dutch POWs still residing in Russia, these investigations also yielded information on those who had perished during their internment. All of the parties within the MtO exchanged this information in order to gain a better overview of the situation of the Dutch DPs (Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, *eindverslag* 1952). For example, in May 1945, the German military Officer Heinz Ebner was made a POW in Austria, where he was held in several Russian camps. When Ebner was released in 1950, he was repatriated via Brussels, where an official of the Dutch embassy questioned him about the number of Dutch citizens in the Soviet camps and their living conditions. The first camp in which Ebner stayed was in Potsdam, about 600 kilometers south of Moscow. There were about 150 Dutchmen being held in this camp, most of them former members of the *Waffen-SS*. According to Ebner and reports by repatriated Dutch prisoners, these displaced Dutch citizens were transferred to Kharkov in January 1947, and then to Kiev in May 1949. During Ebner's internment there, some Dutch POWs were sentenced to 10-20 years of forced labor. They were exiled to Siberia in December 1949 because they had complained about their treatment, although their formal charges related only to their activities during the war. The head of the MtO forwarded this information to the Information Bureau in The Hague.<sup>16</sup> Former POWs from Belgium also mentioned these trials after their release. They explained that only prisoners who for some reason stood out were subjected to this procedure. Following their conviction, they were transferred to other camps as civilian forced laborers, together with Russian POWs.<sup>17</sup> According to the NRC, many of the Dutch citizens in the camp at Kiev were forced to work as bricklayers, laboring ten to twelve hours a day. Their diet was limited, consisting of 600 grams of bread daily, half a liter of thin soup, 250 grams of oats at noon, and half a liter of soup in the evening. The treatment of the prisoners was dependent on the temperament of the guards, but in general physical violence was not common.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.4 Dutch Efforts to End the Impasse

Despite the terrible circumstances that the Dutch DPs faced in the Russian camps, the Dutch government never gave in to the Russian government's re-

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<sup>16</sup> Beelaerts van Blokland to minister of Foreign Affairs Stikker about the interned Dutchmen in Russia. Questioning was done by Mr. Zijlmans of the Dutch embassy in Brussels. April 17 1950, Archive NRC/5.

<sup>17</sup> Report on the repatriation of Soviet citizens, as well as reciprocity of Dutch people living in the Soviet Union, 1950, 2.05.111/165, National Archives, The Hague.

<sup>18</sup> Beelaerts van Blokland to Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs Stikker about the interned Dutchmen in Russia, April 17, 1950, Archive NRC/5.

quest for the forced repatriation of its own citizens. However, during the spring of 1947, the Dutch government, diplomats, and officials did attempt to come up with a solution to the impasse. In April 1947, the new Dutch ambassador to Moscow, Tony Lovink, proposed a breakthrough plan to the Soviet diplomat, Yakov Malik. Lovink explained to Malik that the Dutch government was willing to inform all Soviet citizens living in the Netherlands of the Soviet government's wishes regarding repatriation. He suggested that the Netherlands could enable meetings between these Russian citizens and Russian repatriation officials, and that the Dutch government could allow Russians to travel freely to the Russian embassy in The Hague and to the Soviet Union. He did not, however, capitulate to the Russian desire for the involuntary repatriation of Russian citizens. He stated that the Dutch government hoped that the Russians would accept these terms and measures, and that repatriation based on the principle of reciprocity would resume.<sup>19</sup> In June of that year, the Dutch government made Lovink's proposal official.<sup>20</sup>

To the Dutch government's great disappointment, the Russian response to this proposal was a resounding "*njet*" (no). The Soviet Union insisted upon the return of all Soviet citizens. As a result, the atmosphere concerning repatriation became even more strained and the tension between the two countries increased. This tension was reflected in the Russian media, with Soviet politicians and diplomats criticizing the Dutch for hindering Soviet repatriation and accusing the Dutch government of incarcerating Soviet citizens, preventing their repatriation, and spreading anti-Soviet propaganda among Russians in the Netherlands.<sup>21</sup> Following Lovink's proposal, such accusations increased.

