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## **British Film Propaganda in the Netherlands: Its Preconditions and Missed Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

British film propaganda directed at neutral countries was meant to strengthen the pro-British attitude or at least weaken pro-German sentiments in the neutral countries. Directed at the wide strata of neutral societies as well as at intellectual, military and economic elites, factual films from the battle lines were believed not only to counteract German propaganda but also to overshadow hostile actions taken by British government against economic and political freedoms of the neutrals. This article is an attempt at understanding the reasons for the eventual failure of British film propaganda in the Netherlands. While mentioning various conflict areas between the countries, it focuses on cultural entanglements and cultural networks that developed, though precariously, throughout the war. The neglect of existing connections between British and Dutch filmmakers and the hesitant if not hostile attitude of War Office Cinematograph Committee towards expensive adaptations of literary works, and feature films in general, might be perceived, the article argues, as one of the core reasons, along political and economic tensions, why Britain lost the battle for Dutch cinema audiences.

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### **1. The Shifting Paradigm of First World War Studies**

The recent surge of publications related to the centenary of the First World War brought, among other things, an important shift to perceiving the war as a global affair where many countries were dragged into fighting, against their will and national interest. The entanglement of neutral countries, and violation of their neutrality by belligerents, have been persistent, if marginal, subjects in research, and they have been recently re-valuated: “Par ailleurs, l’expérience des pays neutres a longtemps été négligée par les historiens de la Première Guerre mondiale, ce qui a constitué un obstacle à l’émergence d’une histoire globale du conflit” (Compagnon and Purseigle 50) [“The experience of neutral countries was, for a long time, neglected by historians of the First World War, what caused an obstacle in emergence of a global history of the conflict”; trans. N.S.]. Therefore, an inclusive and comparative approach could help to understand the nature of the global war, the multiple forms of

entanglement of the neutrals, and the change in the concept of neutrality (Tames 277–280).

The specific quality of this global war meant that even remote overseas territories became involved in the conflict in many ways, including entanglements in economy, migration or transportation. The war affected distant countries as much as it did the neutral countries in Europe, and in “Géographies de la mobilisation et territoires de la belligérance durant la Première Guerre mondiale” (2016), Olivier Compagnon and Pierre Purseigle provide many examples of such acts of violation of neutrality in different continents and culture circles. The Dutch case was already subject of relatively extensive research: a large bibliography of British, American and Canadian research concerning the Netherlands during the First World War can be found, i.e. in Wim Klinkert’s *Defending Neutrality: The Netherlands Prepares for War, 1900–1925* (2013), and in the recent decades many Dutch publications concerning various aspects of the Dutch and colonial experience have appeared, among them Paul Moeyes’s *Buiten Schot: Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog 1914–1918* (2001), Kees van Dijk’s *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War* (2007), and Conny Kristel’s *De oorlog van anderen: Nederland en oorlogsgeweld, 1914–1918* (2016). The wealth of Dutch monographs describing the difficulties in maintaining neutrality must be put into a wider context of re-evaluating the First World War experience in national historiographies of the neutrals (e.g. Carden, Reiter). Numerous attempts at understanding the national experiences result in revival and reframing of the concepts of *histoire croisée*/entangled history, or intercultural and cross-cultural transfer and exchange, including Michel Espagne’s “Sur les limites du comparatisme en histoire culturelle” (1994), Michael Werner’s and Bénédicte Zimmermann’s “Penser l’histoire croisée: Entre empirie et réflexivité” (2003), Manuela Rossini’s and Michael Toggweiler’s “Cultural Transfer: An Introduction” (2014), and Sebastian Conrad’s and Shalini Randeria’s *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften* (2002).

Wim Klinkert, a distinguished Dutch historian of warfare, stated that “the idea that insight into the specific internal circumstances and national political and military culture of a state is vital for understanding its foreign and military policy.” This insight shall be combined with two other approaches, as put forth by Klinkert:

Second, for a real appreciation [of] the internal developments transnational developments have to be taken into account, as no country exists in a void. Third, a comparative approach can foster an understanding of national histories and is essential for asking the right and relevant questions. So, only the combination of transnational and comparative approaches can put the national in their proper perspective and can contribute to a better understanding of the period of World War I. (2013a, 4)

According to many of the newer studies of neutrality, the global war could be understood not only as a rupture of trust between nations, and destruction of pre-war international bonds between politics, economy, culture, art and entertainment, but also as a time when new networks were established, at least in the cultural sector. The outbreak of the First World War resulted in intense cultural mobilisation of belligerent and neutral nations alike. In both cases, cultural mobilisation was strongly encouraged and influenced by official factors: belligerent governments operated via propaganda officers, trying not only to preach to the converted, but also to reach the hesitant or hostile groups. Among new means, still mistrusted and often misjudged as this article tries to argue, of cultural mobilisation was the film, believed to cross national, cultural and social borders to and move audiences towards expected actions or attitudes.

Almost directly after the outbreak of hostilities neutral countries became the focus of belligerents' propaganda. The Allied and the Central Powers tried to win neutrals for their cause, if not counting on actual political and military support, then at least on sympathy and respect, or on keeping a country out of war. As the war progressed, the firm belief in the persuasive power of the moving image grew by the Allied and Central Powers alike, reaching its peak in 1916, progressing and developing into many, sometimes unexpected, directions, including war documentaries, newsreels, features, literary adaptations, comedies, social dramas, cartoons, travelogues, educational and industry films: "the second report of Wellington House recognized the cinema as being the 'Bible' of the working classes of most countries who would be little affected by books and pamphlets" (Sanders 136).

The Kingdom of the Netherlands and its overseas territories appear, in the documents of the Foreign Office, as the areas which could have been, with carefully orchestrated propaganda, eventually won over for the British case, or where at least German influences could have been balanced with the British vision of war for justice and freedom. Film and other forms of propaganda, including press articles, pictorial magazines, lectures, translations of hallmarks of literature, were supposed to reach Dutch citizens, incline them favourably towards Great Britain, and weaken pro-German sentiments, which were believed to be relatively strong there. The film was considered a very appropriate medium meant in the first instance to reach wide masses throughout the Dutch empire; its allure should have also appealed to higher social classes, including Dutch civil and military officers. Despite the efforts of British propaganda officers, diplomats and their Dutch co-operators, the impact on the Dutch cinema audiences in Europe, Dutch East- and West Indies, and Dutch Guinea was far from satisfying.

There are several reasons for the problematic reception of British film propaganda in the Netherlands: strained political relations, including constant economic tensions and periods of open hostility, whose most important cause was the refusal of the Dutch government to stop trading with Germany. Cultural differences, moderate commitment of British government to propagandist actions in the

Netherlands, permanent delays in delivery of high quality films, and the Dutch policy of neutrality, did not facilitate the delivery of propagandist message to cinema screens in the Netherlands. It appears questionable whether, in a time of increasing political pressure from Britain, film propaganda might have had the persuading power ascribed to it by its acolytes.

Still, after a closer scrutiny of British sources, some more optimistic conclusions can be reached, especially with regard to the collaborative network of Dutch and British film makers. This network existed long before the war and expanded even in wartime, while it appeared to be unknown to, or neglected by the British Foreign Office. This article searches for answers why the British apparently ignored these connections and they did not try to build on them to create a more complex system of film propaganda.

