4 Suffering Compatriots

Compassion, Catastrophe, and National Identification in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

Why do nations command such profound emotional legitimacy? This was one of the central questions of Benedict Anderson's 1983 seminal study *Imagined Communities*. Only recently have historians turned their full attention to the affective dimensions of nationalism and national identification. They argue that emotions and feelings are key to understanding the strong pull of nationalism on the lives of people. My chapter will single out one such 'national emotion': compassion for fellow countrymen. Focusing on the Netherlands of the nineteenth century, this article investigates how moments of major catastrophe were appropriated by the authors of poems and eyewitness reports to disclose the suffering of countrymen in the struck area. They invited the public to affectively identify with the victims' anguish and misery, gave shape and meaning to these feelings of compassion, and thus laid the emotional groundwork for strong ties of national unity and belonging.

Keywords

national belonging – appropriation – compassion – the Netherlands – nineteenth century

In late January 1807, Josué Teissedre l'Ange delivered a sermon in the Walloon church of Haarlem. The subject of the minister's address was the Leiden gunpowder disaster: earlier that month, a ship carrying numerous barrels of black powder had exploded in the town of Leiden, causing the death of more than one hundred fifty people and the destruction of over two hundred

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buildings in the town's city centre.[1] Teissedre l'Ange invited his audience to paint for themselves a mental picture of the 'scene of disaster' ('toneel van akeligheden'). He asked them to imagine the mortal fear the townsfolk had felt during the explosion and to hear the 'moaning of the wounded, the groans of the dying'. The listeners had to feel the pain of the inhabitants of Leiden, or so the minister made clear: 'If one member of the Fatherland suffers, the other members should suffer with him'.[2]

Making use of this expression, Teissedre l'Ange referred to a key characteristic of nation-building: the feature that the 'heart' of any nation ultimately consists of a shared sense of social and moral compassion with those individuals who allegedly belong to the same nation.[3] The cognitive understanding that compatriots are in fact part of the same national community as yourself implies a sense of mutual connectedness and affective identification, and compassion has therefore been a powerful resource for nation-building. This emotion has allowed contemporaries to affectively – rather than just rationally – identify with their compatriots and, in turn, feel ever more strongly part of the national community. Focusing on the case of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, I argue in this chapter that major disasters – such as the Leiden gunpowder disaster, but also severe storm surges and river floods – were key moments during which a 'nationalist' culture of compassion with one's countrymen – and women, of course – was being propagated and consolidated.[4]

For a long time, nationalism scholars have shown awareness of the fact that affective experiences in general play a key role in processes of nation-building. National identification thrives on emotional experiences such as collective singing of anthems, attendance at solemn memorial services, and the passionate celebrations of national holidays.[5] As early as 1983, one

1 Arti Ponsen and Ed van der Vlist (eds), *Het fataal evenement. De buskruitramp van 1807 in Leiden* (Leiden: Ginkgo, 2007).

2 J. Teissedre l'Ange, *De verwoesting van den twaalfden Januarij, voorgesteld als eene algemeene ramp in eene leerrede over I. Corinth. XII 26* (Haarlem: J. Enschedé en zonen, 1807), 9–10.

3 Hanneke Hoekstra, *Het hart van de natie. Morele verontwaardiging en politieke verandering in Nederland 1870–1919* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2005), 14–15.

4 For the role of disasters in Dutch nation-building, see Lotte Jensen, 'Floods as Shapers of Dutch Cultural Identity. Media, Theories and Practices', *Water History* 13: 2 (2021), 217–33. In my PhD dissertation I have shown that major disasters are important milestones in the history of nineteenth-century Dutch nation-building: Fons Meijer, *Verbonden door rampspoed. Rampen en natievorming in negentiende-eeuws Nederland* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2022). The following contribution is based on the research I have conducted for the fourth chapter of this book.

5 Joep Leerssen, *Nationalisme* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015), 55. This is also analysed in Ann Rigney, 'Embodied Communities. Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859', *Representations* 115 (2011), 71–101.

of the pioneers of modern nationalism studies, Benedict Anderson, noted: 'To understand [nation-ness and nationalism] properly we need to consider carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, *they command such profound emotional legitimacy*'.[6] Only if we answer the latter question can we fully grasp why millions of individuals over the last two centuries have been willing to die for the sake of an abstract – or imagined – community such as the nation.

Yet only more recently, under the influence of the 'emotional' or 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences, have nationalism historians started to analyse more thoroughly the emotional dimensions of national identification processes, as is illustrated by the publication of *Emotions and Everyday Nationalism in Modern European History* in 2020.[7] Edited by historians Andres Stynen, Maarten Van Ginderachter, and Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, the volume examines the various ways in which emotions are integral to understanding the everyday pull of nationalism on ordinary people in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.[8]

This chapter focuses on the authors of two types of nineteenth-century mass media genres: occasional poetry and eyewitness reports in the periodical press. While the first genre was especially popular in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the second genre became influential towards the end of the century. I argue that the authors of these texts gave their audiences access to the suffering of compatriots in times of major disaster and contributed to Dutch nation-building by engaging their readers' affective lives. The consumers of these texts learned how to feel compassion for people with whom they had little in common but their nationality. This did not mean that authors simply *stirred* and *aroused* feelings of compassion, but they also *shaped* this emotion. They provided their readers with a vocabulary that allowed them to make sense of their affective lives.

