

Non-revolutionary Dutch fascism redefines generic fascism

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Abstract

This article is largely based on my doctoral dissertation that describes the rise, peak and fall of organized fascism in The Netherlands in the years 1923-1945.¹ The research questions of the book are: What was the nature of Dutch fascism? What forms did it take? To what extent did it differ from generic fascism? In the study the various forms of Dutch fascism are presented on the basis of an overview of relevant figures and a chronological summary of almost all fascist political parties active from 1923 to 1945, whereby the years from 1918-1923 are also examined as a 'run-up period'. The conclusion to the third research question is that Dutch fascism differs fundamentally only in terms of the revolution component from generic fascism. The case of Dutch fascism shows that political parties or movements can be fascist without being revolutionary. Dutch fascism proves to differ substantially from the chosen operational definition of fascism on one of the four criteria, meaning that Dutch fascism as a whole differs from generic fascism. Griffin's definition therefore needs to be corrected, as not all of its components are equal. Consequently, I propose modifying the definition as follows: *Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of sometimes revolutionary populist ultra-nationalism.*

1. W.S. Huberts, *In de ban van een beter verleden: het Nederlandse fascisme 1923-1945* [Under the spell of a better past: Dutch fascism 1923-1945] (PhD diss., University of Groningen 2017).

Introduction

On October 28, 1922 Mussolini rose to power, thus beginning the era of fascism. Within three months, on January 22, 1923 the first Dutch fascist political party was formed; the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists]. Just over twenty-two years later the last remaining Dutch fascist party, the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement], went down during the apocalyptic ending of World War II. In that period of twenty-two years over 60 fascist political parties originated, blossomed and perished in The Netherlands. A striking difference with the developments in Italy, Germany and other European countries with a fascist past. In no other European country so many fascist parties existed during the fascist era. But that is not the only noticeable difference between The Netherlands and the rest of Europe. Based upon these differences I propose in this article a modification of the definition of generic fascism, as put forward by Roger Griffin: *Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetical form of populist ultra-nationalism.*²

Chronology of Dutch fascism

Five periods can be distinguished within the development of Dutch fascism between 1918 and 1945. These five periods reflect the development of Dutch fascism in its relation to the economic, social and political phenomena during that time frame.

In the first period 1918-1922 (which were years of economic decline) The Netherlands saw the rise of a number of small political parties. They can of course not be considered as being fascist, but they were (sometimes extreme) right-wing and conservative and therefore they can be viewed as precursors, even proto fascist in character. They were filled with negative feelings towards recent innovative developments that emerged after World War I in The Netherlands: universal suffrage, a gradually increasing democratic sentiment in the Dutch society with a growing role for the government. These political parties paved the way for fascism and (later) national socialism. While feeding on societal discomfort they never fully grew into accepting the *fascist minimum*.³

The second stage of Dutch fascism took place in the years 1923-1928. The first fascist party to emerge was the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists], followed by the *Nationale Volkspartij* [National People Party], the *Nederlandsche Oranje Nationalisten* [Dutch Orange Nationalists] and, in 1925, by the *Eerste Nederlandsche Fascisten Organisatie* [First Dutch Fascist Organization] – the very first time the term *fascism* is used in the name of a political party. Up until 1925 that term was primary linked to Mussolini's Italy and its political system and therefore considered unusable in The Netherlands.

The years 1929-1933 can be regarded as the period in which Dutch fascism bloomed. Nevertheless even in those years Dutch fascism never succeeded in getting any real influence, neither in the Dutch society outside of parliament, nor in parliament itself. After the failure of the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists] in 1928, the *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of

2. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1993), 26.

3. Revolutionary, palingenetic, populist and ultra-nationalist.

Nationalists] proved to be the most promising fascist party, with its own militia and its good contacts with the German SA. Its main ideologist was Henri Blok, a professor in ancient art history of Egypt and the Middle East. The *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of Nationalists] campaigned for the May 1933 elections, but failed to win a seat in parliament. That lack of success was the beginning of its end. The same period was characterized by the success of the *Vereeniging 'De Bezem'* [Association 'The Broom'] – founded by Hugo Sinclair de Rochemont, who was more of a scholar than a politician. It didn't take long for Sinclair to be pushed aside by Jan Baars, the first fascist who was able to rally the working classes. During the years 1932-1933 he came to be the best known and most influential Dutch fascist. In Dec. 1931 the Dutch equivalent of Hitler's NSDAP saw the light. It was called the *Nationaal-Socialistische Nederlandsche Arbeiders Partij* [National-Socialist Dutch Workers Party] and it was founded by Bertus Smit. After a couple of months Smit was pushed out of the party by his rival leader, so the party split up. This process repeated itself several times, the result being the existence of no less than some ten fascist parties, all bearing the same name. In spite of their incompetence to form a functioning political party, they remained attractive to the more radical Dutch fascists who were looking to Hitler's Germany for guidance and inspiration. After Jan Baars took over the leadership of *'De Bezem'* ['The Broom'] he renamed it the *Algemeene Nederlandsche Fascisten Bond* [General Dutch Fascist Union] and it grew to be the most powerful and influential Dutch fascist party in the years 1931-1933.