Another factor in favour of British film propaganda was the near elimination of two distribution centres in Brussels and Berlin, which were crucial for Dutch film trade. In wartime London became the unique distributor of British and Allied films for the neutrals and, ideally, the British distributors could have had the decisive power over what Dutch cinema audiences were to watch. Still, this chance appeared to have been missed, mainly due to the maritime trade blockade, inefficient bureaucracy, and constant trade tensions between both countries. The involvement of the British General Consul in Rotterdam, Ernest Maxse, in distribution of the film propaganda was also quite unique, as many British diplomats in other parts of the world were less experienced and far less willing to commit to the case (Reeves 1983, 474–476). Additionally, one must keep in mind that British war documentaries, most notably *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), were astonishing achievements and impressive commercial successes, at least until the second quarter of 1917 when even the British audiences grew tired with battle films (Reeves 2003, 28).

British propaganda had therefore some initial strong points which might have proved useful: experienced diplomats committed to the case, successful film titles of great pictorial and narrative novelty and good technical quality, competitive Dutch distributors ready to blackmail each other to receive monopoly for screening of British films (Dibbets and Groot), and keen cinema audiences looking out for new films. Geographical vicinity, the crucial role of London as a new distribution centre of American (and British) films, as well as British attempts to control and regulate all aspects of Dutch sea trade might have asserted a success of British film propaganda. The long-term relations between the two cinematographies, reaching back to the beginnings of the cinema in both countries, and the shared interest in scientific and educational potential of the new medium, might have been played in favour of British war effort.

On the other hand, however, it appears highly questionable whether even a perfectly managed and massive effort in film propaganda (which was obviously not the case) could have been of a great importance in a country harassed by frequent British infringements of its political neutrality and economical freedom

of trade. Thus, the seemingly unexpected failure of British film propaganda in the Netherlands deserves closer examination: although the British consulate offered competitive material, dealt directly with Dutch film traders, monitored the attitudes and sentiments in the Netherlands and consulted its actions with Wellington House, the distribution of British official war films turned out to be more problematic than anybody could have expected. The famous *The Battle of the Somme*, which was supposed to be an unequivocal success of British film propaganda, became a source of outrage in the Netherlands (see Blom 2001, Buelens 2010, Dibbets and Groot, Kristel 2007). Most of the later official films were met with little interest, became prohibited by local censors or circulated, cut in pieces and intersected into Dutch-compiled newsreels through urban and rural areas of the country. The fate of British war films in Dutch colonies was similar: they usually reached the colony with an enormous delay, and had to compete against French war propaganda, which was delivered more regularly and better advertised. Moreover, British films were often banned in Dutch colonies by local authorities due to protests of German minorities (van Dijk 317–352).

The Dutch policy of neutrality was certainly one of the sources of the failure of the British film propaganda; still, it did not prevent the spectacular successes of French war melodramas or the triumph of German cinema in the final years of the war. There is no simple answer to the question why productions of the emerging German giant Ufa captured hearts and minds of Dutch cinema-goers, or why *Mères françaises*, *Alasce* and *L'Alsace attendait* remained unequalled successes, despite many attempts made by Germans and Americans to outperform the films by Desfontaines, Pouctal, Mercaton and Hervil.

The sometimes-dramatic correspondence between London and the British consulate in Rotterdam, kept at the National Archives, sheds some light into the daily struggle against the “Teutonic spirit” apparently dominating in Dutch cinemas and influencing the minds and imagination of the Dutch society (Steward to Maxse, Rotterdam, 28 August 1917, FO 395/100/174949). At the same time, it presents some ideas of the British propaganda officers and civil servants which might have proved useful for the British cause in the Netherlands if they have been applied, even partially. While presenting some alternatives for the shortcomings of official war films, British officials apparently began exploring the possibilities of “indirect propaganda” (Guest’s memorandum, 1 November 1917, FO 395/102/213171), but they did not make a success story out of it, as did the Germans with their “secondary propaganda” (Stiasny 27–36) or the French with their thrilling mystery and crime series, only loosely relating to the war. Symptomatically, two British high-budget propagandist features were designed and promoted by a politician of Canadian descent and made by an American filmmaker. One can only speculate about the possible results of the collaboration between Max Aitken and D. W. Griffith, if it started earlier. Both *Hearts of the World* (1918) and *The National Film* (1918) came out too late to be of great importance for the British case.

This article aims to explore some unresearched or less-known records of British film propaganda in the Netherlands, therefore it mentions only in passing the fascinating and troublesome story of Dutch reception of *The Battle of the Somme* (Blom 2001, 2003, 278–282, Buelens 2010, 2016, Dibbets and Groot, Kristel 2007, De Zwaan). Similarly, numerous astonishing similarities between *Britain Prepared* and the Dutch documentary *Holland Neutraal* (see Aarten 2015) are only a starting point for some speculations of a more general character. By looking at pre-war personal contacts between British and Dutch cineastes, and war reports of British officers trying to develop alternative patterns of film propaganda, this article tries to investigate whether British film propaganda might have chosen other ways, strategies and actors to become more successful in the Netherlands. By neglecting existing connections and networks, I will argue, an important potential might have been lost. The unwillingness to develop alternative paths of film propaganda is, in my opinion, at least partially responsible for the lost battle for Dutch cinema screens.

## 2. British-Dutch Tensions Throughout the Great War

The strategic position of both the Netherlands and its overseas territories proved very challenging for the country's government, as it tried to keep the country out of war: "one major asset of the Netherlands that did not diminish in value during the war was its geo-strategic position. [...] This remained the belligerents' only consistent reason for respecting Dutch neutrality during the war" (Abbenhuis 261). The political tensions resulted in a discharging of the Dutch idea of neutrality and the self-assumed mission of guiding other nations towards a harmonious and peaceful existence. This idea, the most visible sign of which was the (Andrew Carnegie-founded) Peace Palace in the Hague, resulted in proclamation of the War Conventions of 1899 and 1907. In the war years the Dutch visions of international politics, impartiality and economic freedom proved futile. In the Allied propaganda, Dutch neutrality became synonymous with cowardice and lack of responsibility for the global peace and justice (Tames 277–280): "neutrality stopped being the vibrant and attractive foreign policy it seemed to be before the outbreak of war" (Abbenhuis 261).

While the Allies blamed the Dutch government for a lack of solidarity with the belligerents fighting for universal human values, it could not avert the obvious fact that "[b]oth the Allied and Central Powers rejected international laws and other legal recourses open to neutrals when and where it suited them" (Abbenhuis 262). This imposed on the Dutch government and society a plight of keeping their impartiality in all aspects of life to avoid or weaken the accusations of supporting one side of the conflict, and to minimize the risk of eventual invasion.

In fact, neither Germany nor Great Britain was ready to invade. "[T]he Allies did not believe it was possible to defeat the Dutch and occupy the territory

before their enemies intervened. A German invasion of the Netherlands had to be prevented if at all possible” while “[t]he two restraining influences on Germany were the fear that the Allies might open another military front in and around the Schelde and the knowledge that it could not divert more resources to another area of conflict”:

But recognising the importance of Dutch non-belligerency did not keep the Allies from extracting as many advantages as possible out of that neutrality. When these demands reached a zenith with the requisitioning of Dutch ships in 1918 and the resulting ‘sand and gravel’ crisis, the Allies had to make concessions to the central Powers, to keep the Netherlands out of the war. Because the stakes in the conflict were so high, the warring sides had few reservations about interfering with the rights of the neutrals. (Abbenhuis 262)

In the opening months of the war Great Britain tried to drag the Netherlands into the conflict, but “the Dutch Government politely turned down a British offer to conclude a formal alliance,” feeling relatively safe after “the Prussian Chief of Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, promised in an “absolutely official’ manner not to violate Dutch neutrality” (Frey 2001, 60). “Great Britain could not violate Dutch neutrality since it had entered the war to protect neutral Belgium” (Abbenhuis 261), but the Dutch closure “of the Scheldt for warships, including British deployments intended to safeguard Antwerp” was a cause of “considerable anger in London” even if “[i]n terms of international law, The Hague could not have acted otherwise. However, under the circumstances, this move clearly favoured the German armies” (Frey 2000, 60).