The nineteenth-century authors' efforts to bolster a culture of compassion with unfortunate and disaster-struck compatriots can be deemed

6 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 4 (my italics).

7 Not only historians but also nationalism scholars have turned their attention to the relationship between nationalism and emotions. See, for example, Jonathan Heany, 'Emotions and Nationalism. A Reappraisal', in Nicolas Demertzis (ed.), *Emotions in Politics. The Affect Dimension in Political Tension* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 243–63; Sinem Adar, 'Emotions and Nationalism. Armenian Genocide as a Case Study', *Sociological Forum* 33 (2018), 735–56.

8 Andreas Stynen, Maarten Van Ginderachter, and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas (eds), *Emotions and Everyday Nationalism in Modern European History* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

an example of what Michael Billig has called 'banal nationalism'. This concept refers to all representations of the nation that only tacitly build a collective sense of national belonging.[9] The pitiful texts studied in this chapter were not really *explicit* nation-building endeavours: they did not overtly propagate compassion as an emotion that was typically Dutch, or even as an emotion that was solely – or predominantly – felt towards one's countrymen. All the same, the *contexts* in which they were produced meant that these texts contributed to the consolidation of the Dutch nation-state as a self-evident frame of reference. As such, they implicitly contributed to the process of nation-building in the Netherlands. Indeed, they were concerned with the victims of *national* disasters and with the suffering of *Dutch* citizens. All in all, these texts silently but boldly reinforced feelings of national unity and legitimised the notion of the Netherlands as a community of solidarity.

Compassion: A Historical Phenomenon

It was not self-evident that nineteenth-century Dutchmen would be aware of the hardships their compatriots faced in times of major disaster. Most disasters occurred tens or hundreds of miles away, while, for most contemporaries, their habitat did not encompass the entire country but rather the specific sub-region where they lived. Geographically speaking, the Netherlands was an 'archipelago of regions and communities', at least before the dawn of the railways during the middle of the century. This meant that there was little chance that an ordinary citizen would regularly meet a fellow Dutchman who resided in the other side of the country.[10]

Then as now, most disasters were events that directly affected only inhabitants of one specific city or region. Compassion towards compatriots in disaster areas was not the result of people actually knowing each other but instead originated from the process of reading about – and seeing – these victims in various sorts of texts. Media made it possible to bridge the spatial divide between, on the one hand, those who suffered the consequences of disasters, and, on the other, those who did not. It was, in short, only because

9 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

10 Hans Knippenberg and Ben de Pater, *De eenwording van Nederland. Schaalvergroting en integratie sinds 1800* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1990), 27–42. An example: at the dawn of the nineteenth century, it would take an inhabitant of Haarlem approximately seven hours to travel to Leiden, while the train would eventually make it possible to cover this distance in less than an hour: Carl Koopmans and Rogier Lieshout, 'Spoorwegen en groei', *ESB* 93 (2008), 301–2.

media raised awareness about catastrophes that people throughout the country came to learn about the misery of the victims.

By means of producing what historian Thomas Laqueur has called 'humanitarian narratives', the authors of these texts mobilised readers into affective identification with 'unknown' disaster victims in their country.[11] The notion of humanitarian narratives refers to texts that made visible the suffering of others, prompted a physical reaction from their readership, and generated moral indignation. Despite what the word 'narrative' seems to suggest, humanitarian narratives were not necessarily narrations with a well-defined storyline. Laqueur has rather categorised them as rhetorical forms that consisted of three recurring motifs. Firstly, these narratives relied on details as signs of truth. Authors overwhelmed the reader with specific information or minute observations about the hardships faced by individuals. As such, they engendered a 'reality effect'. Readers became aware of the fact that the misery took place in the same world they were living in. Secondly, authors of humanitarian narratives emphasised the corporality of the suffering subjects. Detailed depictions of corporal suffering affirmed the bodily commonality between reader and victim. They demanded that the reader physically identify with the described torment – *as if* it were happening to their own bodies. Thirdly, humanitarian narratives exposed causality and the possibility of human agency. They presented explicit pointers to stop the specific suffering they had described and, as such, represented intervention as a moral imperative. Their readers should not sit idly by but were instructed to take action, by signing a petition or by donating money. In turn, this realisation reinforced the readers' affective identification: aware of the fact that it was their decision as to whether the suffering was to stop, they were likely to feel even more connected to the fate of the unfortunate souls they were reading about.[12]

Historical research has shown that texts that made use of humanitarian narratives – novels, medical case studies, investigation reports – have played a critical part in several Dutch, nineteenth-century reform movements, such as the movements against slavery, vivisection, and child labour or the ethical movement in Dutch colonial politics.[13] Contemporar-

11 Thomas Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 176–204.

12 Laqueur, 'Bodies, Details', 176–78.

13 Amanda Kluveld-Reijerse, *Reis door de hel der onschuldigen. De expressieve politiek van de Nederlandse anti-vivisectionisten* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000); Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840–1880* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2007); Maartje Janse, 'Representing Distant Victims. The Emergence of an

ies could no longer close their eyes to the pain and misery that was being caused elsewhere and had to take a stance against the practices that made them possible, or at least this was the aim of the idealist authors of such texts.