In the following years 1934-1939 Dutch fascism largely converted itself to national socialism. Although many (sometimes very small) parties remained more or less active, the two most prominent ones were the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement] from Anton Mussert and *Zwart Front* [Black Front], led by Arnold Meijer. Dutch fascism in those years was getting more and more extremist and anti-Semitic, partly as a reaction to the ever growing opposition.

Finally we enter the last period of Dutch fascism: 1940-1945, the years of World War II. After Nazi-Germany had occupied The Netherlands, Dutch fascism was placed under guardianship. The Germans were in total control of all political activities and gradually they forced all Dutch fascist and national socialist parties to either liquidate themselves or to merge with Mussert's *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement], the only fascist party to make it to the end of the war in May 1945. The beginning of the German occupation in May 1940 marked the end of all possibilities to implement own policies by Dutch fascist parties.

Some key aspects of Dutch fascism

Most important Dutch fascists and Dutch fascist parties

There is a big difference between Dutch and Italian/German fascism. From the beginning of fascism Mussolini and Hitler were able to manifest themselves as the unquestionable leader of their parties. Fascism in The Netherlands took another path, for during the first seven years of Dutch fascism there was no clear leader. In 1930 Jan Baars took this position and from 1933 onwards Anton Mussert proved to be the leader of Dutch fascism. The absence of a leader during the first years of Dutch fascism is one of the explanations why a multitude of fascist parties emerged. The many dozens of Dutch fascist parties never merged into one powerful movement.

A group of twelve men were responsible for the trials and tribulations of Dutch fascism

between 1923 and 1945. They were, in alphabetical order: **Jan Baars** (1903-1989), **Max van Eijsden** (1899-1982), **Carel Gerretson** (1884-1958), **Rob Groeninx van Zoelen** (1889-1979), **Horace van Gybland Oosterhoff** (1887-1937), **Alfred Haighton** (1896-1943), **George Labouchere** (1896-1971), **Wouter Lutkie** (1887-1968), **Arnold Meijer** (1905-1965), **Anton Mussert** (1894-1946), **Hugo Sinclair de Rochemont** (1901-1942) en **Emile Verviers** (1886-1968).

Although over 60 fascist political parties were active from 1923 on, only seven of them had any influence on politics and society. Chronologically they were: the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists] (1923-1928), the first Dutch fascist political partij and after her demise the *Vereeniging 'De Bezem'* [Association 'The Broom'] (1928-1932) and the *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of Nationalists] (1928-1931) took its place. These two marked the two streams Dutch fascism followed: the true fascist one vs. the conservative one. *'De Bezem'* ['The Broom'] lived on as the *Algemeene Nederlandsche Fascisten Bond* [General Dutch Fascist Union] (1932-1934), which in its turn continued as *Zwart Front* [Black Front] (1934-1941). The *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of Nationalists] proved to be the reservoir of the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement] (1931-1945) and of the *Verbond voor Nationaal Herstel* (1933-1941). These seven parties formed the backbone of Dutch fascism.

Dutch fascism and conservatism

Dutch fascism between 1923 and 1945 consisted of three components; 'pure' Mussolini based fascism, Hitler based national socialism and conservatism. The three components interacted and influenced one and another during the entire period. Chronologically speaking conservatism was the first to appear. Among its exponents are to be distinguished the *Economische Bond* [Economic League] (1917-1921), the *Staatspartij voor de Volkswelvaart* [State Party for the Well-Being of the People] (1921-1925), the *Vaderlandsch Verbond* [Fatherland Union] (1924-1932), the *Nationale Unie* [National Union] (1925-1941) and the *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of Nationalists] (1928-1934). From 1933 till 1941 the *Verbond voor Nationaal Herstel* [Union for National Recovery] showed itself as a mixture between a fascist and a conservative party. This Union was the first fascist party to have a seat in parliament. Secondly are to be distinguished the Mussolini based parties like the *Verbond van Actualisten* ([Union of Actualists], 1923-1928), the *Vereeniging 'De Bezem'* [Association 'The Broom'], 1928-1932), the *Algemeene Nederlandsche Fascisten Bond* ([General Dutch Fascist Union], 1932-1934) en *Zwart Front* ([Black Front], 1935-1941, in 1940 it changed its name to *Nationaal Front* [*National Front*]). Lastly we encounter the Hitler based national socialist parties, among which the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement], 1931-1945) and the *Nationaal-Socialistische Nederlandsche Arbeiders Partij* ([National Socialist Dutch Workers Party], from 1931 till 1941 there were at least nine groups that went by this name. In the end only Musserts *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National Socialist Movement] prevailed until the end of fascism in May 1945.