“A war between Germany and Great Britain” was indeed “[t]he nightmare of Dutch politics” (Frey 2000, 60), even if the risk of invasion was relatively low, the economic relationship between the Netherlands and its colonies became severely challenged. The war years were a time of permanent tensions between Great Britain and the Netherlands: from the initial refusal of the Dutch government to join forces with the Allies, through British allegations of the Dutch support for Germany, British restrictions of Dutch sea trade, British threat to integrity of Dutch colonies, the establishment of the British Ministry of Blockade in February 1916 which diminished badly the Dutch practice of re-selling imported goods to Germany, British total control of telegraph connection between the Netherlands and its overseas territories, the annexation of Dutch merchant ships by the British and American navy in March 1918, British patrolling flights over the Dutch territory, and eventually the British outrage in November 1918, when the German Emperor found refuge in the Netherlands. “The Allied seizure of Dutch ships in March 1918 followed by Germany’s insistence on unlimited transport trade in April of that year brought the Netherlands to the verge of war” (Abbenhuis 261) and only the war-weariness of the belligerents protected the integrity of the Dutch territory.



In the colonies, especially in Dutch East Indies, British officials enforced a very close collaboration of Dutch civil servants. Neutralizing the German attempts to start a Muslim rebellion at the Malacca Straits and in neighbouring territories was obviously of mutual benefit for the Dutch and British colonial systems, but the range and intensity of British pressure on the Dutch government was reaching beyond the mutual interest of two colonial powers (see van Dijk, 317–357). Marc Frey in his comparison of the Netherlands and Scandinavian neutrals during the war draw several important conclusions:

The Netherlands, more than any other country in the First World War, was caught between “the anvil of Germany and the hammer of Great Britain.” Like Denmark, its policy of neutrality tended to be pro-German in military and strategic matters. Due to the very large transit trade in building materials and an enormous export of sand and gravel to the German front in Belgium and Northern France, the Netherlands came to be regarded as a “military highway” for Germany. Due to German pressure, it was the only European neutral which in 1917/18 preferred to be embargoed until the end of war instead of signing an agreement with the allies. While it was subservient to Germany’s strategic interests, it had considerable influence on Germany in terms of trade, business relations, and the economy. In contrast to the Scandinavian neutrals, the Netherlands were an economic global player with a rich colonial empire, foreign investment surpassed only by that of Great Britain, France, and Germany, and valuable business connections on a large scale with the US. Particularly during the second half of the war, this role influenced German decision-making and provided the Dutch with some freedom of action. (Frey 2000, 17–18)

From the economic perspective, both German industry and British merchant marine were vital for Dutch independence: “in the pre-war period, the Netherlands had been regarded as an integral part of the German economy” (Frey 2000, 15). In the imperial visions of Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg expressed in the “September programme” (1914), “the Netherlands in particular were singled out as junior partners of the Reich – nominally independent, but in fact dominated by Germany.” A similar idea of “close alliance of Germany and the Netherlands” was favoured by “[t]he, the Auswaertiges Amt, various influential newspapers, industrialists, people from the military like Ludendorff or Tirpitz, and influential members of the Reichstag” until mid-1916. The Chief of the German General Staff, Helmut von Moltke, decided to modify the initial Schlieffen plan and leave the Netherlands unoccupied, but serving as the “breathing pipe” of German war economy. Richard von Kühlmann, German minister in The Hague, ascribed to the Netherlands the role of “a neutral mediator right at our doors” (Frey 2000, 13). The degree of integration of Dutch and German economy and politics might have varied throughout the war years, but generally for Germany the Netherlands were a guarantor of well-functioning war economy.

For the Dutch trade the German economy was indispensable as source of coal and market for agricultural products. The main trade route remained the Rhine,

hence the constant disagreement between the Dutch and British governments considering British restrictions in this matter. The British command of the sea was crucial for trade between the Netherlands and its own colonies” “if Germany was the Netherlands main trading partner within Europe then Great Britain was the only nation with a navy capable of taking, or protecting, the Dutch colonies (or at least trade routes)” (Wolf 7). It was widely believed that without British protection and support the Dutch colonies would have been defenceless against many potential aggressors: Germany, Japan, the USA, France and Great Britain (van Dijk ix–xii), in military as well as in economic sense: “what appears from all this is a bifurcation of the Dutch economy: merchants and industrials were temporarily forced to comply with the British, while banking and the extensive agricultural sector cooperated with Germany” (Frey 2000, 12).

The small and vulnerable colonial empire had to navigate very carefully between the German “devil” and the British “deep blue sea” (Abbenhuis 17). Even in October 1917, when British Navy cut off undersea cables connecting the Netherlands with the colonies, and when in March 1918 the Allied annexed about one third of Dutch merchant fleet worldwide, and when in summer 1918 British airplanes regularly patrolled the Dutch coast, Dutch government kept the policy of strict neutrality (Frey 2001, 73).

On the long run, especially British precautions taken to diminish or eliminate German war contraband were devastating for Dutch trade: “There is no doubt that the Dutch [...] felt that the British blockade infringed upon neutral rights of neutrals to trade with both groups of belligerents. But the Dutch [...] under no circumstances wanted to complicate their already strained relations with London” (Frey 2000, 6–7). The British postulate of “starving Germany” from January 1917 (Frey 2001, 65), by cutting off its supplies meant obviously also hard loses for Dutch export. It was not the first attempt to control and limit Dutch trade. Already in 1914 Sir Francis Oppenheimer (Baliol Archives) negotiated the trade conditions between the neutral Netherlands and the belligerents which led to establishing of the NOT (Netherlands Overseas Trust, Kruizinga), a private organisation “of businessmen and bankers” which “guaranteed the home-consumption of goods entering the Netherlands. All other goods not consigned to the NOT (or, in few cases, to the government) were suspect and liable for seizure.” The NOT “became the model for all other bodies and institutional arrangements in neutral countries” (Frey 2000, 20). A similar organisation, Landbouw Export Bureau (LEB, Agrarian Export Office) was the second of British-enforced “regulators of the Dutch economy and [...] foreign policy-institutions” (Frey 2001, 65):

What facilitated the foundation of the NOT was the specific character of Dutch trade. The former East India Company, renamed *Nederlandse Handel Maatschappij*, still exerted considerable influence among the business community. The rather small group of leading businessmen, entrepreneurs, and bankers knew each other well. They realized that their foreign investments, the colonial trade, and their overseas

transportations were in danger. On the other hand, they looked to the future, and they were aware that the economic development of the Netherlands were closely connected to that of Germany. Therefore, the same group of people who made blockade deals with the British were forging new business alliances with their German counterparts. On the p. 22 whole, Germany consented to the NOT, particularly during the second half of the war, because the government and the business community realized that they needed the Dutch in the post-war period. (Frey 2000, 21)

The Netherlands were thus subject to multi-layered British pressure, reaching from questioning ethical standards of Dutch policy of strict neutrality through (more or less direct) threats and limited manifestations of military power, down to the smallest aspects of economic reality. The latter, I would argue, was in many ways the most visible and irritating sign of British pressure for the common Dutch citizen and therefore the most damaging factor for the perception of Great Britain and its war aims.