Many types of texts that Dutch authors produced in the wake of major disasters were also meant to open readers' eyes to the hardship of others. It was with good reason that the authors of these texts often made use of theatre metaphors, just as Teissedre l'Ange had done when he spoke of the 'scene of disaster' in his sermon about the Leiden gunpowder disaster. The members of the audience had to feel as if they were actual spectators of the described suffering. Moreover, just as with the humanitarian narratives of reform movements, many disaster texts were meant to mobilise readers into taking action. As will become clear in the following paragraphs, the idea was that readers would become convinced of the societal and moral importance of charitable action and eventually would make a donation for the benefit of their compatriots in the disaster area.

Yet Laqueur does not offer any tools to analyse how humanitarian narratives actually gave shape and meaning to compassion. Ever since Laqueur first wrote about humanitarian narratives in 1989, significant changes have occurred in the ways in which historians think about emotions. Under influence of the emotional turn, historians of emotion have started arguing that emotions are not universal, timeless phenomena, but rather that emotions have a historical dimension. Each and every community and time has its own ideals, theories, and beliefs regarding specific emotions and their expression, as well as specific emotional norms and words.[14] This also applies to compassion: what this emotion meant to people, what they felt when they felt compassion, and how they expressed it differed considerably from time to time and from place to place.[15] What is more: just like other emotions, compassion had a strong cognitive component. Contemporaries, therefore, had to learn what compassion was before they could feel it.

In this article I show how the humanitarian narratives that nineteenth-century authors produced contributed to this process of learning compassion. To explain this, I make use of historian William Reddy's concept of

Ethical Movement in Dutch Colonial Politics, 1840–1880', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128 (2013), 53–80. Hanneke Hoekstra has also argued that humanitarian narratives were the boosters of a culture of civic idealism: *Het hart van de natie*, 31–32.

14 Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about Emotions in History', *American Historical Review* 107 (2002), 821–45

15 Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers, 'Introduction', in Aleida Assmann and Ines Detmers (eds), *Empathy and Its Limits* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 1–17.

'emotive'.[16] In short, emotives are speech acts directed at interpreting an individual's affective life, yet at the same time they influence the perception of this person's affective life. Expression organises the experience: our affective lives often are 'amorphous and unintelligible … until [they] have been shaped by mental attention'.[17] Emotives provide cognitive frameworks that allow persons to relate to their affective lives. A woman, for example, is experiencing certain bodily sensations and yells: 'I am angry!'. This statement is an effort to *describe* her affective life but simultaneously navigates the ways in which she *understands* her affective life. In other words, the statement 'I am angry' allows the individual to actually *become* angry. Historian Monique Scheer has deepened our understanding of emotives by arguing that not only speech acts but also every social interaction (she uses the notion 'emotional practice') contribute to the ways in which individuals learn a certain emotion.[18] The fact that the aforementioned woman for example *yells* that she is angry, and maybe also experiences trembling hands, contributes just as much to the way in which she learns how to experience anger as the actual content of her remark.

Many texts that consisted of humanitarian narratives about the misery of compatriots in the disaster area employed emotives. Authors addressed compassion as much as they addressed suffering: they introduced characters that explicitly felt compassion, made it known that they themselves felt compassionate towards disaster victims, or emphasised that their readers were to experience this emotion. They used various Dutch emotion words that characterised a sense of fellow feeling interchangeably: apart from compassion (*medelijden*), they used words such as mercy (*mededogen*), charity (*mensenliefde*), or pity (*deernis*).[19] At the same time, they often promoted

16 William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104–11.

17 This interpretation of Reddy's concept comes from Monique Scheer, 'Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bordieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion', *History and Theory* 51 (2012), 193–220, at 212.

18 Scheer, 'Are Emotions', 212–14.

19 Writing about the eighteenth century, Dorothée Sturkenboom has argued that various words that authors used to characterise compassion were 'to a high extent … used interchangeably': *Spectators van de hartstocht. Sekse en emotionele cultuur in de achttiende eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998), 300. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that each emotion word has its own history and connotations and refers to different kinds of fellow feeling. 'Compassion', for example, has different conceptual origins than related words such as 'empathy', 'sympathy', or 'pity'. See for example: Assmann and Detmers, 'Introduction', 3–4; Rob Boddice, *The Science of Sympathy. Morality, Evolution, and Victorian Civilization* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 3–6.