Fascism possessed certain conservative elements⁴ which confused 'real' conservatives, who in the beginning of the fascist era felt threatened by the unexpected presence of fascism. From 1925 onwards however, fascists and conservatives began looking alike more and more. It is important to

4. For example, in the program of the first fascist political party in The Netherlands, the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists], some classic conservative elements like respect for King and army were to be found. This party avoided the term *fascism* altogether.

stress that conservatism start looking like fascism, more than the other way around. In the words of Martin Blinkhorn: ‘Nevertheless in important respects – both ideological and social – they [fascists – WH] were *different*. For one thing, they were [...] “more extreme in every way”: shriller in their nationalism, more plebeian in composition and style, less respectful of tradition and of established hierarchies, more violent in their behavior and, specifically and crucially, their anti-leftism.’⁵ Parallels between fascism and conservatism were: resistance against democracy, Marxism, anarchism, internationalism⁶ and decolonization. Essential differences between fascism and conservatism are to be found in on the one hand the means both ideologies deployed when trying to realize their goals and on the other hand their attitude towards the existing social hierarchy. One of the main fascist goals was a fundamentally different society, in which the so called *new man* would function in a totally different role and societal position as before.



The New Man

The best-known representation in Dutch art of the concept of the *uomo nuovo* (new man) is the large tempera and oil painting on plywood, 227 by 172 cm (incl. frame), *De nieuwe mensch* [*The New Man*] by the Dutch painter Henri van de Velde (1896-1969). He created it presumably in or around the year 1937.

The image on the painting is divided into three parts. The figure in the center personifies the middle course fascism aspired to be between capitalism/liberalism (portrayed on the left) and communism/socialism (on the right). This vigorous person with his naked torso is the personification of the ‘man of power’, venerated in fascist ideology. He carries a burning sword, on the one hand symbolizing the violence fascism venerated, on the other hand an image with a biblical connotation as it is an allusion to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, which afterwards is being guarded by an angel with a burning sword. The image tells us that neither capitalists nor communists will ever end up in Paradise. The man tramples his feet on a corpse with a crown, with the word ‘Ratio’ written upon it. This corpse personifies the

5. Martin Blinkhorn, ‘Fascists and Conservatives: between alliance and rivalry’, in *The Fascism Reader*, ed. Aristotle A. Kallis (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 438.
6. The ultra conservative French politician Philippe Pétain put it like this: *À mon avis, ce qui est international est discutable. Ce qui est national est utile et fécond.* [In my mind, all that is international is questionable. All that is national is useful and fertile.] Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon. *Pétain* (Paris: Perrin, 2014), 276.

'King of Reason', being produced by the French Revolution and guilty of all excesses of capitalism and communism that happened since. The writings of Ratio's symbols Darwin, Marx and Voltaire are being trampled on in the lower right hand corner, while already on fire, ignited by the flaming sword.

Left of the main character we can see capitalism, symbolized by the United States of America. Standing on a pillar with the inscription 'Vanitas' (vanity) we can see the Golden Calf, which is being worshipped by a multitude of figures, amongst whom a king, some noble men, naked lechers and violent bystanders. Next to the pillar of the Golden Calf are standing two persons personifying the devil and his masked henchman. The devil is sitting on well-stocked bags filled with money. His henchman wears a Ku Klux Klan robe, decorated with a masonic emblem. He is demonstrating the potential evil that lies in hidden and secret societies. American skyscrapers are to be seen on the background. This allegory portrays capitalism as the ultimate evil.

The same can be said of the right part of the painting. There the communist Soviet Union is being portrayed. Important is the person sitting on a peasant's cart who gets town by a group of emaciated workers. He wears a Lenin cap and his face shows a cruel expression. This person is accompanied by a bare breasted female, who puts out her tongue at a Jesus crucifix, that is about to fall into a burning church building. The Lenin figure is accompanied as well by a person wrapped in a cape and with a putrefying face, a symbol for Death, and in the background we see a pillaged farm. The message that is being transmitted through these images is crystal clear: communism brings death and destruction.

Not only the 'new man' defeats on the one hand capitalism and liberalism, and on the other hand communism and socialism, but it demonstrates and wants to be a middle course, some sort of 'third way' between these two ideologies from the political left and right. The inspirational force from which this middle course draws its power, is portrayed by the divine beam of light into which the main character is gazing.

With his *De nieuwe mensch* [*The New Man*] Henri van de Velde created a painting that demonstrates in the smallest detail the ideology and expectations of fascism.