### **3. British Attempts to Define and Influence Dutch Cinema Audiences**

Performing war propaganda in a neutral country was a difficult undertaking, but performing pro-British propaganda in the Netherlands proved, at times, an almost impossible one. The actions of British government, sternly affecting Dutch economy and Dutch sense of dignity, resulted in hostile attitudes of many Dutch citizens towards Great Britain. Even if the Dutch “were generally well-disposed toward the Entente, mainly due their dislike of Germany” (van Tuyll 147), British restrictions and acts of violation of Dutch neutrality stimulated anti-British feelings. The files of the Foreign Office testify that the British kept a close watch of Dutch attitudes and sentiments. British officials went beyond regular reading of Dutch dailies and magazines or spying on German propaganda in the Netherlands. Not only British civil servants but also British citizens living in Dutch territories and, occasionally, Dutch citizens sympathetic to the British cause, reported to London about the actual opinions of different social groups. The British, apparently, tried to define the Dutch society in terms of British social classes. This attitude led at times to falsities and misunderstandings but was a clear sign of an effort to understand the cultural specificity of the Dutch. This understanding was crucial for designing and developing successful propaganda strategies. The misconceptions about the recipients of British propaganda were, in my opinion, one of the sources of British failure in the Netherlands.

According to an anonymous “British Resident in Holland,” the Netherlands had “a larger lower middle and middle class in proportion to population than almost any other nation,” therefore the “main purpose of our propaganda should be to win the middle and upper classes who are governing forces of public opinion”:

The wage earning classes and the small bourgeoisie are anti-German. But they dislike and mistrust England and do not believe she has the power nor the endurance to win the war. [...] The intellectual and upper classes are divided in their sympathies, which depend upon business interests, education, blood ties and religion. The Ultramontanes are pro-German because they regard France as Atheistic, and many Calvinists are pro-German. (FO 395/102/12077, Wicks to Carson, 16 January 1917)

Even if the Dutch “were generally well-disposed toward the Entente, mainly due their dislike of Germany,” “definite anti-British feelings” remained. Instead of relating these feelings directly to British oppressive politics towards the Netherlands, British civil servants tended (at least in the preserved official documents) towards naming different groups prone for German propaganda: “The most pro-German elements were found among army officers and aristocrats, followed by members of court society, university professors, some business people, and some Catholics who disliked the French Republic. This left Germany with an influential minority on which to build” (van Tuyll 2001, 147).

The British were thus aware of relatively strong pro-German sentiments, a moderate belief in British military power and a general anti-militarist attitude of the Dutch society, and of its growing indifference towards the war among the Dutch. Already in the autumn of 1916 Alan Blakiston, a British pastor from Utrecht, one of the informers of the Foreign Office, stated that the Dutch “ignorance of war” was “simply colossal”:

One of the most lamentable manifestations of the past year or eighteen months has been the growth of, not [...] war-weariness, but of a lack of interest in, and indifference towards the cause, objects and meaning, of the war. The average Dutchman is preoccupied with his own affairs; he is darkly suspicious of all his neighbours; he frankly refuses to credit the Allies with any lofty motives; he bans all belligerents alike. This attitude of mind is probably reflected in Dutch statesmanship. (FO 395/22/231749, 30 October 1916, Blakiston to Carson)

Still, despite the circumstances, British propaganda was believed, rather desperately, to be able to change Dutch attitude of indifference or suspicion into enthusiasm and admiration of British war successes. The civil servants from Foreign Office were aware that “British propaganda will always be regarded with suspicion in Holland and always subject to a heavy discussion” and therefore must be “done indirectly – best of all through Hollanders,” (FO 395/102/12077, Wicks to Carson, 16 January 1917). In the case of film propaganda, the British succeeded to act through a Dutch co-operator, but the results proved far from satisfying for both sides.

The decision to focus on the distribution of the official feature-length war documentaries seemed initially the most logical one: the films offered a novelty of showing the reality of war (even if the most dramatic scenes were faked). British film propaganda was focussed on current news, relative objectivity, and seriousness. The internal and international successes of British feature-length war

documentaries led both the officials at Wellington House and British diplomats in Rotterdam to believing that *Britain Prepared* (1915), *The Battle of the Somme* (1916), *The Battle of Ancre and the Advance of the Tanks* (1917) were perfect tools to reach wide social strata of Dutch society and to awake the interest of Dutch high rank military officers and civil servants. The sober, realistic way of portraying the war was seen as an antidote against German bombastic and straightforward propaganda. The unadorned pictures of British land and sea power, technical potential of the modern army might have been perceived as more convicting than French or Italian war documentaries, avoiding the directness of the British *Somme*.

In British eyes, seriousness should have been the key to the heart of the Dutch cinema audience. In one of his reports Alan Blakiston underlined that “the average Dutchman does not understand [the British sense of] humour,” therefore the propaganda should avoid everything “trivial [...] out of date [...] [or] not in a good taste” and concentrate on messages “in good Dutch; brief and lucid, dignified in tone and free from bitterness; bristling with fact, and absolutely accurate” (FO 395/22/231749, 30 October 1916, Blakiston to Carson). From this kind of reasoning it was simple to conclude that British official war films might have been the cure for Dutch mistrust and indifference the Foreign Office was searching for. What the British did not include in their calculations was the Dutch abhorrence of militarism, although this could be inferred even from British reports quoted above and the latent pacifist potential of the war films.

Film propaganda was entrusted to the British General Consul in Rotterdam Ernest Maxse. He “joined the Consular Service in 1891 and served in Algiers, Greece, Samoa and Reunion before being appointed consul-general in Valparaiso, and then in 1913 the consul-general in Rotterdam” (West 199) where he worked until his transfer to Zurich in 1919. Working in the city known as “spy paradise” (see Kinkert 2003b, Ruis 2016), and eager to involve in actions surpassing his regular consular duties (Jeffery 69–70), Maxse revealed talent, energy and commitment, as did his collaborator, George F. Steward from the Press Department who was the decision person in film distribution (Bundesarchiv R901/71961, NOT to Firma B. Vissers, 17 September 1918). Maxse’s work was judged very positively by the Wellington House (INF 4/4A, qtd. in Blom 2001, 143).

Maxse was far from overestimating the potential of British film propaganda in the Netherlands. Already in January 1917, when British official war films still enjoyed great popularity in Great Britain and worldwide (see Reeves 2003), Maxse wrote to London that of all the great titles “two copies will be sufficient, 1 copy for the trade and one for loan to various internment and refugee camps and private propaganda work” (Maxse to Montgomery, 8 January 1917, FO 395/102/214539). His moderate enthusiasm for war films was dictated by severe difficulties he had to overcome by screening in the Netherlands *The Battle of the Somme* in November 1916. To list only the most obvious ones, the film reached Dutch shores with a certain delay, its screening was delayed for several more weeks by the Dutch

distributor, and when it entered Dutch cinemas on October 6, 1916, it had to compete with a French Somme film which reached Dutch screens around the same time (Blom 2001, Dibbets and Groot).

When finally screened, the film was received with mixed feelings: Dutch audience was mesmerized by the volume of British war production, fascinated by the war machinery, but outraged by the realistic pictures of death and suffering (Buelens 2010, Kristel 2007). The most problematic screening was in the Hague, where a Dutch pacifist organisation NAOR (Nederlandsche Anti-oorlogs Raad) managed to insert some strongly pacifistic intertitles into the film and therefore to modify its meaning drastically. Despite protests from the British diplomats, nothing could be done, not only to save *The Battle of the Somme* from becoming a tool of Dutch pacifist propaganda, but also from its being mutilated by distributors: the film was shown at high speeds to enable more viewings per day, or cut up into pieces, and inserted in variety programmes circulating through less renowned locations in the Netherlands.