Until June 1948, there was an impasse – Lovink's proposal had failed, and neither side wanted to give in. Then the Soviet ambassador to The Hague, Vasili Valkov, suddenly promised to accept the proposal. Valkov stated that the Soviet government would now follow the principle of reciprocity, and that it would consent to the return of Dutch DPs. The Russian promise felt like a victory for the Dutch, who now had to begin executing their own promises to fully cooperate with the repatriation of Soviet citizens. However, in August 1948, a difference of opinion about the execution of the Dutch measures once again caused serious difficulties between the Russians and the Dutch.<sup>22</sup>

The increasing distrust between East and West during the Cold War was reflected in these Dutch-Soviet negotiations about repatriation. According to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch government was not making

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<sup>19</sup> Aide memoire Lovink, April 10, 1947, 2.05.111/ 164, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>20</sup> Verbal communication from Dutch embassy Moscow to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Moscow, June 21, 1947, 2.05.111/164, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Dutch embassy Moscow to Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Hague, July 11, 1946, 2.05.111/164, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Hague to temporary agent in Moscow, A. Janzen, August 25, 1948, 2.05.111/197, National Archive The Hague.

enough effort to repatriate Soviet citizens. In response, the Soviet Union wanted to stall their own activities repatriating Dutch citizens until the Dutch made a more concerted effort.<sup>23</sup> The Dutch interpretation of the principle of reciprocity was that repatriation and preparations by both parties would run parallel. So, the Dutch responded by temporarily postponing the publication of the Russian government's call to all Soviet citizens in the Netherlands to return home. They demanded a written explanation from the Kremlin about Russian arrangements for the repatriation of Dutch citizens before taking any action, however, the written explanation never came (Postma 2003, 313-4).

From August 1948 to July 1949, 14 Soviet citizens were repatriated with Dutch cooperation. In the same period, only two Dutch citizens were returned, illustrating the lack of any numerical reciprocity. The Russian authorities assumed (based on false information they had received from Ambassador Valkov) that at least 2,000 Russians were still present in the Netherlands. Although the Dutch government did publish the Russian call to all Soviet citizens in Dutch newspapers, the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs felt that the Netherlands had not fulfilled its obligation to cooperate in the Russian repatriation. In 1948, a new Dutch ambassador, Philip Christiaan Visser, was appointed to Moscow. Visser was convinced that the Russians would comply, and that the repatriation of Dutch citizens would begin shortly. He based this belief on discussions he had with high-ranking individuals within the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, due to a number of other incidents, Visser's credibility was already in question, and several Dutch officials believed that "the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs [had] simply fooled Mr. Visser" (Postma 2003, 314).

Because the Dutch government had no faith in the Russian promise to repatriate Dutch citizens, it considered revoking the measures they had already taken to encourage the repatriation of Soviet citizens. However, this would only give the Russians a stronger argument against returning Dutch DPs. The Dutch government did not know how to pursue a decisive policy without losing face. The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dirk Stikker, decided to write a fiercely worded letter to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which he accused the Soviet ambassador, Valkov, of incorrect reporting. The 2,000 Soviet citizens who, according to Valkov, were still living in the Netherlands had already been repatriated, and the remaining Russians could only repatriate voluntarily. Thus, he stated, the role of the Netherlands in the Russian repatriation was complete.<sup>24</sup> A little over a month later, the head of the West European department of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Vinogradov, informed the

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<sup>23</sup> Exchange of notes in Moscow and The Hague on the repatriation of Dutch from the Soviet Union and Soviet citizens from the Netherlands, 2.05.111/165, National Archive The Hague.

<sup>24</sup> Nota Dutch embassy Moscow to Ministry of Foreign Affairs Soviet Union, October 28, 1949, 2.05.111/197, National Archive The Hague.