Conservative politics on the other hand was aimed on maintaining the existing social stratification, in particular concerning the dominant position of the upper classes.⁷ Fascism used then modern methods of mass organization and mass propaganda, together with a number of striking appearances, like a rigid hierarchical organization with a single leadership, the use of uniforms and a symbolism appealing to the masses. These modern ways of communicating gave fascism its characteristic revolutionary outlook. According to Payne there is an essential difference between the post World War I autocratic right wing in Europe and the more moderate nineteenth century conservatism: 'It thus becomes crucial for purposes of comparative analysis to distinguish clearly between fascist movements per se and the nonfascist (or sometimes profascist) authoritarian right.'⁸ And: 'As a broad generalization, then, the groups of the new conservative authoritarian right were simply more moderate and generally more conservative on every issue than were the fascists.'⁹

Although it doesn't seem possible to draw a sharp and distinct line between the two, nevertheless also in Dutch politics these differences can be distinguished. For example, following the elections of May 1933 the very first fascist seat in parliament was occupied by the *Verbond voor*

7. Stanley G. Payne, 'Fascism as a "generic" concept', in *The Fascism Reader*, ed. Aristotle A. Kallis (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 87.

8. Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism 1914-1945* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 15.

9. Payne 1995, 18.

Nationaal Herstel [Union for National Recovery]. Their leader and the man taking the seat was the lawyer William Westerman PhD. It is however unclear if he really can be considered a true fascist politician. On the one hand he was a firm admirer of Mussolini; in 1928 he published a translation of a book on the theory of the fascist state by the fascist Italian politician Rocco; after being invited by the Italian government he visited Libya to assess the influence of fascism on this Italian colony and in 1937 he became a member of the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National Socialist Movement]. On the other hand can be noted that during his four-year period in parliament he only spoke of politically concerned neutral affairs concerning the Dutch colonies in the East, defense and economic matters and in generally on matters concerning the national interest.¹⁰ Blinkhorn's words come to mind: '[...] not merely was a boundary between fascists and authoritarian conservatives never drawn with total clarity, but it became more blurred with every year that passed.'¹¹

In 1976 the Dutch history professor Hermann von der Dunk published a small book in which he investigated the reasons behind the absence of organized conservatism in Dutch politics. He defined conservatism as the 'aversion of forced changes based on abstract principles and rational dogma's, rejection of or at least doubt about the thought of progress and the belief in man's capability to improve himself and equality between men, but instead a belief in men being fundamentally unequal; in nature or divine based authority; the belief in history, tradition and experience as the most important signposts.'¹² Von der Dunk concluded that this kind of conservatism was absent from Dutch politics because The Netherlands mainly originated from a urbanized society instead of a feudal-agricultural background. Therefore the focal point of Dutch conservatism lay within religious Calvinism, as only Protestantism proved able to replace feudal-agricultural tradition and develop an inspired anti-liberal conservatism'. On the one hand this reasoning explains why Dutch conservatism hasn't organized itself in the form of a political party and on the other hand it supports the thesis why in The Netherlands during the years between the two World Wars conservatism originated from liberalism and confessionalism.

After the end of World War I in particular the anti-democrats from these two factions felt a growing discontent towards a – what they considered to be – failing parliamentary system and chose to adhere to conservatism. In those years the common ground between fascists and conservatives lay in the palingenetical aspect of both ideologies. But there proved to be a major difference. Conservatives were working towards a new order in society, in which old values were to be restored, while fascists were looking to return to a certain fixed point in time, and build a new society from there, without the errors and defects that had led to the contemporary society fascists rejected. At first glance these two look alike and that may be the explanation why the *Vaderlandsch Verbond*, the *Nationale Unie* or the *Verbond voor Nationaal Herstel* [Union for National Recovery] had a lot of sympathy for fascists targets as the rejection of the parliamentary democracy and a new order in society. It is hard to understand how conservatives and fascists could ever have reached any agreement on matters like a socially engineered society, the

10. Huberts 2017, 84.

11. Blinkhorn 2003, 439.

12. Hermann von der Dunk, *Conservatisme* (Bussum: Unieboek, 1976), 18.

mobilizing of the masses and the instrument of revolution as a means to gain state power.¹³

My conclusion is that Dutch fascism has had a conservative slant for a long time. This ended permanently after having scored bad results at the 1937 elections, with the radicalization that followed.

Continuous discord

A striking characteristic of Dutch fascism was a continuous discord. Political parties and movements were founded, merged, split up and went under. Their leaders hardly ever worked together – on the contrary, they worked against each other.¹⁴ What might be the reason Dutch fascists were fighting among themselves?