Distribution of the English film was left in Dutch hands, and David Hamburger remained the sole distributing partner of the Rotterdam Consulate, although many other distributors tried to obtain the rights for *The Battle of the Somme* which promised to be a commercial success. Hamburger claimed to have never achieved the expected financial gain. Instead, he became mistrusted by both sides: the British could not believe that their films were met with mixed feelings, reaching from awe to outrage, as was the case by the initial screenings of *The Battle of the Somme*, but mostly with boredom and indifference. Other Dutch film distributors, desperate to receive any new films to attract the audience, approached the British consulate with declarations of their pro-Englishness and accusations of Hamburger's alleged pro-German leanings (Blom 2003, 280–281, Dibbets and Groot 446).

Among them was Anton Nöggerath Jr., apparently unknown to British consulate and propaganda officers. This is a quite interesting fact, as Nöggerath worked from 1897 to 1908 as a film operator for the British Warwick Trading Company (Blom 1999). His British contacts included Chares Urban, Cecil Hepworth, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper and Dave Aylott. He was also married to a British actress Eleonora Fox, better known as Nellie Hope (Bischoff 57–60; De Vries and Mul 162–164). Nöggerath Jr. was forced to return to the Netherlands after his father's death, but one can presume that his personal links with British film trade did not cease after 1908.

A working knowledge of Dutch film circuit seems not to have been a seriously desired asset for British propaganda officers. While Nöggerath appears in British documents only marginally, as a curious Dutchman with a German name and British leanings (Blom 2003, 280–281), other Dutch filmmakers such as Max Binger, collaborating throughout the war with British actors and producers (filminnederland.nl), or Theo Frenkel sr., a long-term collaborator of the British early film studio in Hove at Brighton (see Delpeut 1997), seem to be totally absent in British files. Commercial features appeared beyond the range of interest of the

Foreign Office. One can only speculate what could have happened if the British propaganda officers had included experienced Dutch and British filmmakers, who used to work together before the war, into decision-making processes of designing film propaganda for the Netherlands. The neglect of existing connections within the film trade was, in my opinion, one of the reasons behind the failure of British film propaganda in the Netherlands.

*The Battle of the Somme* proved more problematic than successful. The next film about the Somme, *The King of England Visits the Conquered Somme Region (The King Visits His Armies in the Great Advance)*, was screened in the Netherlands at the end of November 1916. The openly-pro British Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf*, presented the film as far less interesting than the previous one (*De Telegraaf*, 28 November 1916). Another newspaper, socialist *Het Volk*, compared this continuation of *The Battle of the Somme* with an Italian propaganda piece *La Presa di Gorizia* with ran parallel with the British one, judging the Italian film much more favourably for the terrific beauty of Alpine landscapes and lack of war horrors (*Het Volk*, 28 November 1916).

*The King of England* was screened officially in Amsterdam in the presence of Dutch high-ranking military officers, foreign diplomats and representatives of influential Dutch newspapers, and apparently the screening did not offend the strict neutrality of Dutch audience. When, however, screened in January 1917 in the Hague, the same film was banned by local authorities (FO 395/102/12446, Johnstone to Maxse, 9 January 1917). The on-screen presence of King George, King Albert, President Poincare, Generals Joffre and Haig was apparently violating the neutrality of Dutch cinema. In a city “full of Belgians who are only too glad to get an opportunity of demonstrating against the Boche, and [...] constitute a large proportion of the cinematograph audiences” (FO 395/102/31076/Johnstone to Montgomery, 5 February 1917) screening of any film featuring belligerent crowned heads, politicians and generals might have immediately led to riots and troubles.

Under the Dutch circumstances, *The King of England* proved to be a controversial film, much due to its overtly political context. The policy of strict neutrality did not facilitate the work of British propaganda officers, as multiple films produced at that time featured the members of the Royal Family, or British and Allied generals and politicians. High hopes were connected with screenings of *The Battle of Ancre and the Advance of Tanks* in the Netherlands. This film was believed to be able to bypass Dutch restrictions and win the audiences for the British case. The Dutch audiences were known to have a genuine interest, even a fascination with the materiality of the war (see Kristel 2007), therefore a film which focused almost entirely of the technical possibilities of a modern army might have been considered as a long-expected piece of propaganda that would run smoothly through the Dutch territory without hurting the fine sense of neutrality and impartiality.

The film premiered in Amsterdam on March 2, 1917, but the audience did not respond enthusiastically: it came two months after its London premiere, yet

the novelty effect was already lost. One can also presume that at this stage of the conflict the war-weariness among the Dutch was on the increase. Cinema was at that time a form of distraction and an escape from the harsh reality of trade limitations and growing social unrest rather than a place where the spectators would want to be reminded once more about the war. At that time, a generation shift in Dutch film distribution took place: the older distributors, connected with European markets, gave way to younger, mostly USA-focused managers, who perceived cinema as a source of entertainment, and invested a lot of money into advertising and into the cheap chic of cinema palaces (built mostly after the war), which were gradually replacing smaller venues. The new distributors were interested in propaganda films only if there was a chance that they would turn out profit. David Hamburger was of the new generation of entrepreneurs, but was ready to compromise and search for reasonable solutions suiting both sides, focusing on commercial success but not at any price. His multiple talents, however, did not rescue the lost case of British film propaganda in the Netherlands.

The following film, *The Battle of Arras*, shot in April 1917 (BFI), reached the Netherlands in the autumn of 1917 and was screened countrywide at least 20 times (cinemacontext.nl), most probably in sections (FO 395/102/196650, Steward to Maxse, 3 October 1917). From the Dutch press record, one cannot infer whether the film made any impression in the Netherlands. Other official war films sent to the Netherlands included titles considered only for private screenings, as they were featuring Allied politicians and generals as well as some other films for the general public, believed to be inoffensive to Dutch sense of neutrality.

*The Royal Visit to the Battlefields of France* and *His Britannic Majesty's Visit to His Grand Fleet*, "in which the King appears [...] prominently" (FO 395/102/206901, Northam to Montgomery, 27 October 1917) belonged to the first group, while *Sons of Empire*, *Peronne* and *Baupame* were judged as appropriate for general public and circulated in sections throughout the country (FO 395/102/154058, Maxse to Montgomery, 4 August 1917). The fate of *Women's Land Army*, *London Air Raids*, *The Story of the Drifters* and *General Allenby's Entry into Jerusalem* remains unknown: the prints were ordered (FO 395/102/222558, Brunel to Montgomery, 20 November 1917; FO 395/102/242413, Gilmour to Steward, 20 December 1917) but it is difficult to determine whether they were screened in public, as no reference was found so far in contemporary Dutch newspapers and trade magazines. Probably the films were circulating as a part of Dutch news compilations made by cinema managers Loet Barnstijn and Anton Nöggerath Jr. *Laatste Bioscoop Wereldberichten* and *Oorlogsjournaal* as they were called aimed at balancing subjects loosely related to war delivered by Central Powers and Allied alike.

A new chance occurred when Loet Barnstijn, the managing director of HAP and a leading distribution company, contacted Steward in November 1917 expressing willingness to screen Topical Budget films within the news



compilations, and to replace at least partially German film materials with the British news. While promising Steward “to screen the official films in roughly sixty of the biggest cinema halls in Holland” (FO 395/102/238426, Steward’s Report, December 1917), Barnstijn hoped to get access to British, French and American films, distributed at that time via London. British support would have helped him to bypass trade restrictions for highly inflammable nitrate negatives, regarded as possible explosives and thus war contraband. Regular delivery of Allied features would have guaranteed Barnstijn the top position among Dutch film traders.