Figure 4.1 Reinier Vinkeles, after Cornelis van Hardenbergh, *The Destruction of the Village of Beusichem after the River Flood of 1809*, 1809, etching and engraving, 25.2 × 34.1 cm, included in a commemoration book that was published after the disaster. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-1944-1855

certain ideas about compassion, about the nature of this emotion and how it should be evaluated and expressed. As such, these authors consolidated an emotional norm and provided to their readers a vocabulary that allowed them to become aware of, give meaning to, and express their compassion. All in all, they bolstered a culture of compassion with suffering compatriots and encouraged their readers to participate in this culture.

Various genres played their part in boosting and bolstering this culture. Commemoration books, for example, were a type of text that, from the late eighteenth century onwards, provided extensive examples of suffering of disaster victims.[20] After major national disasters, especially flooding disasters, these books overwhelmed their readership with factual and specific information about all the forms of mayhem the disaster had caused in all the affected towns. Moreover, these books included prints that made visible these cases of suffering, all the more enhancing readers' identification with the

20 For more information about this genre, see Petra J.E.M. van Dam and Harm Pieters, 'Enlightened Ideas in Commemoration Books of the 1825 Zuiderzee Flood in the Netherlands', in Pepijn Brandon, Sabine Go, and Wybren Verstegen (eds), *Navigating History. Economy, Society, Science and Nature. Essays in Honor of Prof. Dr. C.A. Davids* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2018), 275–97. See also the contribution by Adriaan Duiveman to the present volume.

misery of their compatriots in the disaster area (see Fig. 4.1).[21] The remainder of this contribution, however, singles out and analyses two other genres that – because of their popular appeal and widespread dissemination – made an even deeper impression with regards to boosting and shaping nationwide compassion: occasional poetry and eyewitness reports in news media.

Shaping Compassion Through Occasional Poetry

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Netherlands had a flourishing societal life. In major and medium-sized cities – both in the urbanised west and the more rural east – the infrastructure of community life was made up of one or more voluntary societies, such as scientific, cultural, and reform associations.[22] Literary scholar Marleen de Vries has shown that the ideology behind many of those associations was centred around notions of civilisation, societal virtuousness, and patriotism: members were expected to feel responsible for the national, common good.[23] Especially in the first half of the century, members would frequently give recitals during the meetings of such associations, often in the form of poetic readings.

They believed the ideal of civilisation was to be achieved more smoothly if authors of recital texts did their best to capitalise on the affective lives of the attending listeners.[24] Not surprisingly, many speakers at association meetings would make use of humanitarian narratives in recitals about catastrophes that had just happened, for this encouraged their audiences to feel responsible for the fates of their compatriots in the affected area. Afterwards, many of these poems were published and sold at modest prices on behalf of the relief of the disaster victims, which considerably increased the number of people that would eventually hear or read one of the versions of the disaster poem.[25]

21 A more exhaustive analysis of commemoration books as the boosters of a culture of compassion with suffering compatriots can be found in the fourth chapter of Meijer, *Verbonden door rampspoed*.

22 Boudien de Vries, 'Voluntary Societies in the Netherlands 1750–1900', in Graeme Morton, Boudien de Vries, and R.J. Morris (eds), *Civil Society, Associations and Urban Places. Class, Nation and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 103–16.

23 Marleen de Vries, *Beschaven! Letterkundige genootschappen in Nederland 1750–1800* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2001). For an analysis of association culture of the nineteenth century, see Willem van den Berg and Piet Couttenier, *Alles is taal geworden. Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse literatuur 1800–1900* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 45–53.

24 De Vries, *Beschaven*, 118–21.

25 For an introduction to the nineteenth-century genre of charitable publications, see Marita Mathijsen, 'Ten voordele van… Liefdadigheidsuitgaven in de negentiende eeuw', *De moderne tijd* 4 (2020) 234–58.

An example of such a recital was a poem that Robert Arntzenius read during two association meetings in The Hague in February 1807, weeks after the Leiden gunpowder disaster. He dwelled extensively on all the calamities the explosion had caused. Immediately in the first verse, Arntzenius emphasised that it had been 'heart-wrenching compassion' ('hartverteld'rend mededogen') that had incited him to take up his pen.[26] By using this emotive, he set the tone for the poem to come.