Some possible answers: Since the Eighteenth Century Dutch Protestantism knew a process of growing differences of opinion, followed by separation. Dutch fascism worked along these 'traditional' lines. In 1917 The Netherlands changed their election system from a system of constituencies to a system of proportional representation. As a result nearly all major political parties had to learn to cope with a process of separation. Fascist parties underwent the same process, with the only difference being that they never succeeded in re-integrating the separationist. The leading personalities in Dutch fascism never wanted to (or could) work together. Alfred Haighton was manipulative, quarrelsome and he trusted nobody but himself. Hugo Sinclair de Rochemont liked to plot against his fellow-fascists and had a personality that didn't permit him to collaborate with others. Of George Labouchere was told that he was difficult to work with, always full of grand plans, that never became reality. Although Jan Baars was a gifted populist orator, he proved unable to lead others and therefore his movement was bogged down by people scheming to get a job, money and influence. Lastly Bertus Smit, founder of the *Nationaal-Socialistische Nederlandsche Arbeiders Partij* [National-Socialist Dutch Workers Party]. His ideologic views changed every couple of months, so he was never able to found a consistent fascist party in which people could place their trust. Fascism had religious traits. As a consequence, those with slightly different views were viewed upon as apostates and cast aside. In the history of The Netherlands the cult of leadership is absent. The Dutch are a people of consensus. Therefore Mussolini's and Hitler's position as charismatic leader of an ideologically inspired movement was never fully accepted in The Netherlands, which explains the paradox of Dutch fascism: leaders can only lead those that want to be led – there were leaders, but no followers. The refusal to accept authoritarian leadership was the cause of much quarreling, often leading to parting of spirit, followed by separation. Fascism was a cult of violence. Fascists never accepted being wrong about their political convictions. The consequence of this attitude was that other fascists, whose opinions only slightly differed, were attacked viciously. In particular during the years 1929-1934 many fascist gatherings were being disrupted by other fascists with just minimal different views and opinions.

13. More on the relationship between Dutch conservatives and Dutch fascists is to be found in Huberts 2017, 204-215.

14. Dutch fascists weren't the only ones to act like this, also French fascists were used to fight among themselves. The French historian Robert Belot characterized them as: *divisés, en rivalité permanente* [divided, into permanent rivalry]. (Robert Belot, *Lucien Rebatet: le fascisme comme contre-culture* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 8.

These verbal disruptions were often followed by physical violence in the streets. The fact that fascist opinions were largely based in myths and beliefs that weren't concrete, but rather vague, may have contributed to the constant bickering between them.¹⁵

It seems relevant to conclude that the different leaders of all Dutch fascist parties never choose to overcome their differences. They never put their ideals, their long-term visions before their own position or interests that were aimed at creating a new and fascist society. By doing so they have harmed the growth of Dutch fascism considerably.

A legalistic 'revolution'

Contrary to other European countries, The Netherlands have no revolutionary past. One might argue that the seizure of power by the so-called *Patriotten* [Patriots] at the end of the Eighteenth Century, in the aftermath of Napoleon's conquest, could be considered as a revolution. That may be so, but the absence of any bloodshed would make it a 'velvet' revolution. The same thing happened some 50 years later. All over Europe a revolution could be seen – but not in The Netherlands. The more surprising so was the call for a revolution by the Dutch socialist politician Pieter Troelstra in Nov. 1918. He felt inspired by what was happening at the time in Russia and in Germany and he thought it wise to try to encourage the same chain of events in The Netherlands. Little had he expected that it took no more than three days before his revolutionary but half-hearted attempt vanished in thin air. The only concrete result was that the socialist party and its leader Troelstra were denied access to government for a period of over twenty years. The legal aftermath of the failed Troelstra revolution was a law, passed by parliament in July 1920. It was called the *Antirevolutiewet* [Anti-revolution Bill] and it permitted revolutionary parties to operate within the boundaries of the existing democratic state, if and only if their policies weren't aimed at any concrete initiatives with regards to state institutions. These chain of events form the background for the ambivalent attitude Dutch fascists had towards the concept of the revolution. If they would ever hope to seize power, a call for revolution was to be avoided at all cost. Encouraging the population to seize power with arms in a possible violent and bloody revolution had been impossible after the passing of the *Antirevolutiewet* [Anti-revolution Bill].

And that is precisely the background of the events in the second half of 1933 and the first months of 1934. The leader of the *Nationale Unie* [National Union], Carel Gerretson tried to replace the current parliamentary democracy by fascism in a most ingenious manner. His strategy depended on the collaboration of the prime minister Hendrik Colijn (a good friend of his), who was well known for his positive attitude towards some of the results of Italian fascism which had been in power since 1923. In particular Colijn admired the reenforcement of executive power at the cost of parliament. Let it be noted Colijn however never expressed any wish to abandon the current political system. Following the mutiny on the Dutch military vessel 'De Zeven Provinciën'¹⁶ Colijn on multiple occasions had expressed himself in an unconventional way that led people to

15. Fascism intrinsically was ideological vague, without a 'sacred scripture': 'There was no "Fascist Manifesto", no founding fascist thinker'. Robert O. Paxton, 'The Five Stages of Fascism,' *The Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 4.

