

5 Cultural Resilience during Nineteenth-Century Cholera Outbreaks in the Netherlands

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Abstract

The nineteenth century saw several severe outbreaks of cholera in the Netherlands. This chapter discusses how Dutch society responded to this new and frightening disease. It is argued that cultural responses played an important role in increasing societal resilience. Resilience was strengthened and shaped by cultural media, such as paintings, prose, poems, songs, prints, novels, sermons, and concerts. By offering moral and religious explanations, cultural responses helped people to make sense of the disruptive events and to cope with their fears and uncertainties. Cultural responses also aimed at fostering a sense of community by raising money for the sufferers. Citizens were called to action in the local and national newspapers, poems, songs, and sermons. This led to impressive amounts being collected in a short time.

Keywords

cholera – epidemic disease – the Netherlands – cultural resilience – relief – solidarity

In 1853 the well-known Dutch poet Hendrik Tollens published a beautifully decorated leaflet containing a short poem. By buying it for the price of 25 cents, citizens helped the cholera sufferers.¹ It was not only sold door-to-door,

¹ This corresponds to approximately € 2.80 in the year 2021. See the calculator of the International Institute of Social History, <https://iisg.amsterdam/nl/onderzoek/projecten/hpw/calculate.php> (accessed 4 April 2023).

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Figure 5.1 Decorated leaflet with a poem by Hendrik Tollens on behalf of the cholera sufferers, 1837–56, lithography, text in red with a golden border, published by H. Nijgh, 11.7 × 17.4 cm. Museum Rotterdam, 16316

but in several larger cities people could also leave their payments in collection boxes.² With his verses Tollens encouraged his countrymen to be as generous as possible: ‘Help, give, who is able to give! / No ear may be deaf! No heart of stone!’³ Tollens prayed in the name of the Lord that the voice of humanity would be heard. His campaign was quite successful: with his poem he raised 721 guilders (which corresponds to approximately € 7,870 nowadays).⁴

Tollens was not the only author who wrote about the cholera pandemic in a moving manner. Nationwide, citizens were encouraged to help the victims through songs, prose, sermons, prints, and broadsheets. In some cities, charity concerts were organised on behalf of the needy. Writers, artists, and musicians appealed to a sense of shared Dutch identity and reminded people that it was their religious duty to reach out to the distressed. In these artistic responses, there was also room for expressing emotions such as fear and grief or, as Tollens did, seeking consolation in religion.

² *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* (5 October 1853); *Algemeen handelsblad* (6 October 1853).

³ ‘Helpt, geeft, wie helpen kan en geven! / Geen oor gestopt! geen hart versteend’. H. Cz. Tollens, *Uitroep bij eene inzameling ten behoeve der cholera-lyders* (Rotterdam: H. Nijgh, 1853).

⁴ *Tollens begrafenis* (25 October 1856). *Uitgegeven ten behoeve der oprigting van een gedenkteeken* (Rotterdam: H. Nijgh, 1856), 6.

In this chapter, I argue that cultural responses played an important role in increasing societal resilience in times of disaster, such as the nineteenth-century cholera outbreaks. ‘Cultural resilience’ is a broad concept, which derives from the social and psychological sciences, and considers ‘how cultural background (i.e. culture, cultural values, language, customs, norms) helps individuals and communities overcome adversity’.⁵ Here I focus on the way cultural resilience was strengthened and shaped by cultural media, such as paintings, prose, poems, songs, prints, novels, sermons, and concerts. By offering moral and religious explanations and by shaping a sense of community, cultural responses helped people to make sense of the disruptive events and to cope with their fears and uncertainties. Firstly, I will embed this research in the broader field of historical research on epidemics and offer some historical background on the cholera outbreaks in the Netherlands. Secondly, I will analyse how cultural responses were aimed at increasing societal resilience. Finally, I will tentatively draw some parallels between the past and the present.

Historical Approach

In the last two decades historical approaches have become more and more topical in the field of disaster studies. This emerged from the growing recognition that history provides a useful tool to better understand how societies deal with shocks and hazards, and which factors play a role in fostering their resilience. As historian Bas van Bavel and others have shown, the past may be used as a ‘laboratory’ to understand which societies are better at coping with crises than others.⁶

A heightened awareness of the relevance of historical disciplines can also be witnessed in the research on epidemics. Historians Frank Snowden and Samuel Cohn have convincingly shown that epidemics need to be studied from a broad, multidisciplinary perspective: the way people react to new diseases, the medical and political interventions, and the search for causes are deeply influenced by social and cultural circumstances. In *Epidemics and Society. From the Black Death to the Present* Snowden argues that epidemics have an enormous impact on societies: what starts as a medical problem

5 Caroline S. Clauss-Ehlers, ‘Cultural Resilience’, in Clauss-Ehlers (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cross-Cultural School Psychology* (Boston, MA: Springer, 2010), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-71799-9_115.