Dutch government that Valkov had indeed misinformed the Russian authorities, and he was subsequently released from office. Although Vinogradov emphasized that the Soviet government did not require Soviet citizens to be returned against their will, the Dutch DPs were still not returned.<sup>25</sup>

By the summer of 1950, the Dutch government estimated that the number of Dutch citizens remaining in the Soviet Union was approximately 430. In September of that year, the new Dutch ambassador to Moscow, F. C. A. van Pallandt, had a conversation with the First Deputy Minister of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Andrej Gromyko, hoping he could revitalize the repatriation issue. However, much to his disappointment, his initiative bore no fruit, and he returned from the negotiation discouraged. In a memorandum dated October 12, 1950, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs compiled a report of all the cooperative efforts that had been made with regard to the Soviet repatriation effort. Although the memorandum was little more than a reiteration of all the notes, letters, and demarches that had been sent to the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs between 1945 and 1950, it proved decisive, restarting the repatriation of displaced Dutch citizens (Postma 2003, 317). Between the winter of 1950 and the summer of 1952, approximately 250 citizens left the Soviet Union. This still left dozens of Dutch people in camps and prisons who had been convicted by the Soviet Union for crimes committed during the war. The Soviet authorities refused repeated requests from the Dutch embassy in Moscow to give these prisoners the opportunity to contact the embassy or their families back in the Netherlands. It took until 1957 before (almost) all Dutch citizens held by the Soviet Union had returned (Postma 2003, 259). The exact reasoning behind their release remains unclear. One possibility is that the Russians simply felt that they had extracted as many Russian citizens from the Dutch government as possible, as there had been no progress during the last four years, and as such, it was thus no longer beneficial to keep the Dutch citizens imprisoned.

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#### 4. Conclusion

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Despite the early awareness of the future responsibility to bring home Dutch citizens from the defeated Third Reich, the planning, preparation, and practices of the repatriation by the Dutch government in exile proved inadequate. Even though eventually, this task was left largely to SHAEF and UNRRA, this does not alter the fact that the controversy within the government was a primary contributory factor that led to the chaotic repatriation. The compromises reached between the two repatriation policies were simply unrealistic. Other

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<sup>25</sup> Telegram Ambassador Visser to Ministry of Foreign Affairs The Hague, December 28, 1949, 2.05.111/197, National Archive The Hague.

factors included the coincidence of the general liberation of the Netherlands and the repatriation, and the overall chaotic situation during the collapse of the Third Reich. The repatriation activities of SHAEF and UNRRA were of secondary importance to the defeat of the German forces. As for the NRC, its ambitions were larger than the actual resources it had at its disposal – or that were made available to it. In addition, the NRC was heavily involved in relief activities for the western part of the country, which was given priority. However, even when this phase was over, the NRC was still not always able to provide the tracing missions it oversaw with either the necessary equipment or the trained staff required. It is clear that the NRC's ambitions did not fit the reality of the repatriation conditions. In addition, the Dutch government did little to nothing to lend support to the NRC's repatriation efforts, and even thwarted them with financial cutbacks. The result was disappointment among early repatriates and the families of those who stayed behind. The criticism that swept the country in the early months following the liberation remains to this day – especially among the Jewish community and former resistance workers and their children and grandchildren (Grüter 2010, 402, 409–10).

As for the repatriation from the Soviet Union, this episode stands out. Many DPs were able to return in the early months after the collapse of the Third Reich, but as time went on and the Cold War intensified, repatriation became a political issue. The Dutch government did not reach a repatriation agreement with the Soviet Union, nor did it give in to the Soviet demand to repatriate Soviet citizens on Dutch territory against their will. This only served to further intensify the controversy between the Dutch and the Soviet governments. Eventually the matter subsided, and most of the surviving Dutch DPs had returned by the mid-1950s, by which time the repatriation of Dutch DPs was considered closed.

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