16. Feb. 4, 1933 saw a mutiny, as a reaction to cuts in salary. On Feb. 10 the ship was bombed, which resulted in 23 mutineers killed and the end of the mutiny.

think that he was fit for the position of a strong and determined political leader, in true Mussolini style. He would like to see the mutineers torpedoed to the ocean floor, which gave him the nickname 'Torpedo-Colijn'. All this took place during the campaign for the May 1933 elections. One month before the elections Colijn talked about the parliament as a body that was preventing him to rule as he would like to do – if he were to get in power. He also expressed the opinion that order in society prevailed to individual liberty. After the elections Colijn let the press know that national socialism might be worth trying in The Netherlands. A couple of months later Colijn told the minister of Foreign Affairs that he, Colijn, would be able to play a Mussolini-like role in The Netherlands. As a result of all these events, Colijn was generally viewed upon as a strong and powerful politician, fit to steer The Netherlands in a fascist direction.

Gerretson's first step of his strategic plan was to advise his followers to vote for Colijn in the May 1933 elections. The underlying idea was that, after the elections Colijn would form a so called *Koninklijk Kabinet* [Royal Cabinet], that would govern largely without parliament.¹⁷ Gerretson would then ask Colijn, once appointed prime minister, to implement two changes within the Constitution: firstly change the structure of current government by making the prime minister solely responsible to the Monarch, and secondly the formation of a *Corporatieve Raad* [Corporative Council] that would take over all responsibilities and duties from parliament. This was indeed a cunning ploy by Gerretson, for once his plan realized, The Netherlands would have taken a major step towards a fascist government – without a violent revolution, without any bloodshed and without the need to change the Constitution. Gerretson must have been happy with the outcome of the May 1933 elections, for Colijn's party was the only one of the larger political parties that won extra seats in parliament. Gerretson must have thought that most of the right-wing and fascist voters had followed his advice. Following the elections the Monarch, Queen Wilhelmina, instructed Colijn to form a new government.

During the second half of the year 1933 Gerretson lectured all throughout The Netherlands, stating his opinions on how Colijn should proceed in the fascist direction and thereby trying to influence Colijn and the public opinion. In January 1934 Gerretson published a book in which he further elaborated on the things to come: a corporative state that, if necessary, would introduce dictatorship. Gerretson preferred the changes he deemed necessary to be realized without a revolution, but if that was what was needed, then so be it, he said. He sent his book to Colijn, who responded by saying that there were many things he liked about the book – but he didn't say what these things were. Creating a conflict with parliament most certainly is something Colijn would never have pursued. As stated before, Colijn admired some of Mussolini's fascism but in the end Colijn was more of a right-wing autocratic politician than a hardcore fascist and he wasn't willing to give up democracy.¹⁸

And that was the end of it. Gerretson's cunning ploy failed. This was as close as The

17. A so called *Koninklijk Kabinet* [Royal Cabinet] is formed by order of the Monarch, without any influence of parliament.

18. 'The new right advocated authoritarian government, but hesitated to embrace radical and novel forms of dictatorship and normally relied either on monarchism or Catholic neocorporatism, or some combination thereof.' (Stanley G. Payne, 'Fascism as a "generic" concept,' in *The Fascism Reader*, ed. Aristotle A. Kallis (Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 87.

Netherlands ever came to being a fascist state. If Gerretson had succeeded, it would have been a unique development in European politics in the interbellum period.

Why did Dutch fascism fail?

During the era of fascism in The Netherlands the state power remained in the hands of Monarch, government en parliament. Unlike Italian and German fascism, Dutch fascism failed. The question arises to the how and why. A seemingly simple question leads to a multitude of possible answers that I will try to discuss. I distinguish eight factors of which each carry its own weight: the consequences of a segregated society; lack of outside support; division among themselves; inhibiting external factors; opposition from the government; opposition from the churches; opposition by various civil society organizations and finally lasting negative press reactions.

Between the Worlds Wars The Netherlands were a socially heavily segregated society with three pillars: the Roman-Catholic one, the Protestant one and the social-democratic one. This segregation was very strict at the basis, but this was compensated by a successful cooperation at the top, by the leaders of the pillars. This led however to a static passiveness of the masses which in its turn led to difficulties for 'newcomers' like fascism to gain support. Under these conditions fascism found very little political leeway.¹⁹

Mussolini in Italy and Hitler in Germany came to power with the support of influential groups and individuals: wealthy stakeholders, industrialists, conservative politicians, political leaders, Church and army. This support was largely lacking in The Netherlands.²⁰

One of the most decisive factors in the failure of Dutch fascism is surely their internal division. Hardly any Dutch fascist political party was free of chaos, strife or division. There have been some half-hearted attempts to collaborate, but they remained without lasting effect. Their adversaries could abstain from trying to 'divide and conquer' the fascists, for they did a fine job themselves.

Unlike for example in Italy or Germany, in the era of fascism in The Netherlands no acute crisis in the institutions of the state were to be found. As a result the population wasn't willing to grant political 'newcomers' like fascists access to the political stage. The acting government of The Netherlands showed a lasting stability in performing its duties during the period 1918-1940, in spite of the dire consequences of the 1929 economic crisis.