British officials checked whether an eventual contract with Barnstijn would have not meant a breach of contract with Hamburger. “I can arrange to send you each week about 175 or 200 ft. of Topical Films which you can dispose of to the best advantage,” T. L. Gilmour wrote from the London Department of Information (FO 395/102/242413, Gilmour to Steward, 20 December 1917), still it is very questionable whether the films reached the Netherlands, as there is no trace them in Dutch archival sources. It cannot be excluded that outdated Topical Budget films might have been recycled by Dutch film industry, desperate to get new material, but no proofs of such operations were found in Dutch film databases and trade papers.

While looking at the list of British failures in Dutch cinemas, one must keep in mind the very first British feature-length propaganda film *Britain Prepared* (1915) and its importance and impact on Dutch film, ignored for many years. Less spectacular than its follower, *The Battle of the Somme*, the film proved also far less problematic for screening in a neutral country, and inspired a Dutch propaganda film *Holland Neutraal: De Leger- en Vlootfilm* (1917, “Neutral Holland: The Army and Navy Film”). As proved by Stephanie Aarten, both the general idea of an army and navy film, and the detailed scripts of many segments were in many cases creatively copied and translated into Dutch circumstances by the Dutch film maker and cinema manager Willy Mullens. Mullens, who was assigned by the army to make the official propaganda documentary (Moeyes 325) certainly knew *Britain Prepared*, as it was screened in the prestigious cinema venue in The Hague which was managed by his company Alberts Frères (cinemacontext.nl).

Despite evident similarities, the Dutch documentary was in some respects different from the British original. Not only was the navy section drastically shorter than the army one, but also the message was different: instead from proclaiming readiness for war, the Dutch film showed the readiness to keep the status quo of neutrality at all cost. In my opinion, the similarities between these two films are a marvellous case study of cultural transfer and visual influence within the cinema of that period. The case is even more interesting since Willy Mullens was allegedly pro-British but traded also with Germans (BArch R901/71951, German Embassy to Foreign Office, 25 October 1917) and screened German documentaries (FO 395/102/12446, Johnstone to Maxse, 9 January 1917).

Interestingly, at that time Mullens was probably the only Dutch film maker who did not learn the trade in Great Britain or by cooperating with British filmmakers, unlike Frenkel sr., Nöggerath jr. or Maurits Binger, the managing director of Anglo-Hollandia (established 1919). British contacts with Dutch film trade started around 1896 and flourished throughout the pre-war period. In the early years of the cinema they included Charles Urban's travelogue *Quaint Holland* (1906, Blom 1996) and the record of the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina (1898, *Inhuldiging Koningin Wilhelmina te Amsterdam*), made for Anton Nöggerath sr. (McKernan 2013). In Great Britain, between 1910 and 1912, Theo Frenkel sr., an acclaimed Dutch theatre and film personality, directed and occasionally acted in more than 120 short films made in Urban's experimental colour system Kinemacolor, before moving to Berlin in 1913 and back to the Netherlands at the outbreak of war.

The contacts between Dutch and British filmmakers in the pre-war period were quite intense and inspiring and they did not cease after the outbreak of hostilities. Even when personal contacts with were lacking, as most probably was the case with Willy Mullens, a fairground artist who learned filmmaking in Belgium and France (Convents 186–190; Blom 2003, 44; Bishoff 34, Willems 9), new ideas and techniques got through despite the Naval Blockade.

The influence of *Britain Prepared* or *Holland Neutraal* appears unquestionable, therefore it is rather astonishing that in the British files there is neither much interest in Mullens's film, nor any reflection about its indebtedness to the British production. From today's perspective, one can presume that a great chance for promoting the British case was lost. The Dutch filmmaker adopted the British iconography of bravery, readiness and technical progress to express the Dutch sense of preparedness to defend national values. A skilful hand of an unscrupulous propaganda maker would have made wonders when such an opportunity appeared. The Mullens' film meant, even if indirectly, that the Dutch nation was imagining and projecting itself as a micro-scale replica of Great Britain. Obviously, these projections must have been handled very carefully, as the aim of the Dutch film differed strongly from the British piece of propaganda: while Urban's film showed readiness to war, Mullens focussed on preparedness to defend the country. British film was reinterpreted accordingly to the Dutch *raison d'état*.

The Dutch documentary was, most probably, not the only one modelled on *Britain Prepared*; influences and inspirations can be also traced in French official documentary *La Puissance militaire de la France*. Still, both the French army and French cinema, even if severely weakened by the war, were incomparably stronger than their Dutch counterparts. The Dutch film exposed, inadvertently, the weakness of the army (*Bataviaasch nieuwsblad*, 6 February 1918), while the British and the French films showed impressive military potential that carried the promise of winning the war. The Dutch film did not only show the actual unpreparedness and unreadiness to defend the country but also imagined the native country on the matrix on Britishness.

This was not a new occurrence. Long before the war, Dutch cinema was dependent on British, French and German equipment and specialists (see van der Maden 1986). Dutch self-imagining, the pre-war iconography of “Dutchness” was generated by French, German and British filmmakers (see Blom 1996) and multiplied successfully by Dutch producers in the 1910s. Still, Dutch film market opposed the French “colonisation” by Pathé in the first decade of the twentieth century (see Blom 1997), which was almost complete in the neighbouring Belgium (see Engelen 2005). Even though Dutch film makers were highly dependent on skills, techniques and images brought from abroad, and the imaginative “Dutchness” was a product of a colonial gaze of neighbouring cinematographies, they went on developing and contesting the imaginary of “clogs and tulips” (see Depeut 1997; Blom 1996). *Holland Neutraal* shows how foreign imaginary was internalized and recycled for domestic use.

As underscored by Manfred Pfister, “national identity is not some naturally given or metaphysically sanctioned racial or territorial essence that only needs to be conceptualized or spelt out in discursive texts; it emerges from, takes shape in, and is constantly defined and redefined in individual and collective performances” (9). In the greatest Dutch propaganda film of the wartime, Dutch national identity was performed through the imagery of British military power. This was, however, not a unique case of recycling of national imageries in wartime films. Similarly, the two projects of the biggest British propaganda features, *The Hearts of the World* (1917) and *The National Film* (1918) were developed, to a degree, as a counterpart to French features (Abel 548), such as *Mères Françaises* (1917), *L’Alsace* (1916), *Mater Dolorosa* (1917) or *L’Alsace Attendait* (1917). Moreover, *The Hearts of the World* is actually a remake of Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). It is “[a] romance [...] set against the background of war in which Germany and France replace the North and the South” (Rogin 289).

One can only imagine that, with its great persuasive skills, British propaganda might have tried to convince the Dutch that the moral, religious, historical, colonial and economic bounds with Great Britain were stronger than the romantic allure of the “Teutonic spirit.” No such effort was ever made, thus the probably greatest chance to influence Dutch audiences decisively but indirectly was lost without even being noticed by the British. The British remained unmoved and most probably unaware that *Britain Prepared* infiltrated and transformed Dutch imagination. Still, it is an open question whether in 1917, still holding the policy of direct (and inexpensive) propaganda in an area of second-rank political meaning, London would have opted for better orchestrated and less direct forms of propaganda in the Netherlands.

#### 4. Indirect Propaganda

The British made some efforts towards indirect propaganda in the last two years of the war. These efforts remained apparently far less successful than German “secondary propaganda” (Stiasny 27–36). Facing the failure of official war films in the Netherlands, British propagandists searched intensely for an alternative. Struggling against apparent predominance of German, Austrian or Danish films (Denmark’s biggest film producer Nordisk, officially neutral, had strong German connections and was believed to support the German cause, although no proofs have been found in archives so far), G. F. Steward proved to be the most visionary and most realistic of British officials. Already in August 1917 G. F. Steward alarmed about the constant influx of Danish, Austrian and German features, which he described as “Teutonic in spirit” and having “nothing ‘Western’ in their conception” (FO/395/102/174949, Steward to Maxse, 28 August 1917).

