

**Duco Hellema, Ryszard Żelichowski, Bert van der Zwan, eds**  
*Poland and The Netherlands: A Case Study of European Relations*

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*Poland and The Netherlands: A Case Study of European Relations* is the successful result of the 2002 conference on Dutch-Polish relations organized by historian Duco Hellema and supported, among others, by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Polish Embassy in The Hague. The editors, Hellema and historians Ryszard Żelichowski and Bert van der Zwan, have published, among others, on Dutch foreign policy and Dutch-Polish relations.<sup>1</sup> This review focuses on the texts dealing with 20<sup>th</sup> century bilateral relations and offers a few suggestions concerning future research possibilities.

The fifteen chapters mainly focus on Dutch-Polish relations during World War II, the Cold War and the post-1989 era; only the first three texts treat the 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, as valuable as the purely scholarly contributions are, two texts are based on personal viewpoints: the eyewitness report on bilateral relations and the election of John Paul II by Edy Korthals Altes, former Dutch ambassador in Warsaw from 1977-1980, and reflections on (the path to) Polish NATO membership by Henryk Szlajfer, Polish policy planner from 1993 to 2008. Both authors were directly involved in the subject matter of their contributions and provide front seat reports.

First of all, during the “era of Baltic trade,” Poland and the Netherlands were destined to intense economic cooperation. The wars for the political domination of the Baltic Sea were waged for control of the Baltic trade, which would prove to be a crucial source of income for the Dutch (e.g. the supply of grain). Resulting from trade was migration, local settlements and an influential exchange of ideas (e.g. shipbuilding and credit operations). With abundant examples, Maria Bogucka describes productive cultural exchanges and healthy diplomatic relations. Interestingly, the Polish hetero-image of the “clean and

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opulent" Netherlands seemed to stand out against the reputation of Dutch people who were accused of boorish customs, parsimony and avarice. According to Wojciech Kriegseisen, "common threads" in both countries' histories could be the subject of a comparative analysis, e.g. the study of contemporaneous Prussian policy towards Poland and the Netherlands. His contribution discusses the interest of the authorities of the Republic of the United Provinces in the situation of Polish protestants, and states that, besides the Dutch-based training of ministers for the Reformed Churches in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Polish protestants regularly received Dutch financial donations.

The Dutch stance towards two Polish national insurrections (1830 and 1863) during the Third Polish Partition (1795-1918) forms the focus of Idesbald Goddeeris' text. The Dutch authorities strongly condemned the first insurrection and portrayed it negatively because of its association with the Belgian revolution and the accompanying frustration at the Netherlands' loss of territory. On the other hand, "Polonophilia" in neighboring countries was based on its usefulness for domestic political ends (e.g. in Belgium the Poles served as a positive example of a Catholic and freedom-loving people).

Remco Van Diepen argues that, although both countries did have close economic and financial ties in the early 1920s, during the interwar years Poland was not a priority for the Netherlands, which considered the parts of Europe east of Germany as *terra incognita*. Although the Dutch government refrained from expressing opinions on the Polish-German border situation, pro-German views among entrepreneurs, politicians, diplomats and journalists were commonplace. According to Magdalena Hułas, the Dutch and Polish governments-in-exile in London did not maintain close or productive relations apart from information-sharing and cooperation in technical issues inherent to the exilic situation, because they had different interests.

Among the most appealing contributions is Hellema's text on the evolution of Dutch-Polish political relations from 1945-75. After two years of inertia in Dutch foreign policy, which was based on the pre-war neutrality tradition, a rather hostile and suspicious period dawned; the division of Europe into two opposing blocs and the stalinization of the political climate in Poland led to an indifferent policy towards Eastern Europe. With East-West relations entering the phase of *détente* in the late 1960s and especially after foreign minister Joseph Luns' 1967 visit to Poland, Dutch-Polish relations improved slightly and slowly, compared to other Western European nations, despite Poland's anti-Semitic campaign and participation in the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. During the left-wing Den Uyl cabinet (1973-1977), the diplomatic and economic rapprochement continued cautiously, and culminated in the 1979 visit of succeeding Prime Minister Dries van Agt.