The Dutch government showed perseverance in preventing fascism. Starting in 1933 a couple of measures were taken that posed serious problems for fascist parties: firstly a ban for military personal to become a member of any paramilitary arm of fascist political parties, followed later that year by a decree stating that fascists couldn't be members of any militia. In the Spring of 1933 the government issued an interdiction for civil servants to be a member of any revolutionary party or movement, from the left as well from the right. During the Summer of 1933 fascist parties lost the right to parade in uniform which touched heavily on their propaganda.

19. 'Fascism needed some form of political "space" in which to operate.' Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London: Pimlico, 2003), 39.

20. Huberts 2017, 230.

During the years 1934-1936 both the Roman-Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches issued a ban on the membership of any fascist party. In The Netherlands, a religious country, this weighed heavily on the recruiting forces of fascist political parties.

From 1935 on two organizations could be seen trying to fight fascism: the *Comité van Waakzaamheid* [Committee of Vigilance] and *Eenheid door Democratie* [Unity by Democracy]. Both organizations consisted largely of intellectuals, scientists, students, journalists and writers and their many activities made sure that in those five years leading up to World War II in The Netherlands in intellectual circles the support for fascism was minimal.

The press was an important force against fascism. From Jan. 1933, when Adolf Hitler seized power in Germany, criticism among journalists grew widely. In the years before 1933 press coverage of the political developments in Italy and Germany was generally speaking favorably, but that changed after Hitler's rise to power: it became negative, or – at best – neutral.

These eight factors may be considered being largely responsible for the lack of success of Dutch fascism.²¹

Generic fascism and Dutch fascism

As stated in the beginning of this article, I propose to use the definition of generic fascism Roger Griffin provided in 1993: *Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.*²² The questions arise if Dutch fascism can be considered to be part of generic fascism. And if not, what does this imply regarding the definition of generic fascism? To be able to answer these questions, it is necessary to verify to what extent the four major defining points of the *fascist minimum* (revolutionary, palingenetic, populist and ultra-nationalist) can be found in Dutch fascism.

Revolutionary

The concept of revolution as a means of gaining power has never been accepted in The Netherlands. The country just doesn't have any serious revolutionary tradition. Anyone, after World War I active in Dutch politics, must have been aware of the circumstance that governing goes hand in hand with consensus and persuasion, and not with strong-arming political adversaries. However, even after the anti-revolution bill was passed in 1920, in particular catholic fascists during a couple of months in the year 1923 were still aiming at a revolution. The reason they got away with it without being arrested, was they weren't considered a threat by the government.²³ After that very short period of possible revolutionary tendencies, Dutch fascism returned to its non-revolutionary status for a period of over ten years. From 1934 on Dutch fascism was based mainly on two political parties; the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement] van Anton Mussert and *Zwart Front* [Black Front], led by Arnold Meijer. The former

21. More on this in Huberts 2017, 229-236.

22. Griffin 1993, 26.

23. Huberts 2017, 242.

never abandoned the legal way, participated in the elections and although the party grew more and more extremist as the years passed, it never aimed at a revolution. *Zwart Front* [Black Front] however, realized that the legal way could never get them where they wanted to be: in power. So gradually they started to work towards a revolution. As its followers were not that numerous, the Dutch government decided they didn't pose a threat and therefore choose not to persecute them according to the *Antirevolutiewet* [Anti-revolution Bill] of 1920.

Dutch fascisme differs fundamentally from generic fascisme, as far as the concept of revolution is concerned. Only from 1934 onwards, when it became clear to fascists that they would never get to power via the way of legality, fascist leaders like Jan Baars en Arnold Meijer publicly adhered to violence and revolution.

Palingenesis

From the very first beginnings of Dutch fascism the concept of palingenesis has been present in its publications. The first known occurrence is in the fascist periodical *Katholieke Staatskunde* [Catholic Politics] in which one of the first Dutch fascists, Emile Verviers, wrote an article about Mussolini's wish to bring about the rebirth of Italy as a great nation. In the editorial of the first issue of *De Vaderlander* [The Patriot], journal of the *Verbond van Actualisten* [Union of Actualists] is to be read about 18th century rationalism as the cause of all mischief happening in The Netherlands at the moment (August 1924). Almost a decade later the *Algemeene Nederlandsche Fascisten Bond* [General Dutch Fascist Union], at the time the most influential Dutch fascist party, published an article by an unknown editor in its journal *De Bezem* [The Broom] about a longing to unite all good things from the past with modern attainments to create a better, more energetic and modern world. In 1942, in the middle of World War II when The Netherlands were occupied by German forces, Johan Carp, one of the most prominent ideologists of the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement], wrote an article in which he argued that what once was positive for the nation, should be kept alive, but together with leaving behind all that was negative and that has occurred since.