As was fitting for a genuine humanitarian narrative, Arntzenius furthermore explicitly emphasised the corporeal dimension of suffering when speaking about the specific cases of the misery victims of the gunpowder disaster had endured.[27] The poem, for example, contained a rather disturbing anecdote about a young, pregnant woman, who was crushed by her collapsing house, causing her to have a miscarriage. Arntzenius accentuated the corporality of both the woman and the stillborn baby. He recited how 'the neck, the chest and the head' of the woman were damaged by the walls of her house, how the baby was forced from the woman's 'intestines', and how the little girl had no 'blush on her cheeks' anymore.[28] Despite these descriptions of human suffering, Arntzenius decided to end his recital on a more positive note. He expressed the hope that Leiden would soon be rebuilt and that later generations of its inhabitants could hardly imagine that all the misery he had described had actually taken place. On the contrary, they would only feel pride in the fact that their compatriots had helped them out. 'In these times of hardship', Arntzenius remarked, 'The fatherland took care of Leiden; / And God took care of the Fatherland'.[29]

The question is, however, whether poems such as these can be categorised as humanitarian narratives. Authors often staged rather stereotypical characters, especially if their poems concerned the misery caused by flooding disasters. Over and over again, young mothers witnessed their children dying, fathers failed to save their families, old men succumbed after long lives, and farmers lost the cattle that had secured their livelihoods. While authors in their poems often relied on the body of the victims as a means to enable a physical identification between sufferer and listener, their stories still come across as sentimental clichés to modern-day readers.

26 R.H. Arntzenius, *Dichterlijk tafereel der stad Leijden, in den avond en nacht van den 12den van louwmaand, 1807* (The Hague: Gebr. Van Cleef, 1807), 5.

27 Other poems that were read in the wake of the Leiden gunpowder explosion did the same: E.J.B. Schonck, *Treurzang op het rampspoedig lot der stad Leyden, van den 12 Januarij 1807* (Nijmegen: J.C. Vieweg, 1807); Johannes Wilhelmus Bussingh, *De weldadigheid, lierzang* (Leiden: Herdingh en Du Mortier, 1807).

28 Arntzenius, *Dichterlijk tafereel*, 15.

29 Arntzenius, *Dichterlijk tafereel*, 23.

Figure 4.2 A. Lutz, after Jan Willem Pieneman, *Leiden after the Gunpowder Explosion in January 1807,* 1809, hand-coloured aquatint and etching, 66.5 × 86 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-OB-88.824

Obviously, these poems were inspired by sentimentalism, a genre that had been particularly popular among novelists at the end of the eighteenth century but which would also leave its rhetorical mark on other forms of communication during the nineteenth century. Sentimental rhetoric was aimed at arousing compassion and tended to focus on the feelings of its characters.[30] The sentimentalist inclination of the association members, however, did not mean that their pitiful disaster poems were mere fiction. In some cases, the described suffering was based on real events. Arntzenius's story about the miscarriage, for example, can be traced back to an incident

30 Janet Todd, *Sensibility. An Introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1986). For sentimentalism in the Netherlands, see, for example, Annemieke Meijer, *The Pure Language of the Heart. Sentimentalism in the Netherlands 1775–1800* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). Other forms of communication that were inspired by sentimental rhetoric were, for example, sermons and parliamentary speeches: Herman W. Roodenburg, 'Tranen op het preekgestoelte. De achttiende-eeuwse kanselwelsprekendheid tussen toneel en authenticiteit', *De achttiende eeuw* 41 (2009), 15–32; Edwina Hagen, 'Fashioning the Emotional Self. The Dutch Statesman Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck (1761–1825) and the Cult of Sensibility', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 129 (2014), 138–62.

that had most likely actually happened in Leiden.[31] Disaster poems were perhaps not always *true*, yet they always aimed to be *truthful*. The main idea of literature of that age was that stories were not imitations of reality per se but rather compositions on the basis of authentic elements.[32] Even though there was a thin line between truthfulness and cliché – literary critics would regularly attack disaster poems for their hackneyed use of sentimental rhetoric – this postulate meant that listeners could accept that events *such as these* had taken place.[33]

Through their poetic readings, authors raised awareness about the fact that, elsewhere in the Netherlands, individuals were suffering the results of disaster and were deserving of compassion. Simultaneously, they frequently used emotive expressions and gave shape and meaning to feelings of compassion. Like Arntzenius, who had claimed that he himself was feeling 'heart-wrenched compassion', authors of disaster poems provided their audiences with a vocabulary that allowed them to articulate, understand, express, and evaluate the bodily arousals they experienced when listening to or reading about the misery of their compatriots.

Two notions played a key role in the culture of compassion with compatriots these authors propagated. First of all, authors repeatedly accentuated that people should express compassion by giving free rein to their tears. Author and medical doctor Nicolaas van der Hulst, for example, staged a potential benefactor in a poem that he wrote about the river inundations of 1809 and recited at an association meeting in Rotterdam. The staged man witnesses the destruction of a river inundation but cannot help the victims swallowed by the water. Van der Hulst wrote that the man, as a consequence, 'feels how his heart is torn apart' and 'cries, for he cannot help'.[34] The author here used the imagery of heart and tears to convey the idea that compassion, like other emotions, was felt from the *inside* and subsequently should be expressed from the *outside*.[35] The tears flowed directly from the heart, so

31 Peter van Zonneveld, 'Leiden: het Rapenburg. De buskruitramp van 12 januari 1807', in Jan Bank and Marita Mathijsen (eds), *Plaatsen van herinnering. Nederland in de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2006), 37–47, at 38.