Clearly, British film lost its temporary and relative advantage created by *The Battle of the Somme*, while Germany managed not only to create the successful state-controlled film giant Ufa GmbH, but also booked initial successes of the “secondary propaganda”: films only loosely related to war, but presenting Germans, Germany and Germanic culture in a positive light and therefore influencing indirectly the audiences’ attitude (Stiasny 33). German propaganda officers not only watched and analysed the cinematic milestones of D. W. Griffith and Hervil and Mercaton (Duisberg, BArch R901/71950, WB (2) 24–29 September 1917), but also tried to understand the Dutch “ethnic soul” (*Volksseele*) and designed film propaganda accordingly to their judgements of the national characteristic of Dutch cinema audiences (Cürlis 1–5).

Apparently, Germans learned quickly, and the failure in neutral countries (see Dibbets and Groot 2010, Smither 2005) of bombastic military films *Graf Dohna und seine Möwe* and *Bei unseren Helden an der Somme* led to an instant change of strategy: melodramas and romantic comedies, set ideally in a scenic setting and starring the internationally acclaimed German actress and war widow Henny Porten, fantastic features made by Paul Wegener, comic relief offered by Ernst Lubitsch’s comedies and detective series *Joe Deebs*, proved much more successful than the official propaganda. German propaganda officers decided wisely not to screen in neutral countries films with overtly propagandist message, such as propaganda cartoons *John Bull* (1917) or *Das Säugetier* (1917). The British made a similar decision, so most probably none of Lancelot Speed’s propagandist were screened in the Netherlands or in Dutch colonies.

Still, while Germans applied radical changes in their propaganda strategy (they intended to speak rather to the “ethnic soul” than to “collective mind,” using the powerful proto-expressionist images of Robert Wiene and Ernst Lubitsch), the British efforts turned out to be generally unconvinced about the power of indirect propaganda. The changes brought with Max Aitken, Lord Beaverbrook, were

radical but did not avert the failure of British film propaganda in neutral countries. Aitken, from 1910s an influential player in British politics (see McEwen 1979) and from the autumn of 1916 the chairman of War Office Cinema Committee (see Badsey 2009), became the head of the Ministry of Information. The Ministry, established February 1918 from the earlier Department of Information, came into being after many turbulences in the British War Propaganda Bureau, supervised by the Foreign Office (see Sanders 1975). Aitken came up with ideas very similar to the German concept of secondary propaganda: not only did the Ministry take care to produce two fictional films, which the acclaimed American director D.W. Griffith was commissioned for, but also considered another revolutionary change, “namely abandoning the practice of releasing official films altogether and putting in its place a new, ‘discreet’ approach in which the provenance of the films would be concealed from the audience” (Reeves 2003, 30), an approach that had been successfully adopted by Germans. This strategy was not applied, as the war already ended.

After the Armistice, the British were eager to dissolve Propaganda Office and to forget about its activity throughout the war (Messinger 126). For many years, Arthur Ponsonby’s famous definition of propaganda as “the defilement of the human soul [which] is worse than the destruction of the human body” (qtd. in Taylor 1) overshadowed the fact that in the last war years British film propaganda began to experiment with strategies of indirect influence and manipulation. One can only presume that if Griffith’s both ‘British’ films, *Hearts of the World* (1918) and *The National Film* (1918) had reached cinema screens at the right time, they might have been great successes, in commercial and ideological sense.

In the beginning of 1918, British Propaganda Office decided to attract potential distributors in neutral countries by offering films in packages: “from January 1918 a number of commercial fiction films were included in the regular supply of official films sent overseas” (Reeves 1983, 477). This was a change suggested, among others, by a leading Dutch film distributor Loet Barnstijn. Unfortunately, by lack of records, one can only guess whether the package deliveries made for an important increase of British films on Dutch screens. Interestingly, some of the British titles which were quite popular in the Netherlands throughout the war were not mentioned in British reports. Presumably propaganda officers were not aware that, for instance, the British *Ultus* series were doing very well: *Ultus, the Man from the Dead* (1916) had been screened nearly 30 times in the war years, *Ultus and the Secret of the Night* (1916) however, had been screened only once during the War, while *Ultus and the Three-Button Mystery* (1917) reached Dutch screens in 1919. *A Study in Scarlet* (1914) had been screened, apparently, six times in 1915, and *The Valley of Fear* (1916), another Sherlock Holmes-story, also six times, in 1918.

The prospective popularity of such British pre-war films as Charles Weston’s *The Battle of Waterloo* (1913), or its parody, *Pimple’s Battle of Waterloo* (1913)

can be only matter of stipulation, as the titles were most probably not screened in the Netherlands. While it is highly doubtful whether patriotic productions, such as Weston's *Road to Calais* (1914), *Facing the Enemy* (1914) or *Called to the Front* (1914) or Haldane's *Tommy Atkins* (1915) would have passed Dutch censorship, historical films would have probably entered Dutch cinemas without many difficulties.

The Cinematographic Branch in London was aware that the time of great battle films has already passed, and worked out some concepts of indirect propaganda, including

- a) General interest films with a story running through them. b) Films illustrating various forms of activity directly and indirectly conducting towards the winning of the war, or illustrating events arising from or connected with war activity behind the lines of England. c) Topical films, the value of which largely depends upon their being available for exhibition within as short a period as possible after the event they depict. (FO 395/102/213171, Guest's Memorandum, 1 November 1917)

G. F. Steward believed that "indirect propaganda films would certainly find better chances of exhibition here and do much more good than the too obvious type," still insisting "that at the commencement of every film and even at the commencement of each reel there should be some short announcement that the film was produced by a British company. Let the word British appear in some form or other on every film" (FO 395/102/223309, Steward to Maxse, 14 November 1917). The decisive step towards covert propaganda was not considered at that time.

In the Memorandum, the suggested titles were divided into three categories of "Industrials," "Interests" and "Scenic": the first one included *Making Cheddar Cheese*, *Making khaki*, *Ropemaking in Kent*, *Modern Cheesemaking in Taranaka, N.Z.*, *Whaling Industry of Natal*, *Royal Porcelain Works Worcester*, *Birth of an Aeroplane*, the second *The Mighty Atom (Woolwich Creche)*, *London Market*, *Grahamstown: An Historic South African Town*, *Dar-es-Salaam, East London, S. A.*, *Pretoria*, *An Old Dutch Grape Farm Cape Colony*, *Johannesburg*, *Fruit and vegetable farming – Canada*, *Our Brave Merchant Service*, the third included: *Bettws-y-Coed*, *Scenes in Devon*, *Derbyshire Peak District*, *Picturesque Spots in North Wales*, *The Wye Valley*, *Coaching round Keswick*, *Noble Ruins of the Monk Days (Abbeys)*, *Waterfalls of the North Country*.

The list shows that the Cinematographic Branch looked quite desperately for interesting material, presenting the British Empire as global, industrious, fertile mosaic of scenic landscapes and landmarks of architecture and science. This approach might have been quite successful by a nation widely interested in modern technic, eager to watch remote landscapes and exotic cultures. In the war years cinema audience yearned for the pre-war travelogues, as results for instance from the afore mentioned popularity of Italian war propaganda, which focused on the scenic Alpine landscapes. The continuity was also a key word: in a time

of global insecurity a constant flux of pictures, related even if only loosely to each other, brought a promise of continuity. Seriality was a key to success, not only in feature films (especially in thrilling series, each episode of which ended usually with the cliff-hanger, popularized by American series *The Perils of Pauline*, 1914), but also in industrial films. While shown in sections, they also brought the promise of continuity, of ongoing, stable production and of world unshaken by the war (Jung and Mühl-Benninghausen 430).