As far as palingenesis is concerned, Dutch fascisme doesn't differ from generic fascism. From the very first beginning in 1923 of Dutch fascism till the end in 1945 practically all Dutch fascist political parties rallied behind the palingenetic concept of rebirth of the nation; preserving from the past that is worth preserving (the glorious Dutch past, especially from the so called *Gouden Zeventiende Eeuw* [Golden Seventeenth Century]), discarding what has proven to be negative (the disastrous consequences of the French Revolution, rationalism and liberalism) and useless and building a new society.

Populist

Dutch fascism has been populist from its early days on. In speeches and editorials continuously the image of a misleading elite clique was displayed whose only goal was to misuse its powers at their own advantage at the cost of the people. Practically all Dutch fascist and national socialist political parties tried to convince their audience during public rallies, mass gatherings and in various publications that this negative situation would be abolished once they were to gain control of government.

Ultra-nationalist

One of the more salient features of Dutch fascism was its ultra-nationalism. Henri Blok, the most prominent theoretician of the *Verbond van Nationalisten* [Union of Nationalists] stated in 1931 that in fascism nationalism should be the absolute norm by which everything and everyone should be measured. In fascism national awareness should only talk about the obligations and duties of the citizen toward the fascist state, never of his rights, who were considered to be of little importance. An identical attitude can be observed in the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement]. Its *Leidend Beginsel* [Leading Principle] formulates: *Voor het zedelijk en lichamelijk welzijn van een volk is noodig [...] het voorgaan van het algemeen (nationaal) belang boven het groepsbelang en van het groepsbelang boven het persoonlijk belang* [To enhance the moral and physical well-being of a nation it is necessary [...] to put the public (national) interest above the group interest and group interest above the personal interest]. The nation above everything else. A striking similarity with Mussolini's famous quote can be noticed: 'All within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state'.

| | Revolutionary | Palingenetic | Populist | Ultra-nationalistic |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Union of Actualists (1923-1928) | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Association 'The Broom' (1928-1932) | no | ? | yes | yes |
| Union of Nationalists (1928-1934) | no | yes | yes | yes |
| National-Socialist Movement in The Netherlands (1931-1945) | no | yes | yes | yes |
| General Dutch Fascist Union (1932-1934) | no | yes | yes | yes |
| Union for National Recovery (1933-1941) | no | yes | nee | yes |
| Black Front (1934-1941) | yes | yes | yes | yes |

Overview of the presence of the *fascist minimum* in the seven most important Dutch fascist political parties

Redefining generic fascism

My conclusion is that Dutch fascism differs from generic fascism as far as the concept of revolution is concerned. Only after 1933 some fascist parties begin to embrace the revolution after ten years of unsuccessful activism, but even those parties don't dare to rally their followers in an open and active way. Worth noting is the fact that Dutch fascist parties who felt attracted to Mussolini's

Italian fascism gradually started embracing the concept of revolution, while on the other hand Dutch fascist parties who choose the side of Hitler's German national socialism, remained loyal to the Dutch government and continued to choose the path of legality. The case of Dutch fascism demonstrates that political parties and movements can operate in a fascist way, without being revolutionary in every day practice. During the first ten years of Dutch fascism this is true for all fascist political parties. For the period 1934-1940 the most important fascist party, the *Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging* [National-Socialist Movement] abstains from any revolutionary activities, but the smaller *Zwart Front* [Black Front] openly propagates the revolution.

Apparently the mythic core of Dutch fascisme wasn't powerful enough to ignite the revolutionary flame, but the deterrent of the *Antirevolutiewet* [Anti-revolution Bill] of 1920 may not be discarded in this respect. What then must be the consequences for the (meaning of the) *fascist minimum*? If the *fascist minimum* is defined as the total of requirements minimally needed for an organization or a person to be called fascist, can any organization or person that doesn't fit the definition because one or more of the needed discriminatory elements (revolutionary, palingenetic, populist and ultra-nationalist) are absent, be called fascist? In my mind the definition should follow the facts and not the other way around. Thus in the end the presence or absence of one or more of the four components of the *fascist minimum* can not determine if any organization or person is indeed a fascist or not. Based on Dutch fascism apparently the component 'revolutionary' carries less weight than the other three and that fact should ultimately be decisive in the definition of generic fascism. With the absence of the revolution amongst the greater part of Dutch fascism, one might argue that Dutch fascism cannot be regarded as 'real' generic fascism. Against this argument the fact can be seen that on the one hand all Dutch fascist parties saw themselves without any doubt as fascist – even the ones with hardly any revolutionary tendencies and that on the other hand they were all looked upon by non-fascists as fascist political parties.

It appears that Dutch fascism differs essentially from the definition of generic fascism. The definition in my mind needs to be adapted to Dutch fascism. That is why I opt for changing the definition of generic fascism as follows: *Fascism is a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a sometimes revolutionary populist ultra-nationalism.*