32 De Vries, *Beschaven*, 125–31. In the preface to a published poem about river inundations in January 1807, one author even explicitly acknowledged that it was this idea that formed the basis of his story: T. van Limburg, *De watervloed van 1809* (s.l.: s.pub., 1809), 6–7.

33 For this criticism, see, amongst others, Lotte Jensen, *Wij tegen het water. Een eeuwenoude strijd* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2018), 23–26; Mathijsen, 'Ten voordele van…', 253–57.

34 N. van der Hulst and W. Smits, *De overstrooming in Gelderland, dichtstuk, benevens eene bijdrage op hetzelfde onderwerp* (Rotterdam: Cornel, Krieger & Van Balen, 1809), 9.

35 This older idea played a key role in the 'cult of sensibility', which was especially popular in the eighteenth century. See, for example, Paul Goring, *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century*

to speak. Compassion was also presented as an authentic emotion, which meant that it neither could nor should be faked. Conversely, individuals who felt compassion neither could nor should try to hold back their tears.

Secondly, many authors of disaster poems represented compassion as an emotion that should always lead to action. Historian of emotions Ute Frevert has aptly summarised: 'Feeling and acting were perceived as two sides of the same coin. He who just felt pity for a person without coming to their rescue or alleviating the other's suffering was deemed a weakling'.[36] After river inundations in 1820, Rotterdam brewer Willem Messchert wrote a poem in which he staged a personification of charity in order to characterise the relation between compassion, tears, and charitable behaviour:

> Charity opens her benevolent hands to help:
> The damage is being repaired, what has been lost is being compensated;
> And if her gold cannot stem the source of sorrow,
> She has a tear in her eyes to comfort the aching mind.[37]

Messchert represented compassion – and tears – as signs not of weakness but rather of helpfulness and willingness to take action.[38] Other authors did the same, for example by writing that both heart and hands had to be unlocked. This metaphorical expression served to communicate that compassion always had to go together with active help – the one simply could not do without the other.[39]

Some authors explicitly linked this idea to a sense of national belonging. They invited their audiences to identify as Dutchmen who had to help other Dutchmen. Case in point is, again, a verse from the poem van der Hulst wrote after the 1809 river inundations:

> Hurry, hurry, my Countrymen!
> Come and unlock your hearts and hands;

Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

36 Ute Frevert, 'Empathy in the Theatre of Horror, or Civilising the Human Heart', in Assmann and Detmers (eds), *Empathy and Its Limits*, 79–99, at 82.

37 'Menschlievendheid ontsluit haar milde hand tot helpen: / De schade wordt hersteld, 't verlorene vergoed; / En kan haar goud de bron van 't zieleleed niet stelpen, / Zij heeft een traan tot troost van het afgepijnd gemoed'. W. Messchert, *De watersnood* (Amsterdam: M. Westerman, 1820), 28.

38 This is also argued in Sturkenboom, *Spectators*, 313–17.

39 Toussyn Woordhouder, *Het karacter van een oprecht patriot, herinnert bij den waternood van 't Koningrijk Holland, in den Jare 1809* (Rotterdam: J. van Santen, 1809); Johannes Wilhelmus Bussingh, *Aan Nederland* (Rotterdam: J. Pippijn, 1825), 13.

Oh yes! already does charity
Happily ignite all the gifts,
While you, with raised hands
And in tears, help your brothers.[40]

The prototype that van der Hulst represented was that of the compassionate, tearful, and charitable Dutchman who felt morally responsible for the fates of individuals with whom he had little in common except his nationality. As such, he tacitly bolstered the notion of the Netherlands as a community of solidarity, made up of compatriots who affectively identified with one another and helped each other out in times of hardship.

Witnessing Suffering

Disaster poems and charitable publications had their heyday in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the second half of the century, eyewitness reports would become the leading genre with regards to bolstering a nationwide culture of compassion in times of major disaster. Who could better manage to open the eyes of audiences to the misery of others than someone who had in fact witnessed this misery themselves? Eyewitness reports were especially published in periodical press, most notably newspapers and illustrated magazines.[41] The possibilities for periodicals using eyewitness reports expanded after 1850: with the advent of trains and telegraph machines, periodicals were increasingly able to report from the disaster area within only one or two days. These were also the decades in which these media, due to a variety of factors, caught the attention of an ever-larger share of the Dutch public.[42]

As the genre of eyewitness reports published in periodicals became prominent in the second half of the nineteenth century, this article now

40 'Snelt aan, snelt aan, mijn Landgenooten! / Komt, mildlijk hart en hand ontsloten; / O ja! menschlievendheid ontsteekt / Alreeds blijmoedig de offeranden, / Terwijl met opgeheven handen / Uw broeder, snikkend, uitkomst smeekt'. Van der Hulst and Smits, *De overstrooming*, 12.

41 Sometimes they were also published in the form of individual booklets. Two examples are *Herinnering aan onzen togt naar eenige Noord-Hollandsche dorpen, overstroomd op den 4den Februarij 1825* (Amsterdam: M. Westerman, 1825) and B.S., *Twee dagen in Veenendaal gedurende den watersnood in maart 1855* (Dordrecht: J.P. Revers, 1855).