Covering in essence the same time period as Hellema, Żelichowski treats the tentative postwar policy, followed by the "first ice age" during which relations deteriorated (e.g. decrease in economic cooperation, cold war hysteria). Described as "different degrees of cold," Dutch-Polish relations were characterized by thaw (e.g. the omitting of "communist danger" in Queen Juliana's Speech in 1964 and subsequent reduction of tensions), freezing (e.g. the overall worsening after the events of 1968 in Poland) and truly positive results (e.g. the signing of a bilateral economic cooperation agreement in 1974).

Floribert Baudet argues that bilateral relations between 1975-89 consisted of two separate elements. Partly owing to Warsaw's willingness to function independently of the Soviet Union (SU), The Hague tended to support the Gierek regime (1970-80) and did not overtly criticize human rights violations. The no-risk policy towards Solidarity, i.e. refraining from any action that would endanger the liberalization process, attempted to dissuade the SU from intervening. Although the Dutch public were shocked by the introduction of martial law in 1981, The Hague first reacted hesitantly, later demanded dialogue between the communist authorities and opposition and eventually condemned the Polish regime. In contrast to the protection of détente, the Dutch did maintain contact with opposition members and boycotted ministerial contact with the communist authorities. During 1984-86, The Hague slowly resumed relations but remained critical of the developments in Poland, continuously stressing the need for negotiations and liberalization. In 1987, foreign minister Hans Van den Broek met with Solidarity representatives ("a watershed, for other Western governments now followed his example" according to Baudet) and in 1989 the policy of restraint was finally lifted after the Polish Round Table Conference.<sup>2</sup>

Poland became a NATO candidate in 1992, yet, unlike the United States (US), the Dutch government initially did not favor NATO enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and remained hesitant until 1996, partly out of fear of destabilizing intra-European relations and Russia's response. Moreover, according to Hellema and Lotte Kaatee, even in 1997, two years before Poland's NATO accession, there were still objections within the Dutch political establishment. Bianca Szytniewski and Mathieu Segers claim that economic relations and Dutch diplomatic activities in Poland increased in the 2000s. However, when Poland applied for EU membership in 1994, the Netherlands supported Polish accession, but approaching May 2004, opinions in Dutch politics and among the public became more concerned about EU enlargement and migration (e.g. the emotional debate on the free movement of workers).

The other contributions include a description of the Polish troops' involvement in the liberation of the Netherlands in 1944-45 (Ben Schoenmaker); an assessment of the Polish authorities' neglect of human rights between 1975-89 (Wanda Jarząbek) and an evaluation of Poland's overall successful (road to) EU membership between 1994-2004 (Agnieszka Cianciara). Nonetheless, the publication does indicate that during certain 20<sup>th</sup> century periods (e.g. interbellum, 1945-60), bilateral relations were clearly only simmering while the Dutch government took a distant stance and implemented a strict policy towards Poland compared to other Western countries such as Belgium, West-Germany or the US (e.g. between 1984-86).

In conclusion, I would like to point out that this publication can stimulate research projects on Dutch-Polish relations in a narrowed-down time and field framework (e.g. Dutch

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<sup>2</sup> Baudet states that Van den Broek's visit "boosted the morale of the opposition and must have demoralized the authorities" and influenced the decision of US Vice President George H.W. Bush to visit Lech Wałęsa in the autumn of 1987. It is noteworthy that Solidarity's morale was boosted by Wałęsa's meeting with John Paul II in 1981 and his Nobel Peace Prize in 1983. Economic bankruptcy and Moscow's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policy contributed to a large extent to the demoralization of the communist leadership in Poland.

civil support for opposition movements in the 1970s-80s). Furthermore, a comparative study of Dutch-Polish and Belgian-Polish relations in the economic, political and cultural field could generate interesting research results. Since the Regions and Communities in Belgium have the ability to cooperate with other nations and regions culturally, politically and economically, the different language-based policies and relations with Poland can also form the subject of an interesting study.

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