In a longer run, however, the decision to ignore Maxse's suggestion about film adaptations of classical British novels was not a fortunate one, compared to the successes of German, French, Italian and Danish film adaptations which flooded Dutch screens throughout the war years. The Foreign Office argued that it appeared to be "doubtful how far a Government Department is justified in spending public money in purchasing films which can only very remotely be said to have a Propagandist value" (FO 395/102/213171, Guest's Memorandum, 1 November 1917). Instead London was ready to dispatch to the Netherlands following titles: *Chinese Labour Contingent in France*, *South African Labour Contingent*, *The United States Troops Marching through London*, *German Prisoners at Donington Hall*, *Portuguese Expeditionary Force in France*, *The Storm and the Drifters*, *The Egyptian Labour Contingent*. One can only guess the difficulties such titles had to face to bypass Dutch censorship restrictions and to attract Dutch neutral and increasingly anti-British public. Still, London insisted not only on screening of such titles but also on making the screenings profitable, also in economic sense.

## Conclusion

From the British documents it can be inferred that neither the War Office Cinema Committee nor the Ministry of Information were willing to invest great amounts of money and work into development of a system of secondary propaganda, while at the same time in Germany emerged. Presumably, for British propaganda officers in London the Dutch territories were of secondary importance. The efforts of Ernest Maxse and George F. Steward appear not backed enough from London, the collaboration between British officers in Rotterdam, The Hague and London – not entirely free from personal ambitions, and therefore leading to some basic errors, as the delay in delivery of *The Battle of Ancre*, which proved disastrous for British propaganda (FO 395/102/196650, Steward to Maxse, 3 October 1917).

From the summer of 1916 the attention gradually shifted towards Dutch colonies, firstly the West, then in 1917 the East Indies. In both cases, British film propaganda proved futile. In West Indies it lost to the underdeveloped scheme of distribution, the territorial span of Antilles and Dutch Guyana, and opposition of the German minority among white settlers (FO 395/102/38/171180, Gowers to Lampson, 26 August 1916; FO 395/102/204071, Pryde Hughes to Montgomery, 18 October

1917, 26 August 1917, FO 395/102/222554, Rothwell to Montgomery, 19 November 1917). In Dutch East Indies, British films had not only to struggle against Dutch policy of neutrality, perils of the sea trade, and German opposition, but also against French competition. The French managed to use the American branch of Pathé, to distribute their propaganda through commercial network spanning throughout the Archipelago (Thompson 44). French Pathé's war journals reached the colony quite regularly, as did some of the French feature-length propaganda films, as results from numerous adverts and articles in local newspapers from that period (delpher.nl).

The British strategy of influencing Dutch audiences in Europe and in the colonies via the medium of film proved futile. The very plausible influence of *Britain Prepared* on Dutch propaganda film remained unresearched for almost a century. There is an open field for speculations why the British ignored entirely the existing connections between the British and Dutch film industries. Neither was Charles Urban, linked to Dutch film making from its very beginnings, involved in promoting his own film, nor did the British propaganda play upon the existing connections between Frenkel, Nöggerath, or Binger with British film industry. Although Nöggerath's memories *Chapters From the Life of a Camera-Operator*, describing his British period, were published from 15 February 1918 to 3 January 1919 in the Dutch cinema magazine *De Kintopp* (Blom 1999, 263), there is no hint that the British were anyhow involved in the publication. Similarly, the recollections of Theo Frenkel Sr., once a close collaborator of Urban and Hepworth, published in several instalments in the openly pro-British newspaper *De Telegraaf* in 1917, were most probably neither inspired nor used by British propaganda officers.

British-Dutch film cooperation did not cease to exist throughout the war and it blossomed shortly after the conflict had ceased. In August 1919 experienced Dutch film maker Maurits Binger joined forces with British distributor Harry R. Smith and director B.E. Doxat-Pratt (Bishoff 82, Delpeut 21). Anglo-Hollandia, renamed in 1920 Granger-Binger Film made some relatively successful films. Binger, however, worked for a British distributor The Central Feature & Exclusive Film Co., Ltd already in 1915 (eyefilm.nl). The film starred Fred Penley, a British internee, who established the cabaret *Timbertown Follies* at the Groningen (POW) Camp and found a way into Dutch film (see *Timbertown Follies 2014*). The Penley-case, and the phenomenon of the war-time British cabaret, was also only recently researched (see Wielinga 2014). It is highly plausible that British authorities had no knowledge of commercial cooperation between the Dutch and the British that ran despite the turbulences throughout the conflict.

The question that arises is whether this knowledge would have changed anything in British propaganda strategy. Even if the turn towards secondary and covert propaganda had occurred earlier, probably it would not have changed the situation much. It appears not very plausible that even perfect propaganda features would have changed the Dutch mistrust and antipathy towards Great Britain after trade restrictions, annexation of ships, cutting off the cable connecting the country



with its colonies etc. The genius of D. W. Griffith would probably have proved futile after the Dutch-British tensions caused by discontinuation, under British pressure, of re-selling imported goods to Germany.

Another important fact is that the Netherlands remained in many aspects quite marginal for British propaganda politics. The British aimed at convincing the USA to join the war, and at counterbalancing German propaganda, rather than at putting in every possible effort to win hearts and minds of the Dutch people. Regardless of their crucial geopolitical position, Dutch territories in Europe, Asia Pacific and Southern America, were not the main concern of the British. The Cinematographic Branch was interested in influencing Dutch audiences but, unlike the Germans, not willing to make any special efforts of financial or creative kind. Therefore, it is rather plausible that even if the British were aware of the range of bilateral contacts within the film trade, they would not have invested much in making pro-British propaganda by Dutch directors and producers. Such strategy reached beyond the principles and the plans of British film propaganda at that time.

The historical conclusion appears to be quite clear: British film propaganda achieved successes in the Netherlands, but its most spectacular success, *Britain Prepared* seems to have been overshadowed by the problematic case of *The Battle of the Somme* misinterpreted by Dutch spectators and ridiculed by Dutch peace organization, the NAOR. The militaristic character of the Somme-film discredited all further British feature-length war documentaries and reduced their impact to the closed circle of trusted sympathizers of the British case. Unwilling to invest in book adaptations or impressive historical melodramas, the Cinema Branch tried to achieve success with documentary shorts of marginal meaning and questionable artistic value. Therefore, the triumph of German secondary film propaganda, carefully orchestrated and abundantly financed by the Ufa, came as no surprise.

On the other hand, “[t]he belligerents’ general disregard for the sanctity of international laws that govern neutrality” (Abbenhuis 262), did not facilitate the work of propaganda officers. They had to face the hostile attitude towards British militarism and imperialism, which affected the Netherlands not only in political terms but far more through economic restrictions affecting the daily life of nearly all Dutchmen. “The neutral’s ultimate purpose was to stay out of the war. In the end, the loss of sovereignty, independence and economic security – three things that the Dutch had hoped to achieve by staying neutral – were price paid for fulfilment of the general aim” (Abbenhuis 263). The British played too prominent a role in the process of stripping the Netherlands of its core values to be able to win hearts and minds of the Dutch by means of propaganda, I will conclude. The disregard of Dutch sense of integrity appears to have been more detrimental to British propaganda than the lack of knowledge of commercial and artistic links between Dutch and British commercial film. However, they both appear to be rooted in the same approach of neglect and lack of respect for a small nation, representing other set of values than the militant British one.

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