42 For an extensive overview of these developments, see the chapters by Remieg Aerts, Frank Harbers, and Thomas Smits, in Huub Wijfjes and Frank Harbers (eds), *De krant. Een cultuurgeschiedenis* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2019).

takes a leap forward in time. Moving from the early decades of the century, this last section focuses on a specific flooding disaster that happened in December 1880. The reporting of this disaster perfectly illustrates the nature and dynamics of eyewitness reports. On the penultimate night of the year of 1880, a river dyke broke, causing the Meuse to flood several polders and towns in the province of North Brabant. The town of Nieuwkuijk had been particularly strongly impacted, hence the name given to the disaster afterwards: the Disaster of Nieuwkuijk.[43]

Catholic newspaper *De tijd* took the lead. In the first weeks of 1881, this newspaper published numerous reports from various towns in and around the flooded region. Eyewitnesses recurrently described to the readers of *De tijd* what they had seen: the damage that had been done by the streaming water, inhabitants of the region who had fled to higher areas – their roofs or a nearby hill or dyke – and large numbers of refugees who were given sanctuary in nearby towns such as 's-Hertogenbosch. It is not surprising that *De tijd* was most ambitious in publishing eyewitness reports. In North Brabant, the Catholic newspaper could rely on a broad network of informants. What is more, they probably sensed their readers were especially interested to know what had happened to their fellow-believers in the Catholic south. However, *De tijd* was not the only news medium that reported on the disaster: newspapers and magazines such as *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant*, *Het nieuws van den dag*, and *Eigen haard* published one or more eyewitness reports from the affected region as well.[44] Newspaper *Algemeen handelsblad* and illustrated magazine *Katholieke illustratie* went a step further by sending their own reporters to Nieuwkuijk and giving them the task of writing about their experiences.[45]

The eyewitnesses made it clear that their ultimate goal was to make visible the situation in the flooded region. Some of them used theatre metaphors to express this: while describing specific events or providing a description of the atmosphere, they spoke, for example, of a spectacle ('schouwspel') and of

43 Francien van den Heuvel, *'s-Hertogenbosch, eiland in een onmetelijke zee. Omgangsstrategieën van de stedelijke overheid en de bevolking van 's-Hertogenbosch met hoogwater en overstromingen (1740–1995)* (Oisterwijk: Wolf Publishers, 2021), 254–59.

44 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* (2 January 1881); *Het nieuws van den dag* (4 January 1881); *Eigen haard* 7 (1881), 52–54.

45 For more information about the dawn of this genre, see Frank Harbers, 'Between Personal Experience and Detached Information. The Development of Reporting and the Reportage in Great Britain, the Netherlands and France, 1880–2005', PhD dissertation, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2014.

scenes of sadness and misery ('tooneel van ellende', 'tooneel vol jammer').[46] Furthermore, the eyewitnesses emphasised their role as observers. They purposely described what they *saw* or what they *heard*. The reporter of *Algemeen handelsblad* even explicitly invited his readers to watch *along with* him in the perilous accommodation of a group of refugees: 'Oh, throw a glance with me into the hut, which has been built so hastily out of straw, in the midst of this watery pond'.[47] As such, authors allowed the readers to experience the scene via the reporter's senses, so that the readers could imagine themselves being eyewitnesses as well.

The readers of such eyewitness reports were not to count on the objective or sober stories many of us nowadays associate with good journalism. These nineteenth-century reports were very personal accounts, meant to move the readers and engage their affective lives. In order to so, they made use of the same rhetoric the authors of disaster poems had used as well: they zoomed in on the anguish and misery of the inhabitants of the disaster area. One author, for example, wrote about the situation in Nieuwkuijk in the days after the dyke breach: 'Throughout the entire town, grim cries for help could be heard. Out of windows and from roofs, one could see entire households extending their arms, and hear unfortunates begging for aid'.[48] What is more, the authors accentuated the various forms of corporeal suffering, which made these eyewitness reports genuine humanitarian narratives. They used, for example, the image of freezing bodies to pave the way for readers to physically identify with the suffering of flood victims.[49] Most nineteenth-century Dutchmen knew only too well the bodily torment that could come from the winter cold. In addition, authors frequently described the great deal of hunger they had witnessed among the various flooding victims.[50]

In addition to their senses, the authors of these reports also put their own affective lives at the readers' disposal. They described how they emotionally experienced everything they witnessed in the vicinity of Nieuwkuijk. They

46 See, amongst others, *De tijd* (4 January 1881); *Algemeen handelsblad* (4 January 1881); *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* (2 January 1881); *Algemeen handelsblad* (7 January 1881); *Katholieke illustratie* 14 (1881), 147.

47 'Och, sla met mij een blik in dat van riet en stroo en palm in allerijl opgeslagen hok te midden van dien polderpoel'. *Algemeen handelsblad* (4 January 1881).

48 'Allerwege verhief zich een akelig noodgeschrei. Uit de vensters en boven op de daken zag men gehele gezinnen de armen uitsteken, en hoorde men de ongelukkigen om hulp smeeken'. *Het nieuws van den dag* (4 January 1881)

49 *Katholieke illustratie* 14 (1881), 147; *Algemeen handelsblad* (4 January 1881).

50 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* (2 January 1881); *Algemeen handelsblad* (6 January 1881).

often used heart metaphors to give substance to these emotive expressions, as a means to characterise how they were deeply touched by the suffering of the inhabitants of the region: they wrote how their hearts were either 'wrenched' or 'moved' by the various scenes they observed ('hartverscheurend', 'hartroerend').[51] And not only that: several eyewitnesses labelled their emotional response as 'compassion' or even prescribed how compassion ought to be expressed. 'Go there', one author wrote about his visit to Nieuwkuijk, 'Surely, your eye will turn wet and you will compassionately avert your eyes as soon as you set foot in the town'.[52] Readers could use these emotive expressions to make sense of their own affective lives as well, to grasp the emotions they experienced when reading about the unfortunates in Nieuwkuijk as a sign of compassion.

Like the poems analysed in the previous paragraph, the key idea of the humanitarian narratives these eyewitnesses produced was that readers would not wallow in their compassion but rather that they would convert their feelings into charitable behaviour. One author explicitly articulated this idea and linked it to the notion of the Netherlands as a community of solidarity. So far, the author from the town of Waalwijk (near Nieuwkuijk) had repeatedly reported about the misery in the flooded region. In *De tijd*'s edition of 10 January 1881, he more or less directly addressed the reader: 'Many houses have been devastated, much happiness has been put to an end, much prosperity has been destroyed – how can we repair this, even in a small degree, without all humanitarians in the Netherlands joining forces?' Here he placed compassion in a national framework, since he explicitly wrote about humanitarians *in the Netherlands*. He went on: 'That is why I want to call for the aid of our wealthy brothers, who know the word "flood" and perhaps can imagine what a flood looks like, but whose imagination still cannot match what has really happened; our fate is put into their hands, they have to help us'.[53] The author represented charitable behaviour as something that originates from imagination, from the extent to which individuals are able to

51 *De tijd* (4 January 1881); *De tijd* (6 January 1881).

52 'Gaat er thans heen … [Stellig] wordt uw oog dan vochtig en wendt ge u met deernis en innig medelijden af, zoodra ge het plaatsje betreedt'. *Eigen haard* (1881), 52.

53 'Zoovele woningen weggevaagd, zooveel geluk geknakt, zooveel welstand vernietigd – hoe dat alles, zij het dan ook slechts in geringe mate, te herstellen, zoo niet alle menschenvrienden in Nederland de handen in elkander slaan. Daarom voeg ik mijn stem bij zoo velen, om nogmaals een beroep te doen op onze bevoorrechte broeders, aan wie de watersnood niet dan bij naam bekend is, die zich ja misschien wel een watersnood kunnen verbeelden, maar wier verbeelding toch nog steeds beneden de werkelijkheid zal blijven; op hen is onze hoop gevestigd, zij moeten ons ter hulp snellen'. *De tijd* (6 January 1881).

visualise for themselves the amount of misery others have to suffer. Through his eyewitness reports, the author from Waalwijk – as well as the other authors in *De tijd* and the authors in other periodicals – aimed at providing the means for readers to form a clear notion of the situation in Nieuwkuijk so that they would start feeling compassionate towards their unfortunate compatriots and, as a consequence, take action to stop their suffering.

Concluding Remarks

The nineteenth-century Netherlands experienced many physical, social, and religious divides. Some authors hoped to bridge those divides – if only for a brief period – by producing texts that invited their readers to affectively identify with the victims of disaster. This chapter has shown that, through disaster poems and eyewitness reports, contemporaries were able to learn about the suffering that had been triggered by disasters elsewhere in the country. What is more, consumers of these texts were taught how to feel compassion with their contemporaries, or rather: what it entailed to feel compassionate towards a fellow Dutchman. The most important notion these texts conveyed was the notion that feeling and acting were two sides of the same coin. This notion was often presented with a nationalist flavour: they encouraged readers and listeners to convert their feelings into actions to help their compatriots. Feeling compassion was expected to be translated into acts of national belonging. As such, these texts laid the foundation for the notion of the Netherlands as a community of solidarity, whose members helped each other out in times of crisis and hardship. Indeed, through their mobilising appeal, these texts embedded the emotion of compassion firmly in the ways in which contemporaries identified with the nation and the national community.

About the Author

Fons Meijer is a historian. Between 2018 and 2022, he wrote his PhD thesis at Radboud University about the relationship between nationalism and processes of nation-building in the wake of major disasters in the nineteenth-century Netherlands. Previously, he studied history at Radboud University and the University of Sheffield (UK). He is specialised in the modern political and social history of Western Europe, with a specific interest in identity formation, political representation, and media culture.