6 Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka de Keyser, Eline van Onacker, and Tim Soens, *Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

may turn out to have huge social, political, and cultural consequences in the longer run. Snowden pays much attention to the representation of diseases in the arts: according to him, works of art reveal how societies reflected upon matters of life and death.⁷ Cohn also points out the importance of contextualising contagious diseases in *Epidemics. Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS*.⁸ His case studies stem from different geographical settings and time spans but show certain patterns: outbreaks of new infectious diseases always went hand in hand with searching for scapegoats, political turmoil, and the rise of social reform movements. At the same time, there were tendencies to strengthen bonds within communities through religious practices, rituals, and charity. Cohn calls them ‘mechanisms for unity’.⁹

Responses like these – from scapegoating to fostering solidarity – belong to the wide range of coping mechanisms that human beings develop when confronted with catastrophes such as floods, earthquakes, fires, and epidemics. In his study *Cultures of Disaster* (2003), Greg Bankoff differentiates three coping strategies: preventive strategies, strategies which reduce the material impact of disasters, and strategies which reduce psychological stress. His research focuses on the Philippines, where people have to live with the risks of floods and consequential outbreaks of diseases. As a consequence, they have developed a ‘disaster culture’, in which the reduction of risks prevails.¹⁰ While the first two strategies entail practical measures (e.g. building with new materials, moving to other living areas), strategies to reduce psychological stress are to be sought at the emotional and cultural level. Here, the entire variety of cultural forms – ranging from religious practices and collections to musical events and poetry – played an important role: they not only offered an outlet for emotions such as fear and uncertainty but also provided comfort and meaning because they connected people. In addition, they helped to collect money to alleviate the direct needs.¹¹

7 Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society. From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2020).

8 Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *Epidemics. Hate and Compassion from the Plague of Athens to AIDS* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

9 Ibid.

10 Greg Bankoff, *Cultures of Disasters. Society and Natural Hazards in the Philippines* (London: Routledge, 2003).

11 See also Beatrice de Graaf, Lotte Jensen, Rina Knoeff, and Catrien Santing, ‘Dancing with Death. A Historical Perspective on Coping with Covid-19’, *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy* 12: 3 (2021), 346–67.

All three coping strategies can be witnessed during the cholera pandemics in the Netherlands. The country was hit by three waves: 1832–33, 1848–49, and 1866–67. At the end of June 1832, the first death cases were reported in the Netherlands. Over the next months, the number rose explosively: in the years 1832–33, a total of 10,000 people died of cholera in the province of Holland, of which 1,273 were in Amsterdam.¹² The outbreak in 1848–49 resulted in 22,708 dead (2,256 in Amsterdam). Then the illness remained latently present, until it erupted again in 1866–67, when approximately 20,000 people died of the disease.¹³ The number of casualties in Amsterdam dropped significantly (to 1,104) thanks to the installation of water pipes. In 1854 the British scientist John Snow had discovered that drinking contaminated water played a large role in the spread of the disease. After the 1867 outbreak, cholera disappeared in the Netherlands but it still circulated in other European countries. The discovery in 1883 of the cholera bacteria by the German physician Robert Koch, which proved the importance of good hygiene in preventing the disease, led to a further decrease in the number of victims.¹⁴

During the three waves which hit the Netherlands, the local governments took many measures: large gatherings and events such as fun-fairs and food markets were cancelled and health regulations were issued. During the first outbreak of 1832, the local authorities of Rotterdam published a list of forty-one actions to be taken.¹⁵ They demanded that inhabitants keep their houses clean, ventilate regularly, and reduce the number of people in one room. They also advised against eating fish, fruit, and watery vegetables, in particular melons, cucumbers, and cabbage. People should avoid eating meat, because the animals could suffer from the same symptoms as human beings. Coffee, tea, and red wine, on the contrary, could be healing. Some pharmacists took advantage of the situation and offered ‘cholera powder’, which would strengthen resilience and keep the consumer in a good humour. The miraculous medicine was quite expensive: one bottle cost f1.25 (€13.41), which was far too much for the average citizen, let alone the poor.¹⁶

12 Janwillem Korten, ‘Verloop en gevolgen van de cholera, 1817-1923’, *NGV*, published online 3 January 2021, <https://www.ngvnieuws.nl/4-verloop-en-gevolgen-van-de-cholera-1817-1923> (accessed 3 April 2023).

13 Ibid.

14 Today cholera outbreaks still occur, mostly after catastrophes such as earthquakes and floods, for example in Haiti in 2010.

15 *Rotterdamsche courant* (16 August 1832).

16 *Oprechte Haerlemsche courant* (27 March 1832).

Such practical measures were meant to prevent the further spread of the disease. It was uncertain to what extent they actually helped, but from the experience with other contagious diseases such as the plague, people knew that preventive measures with regard to hygiene, food, and social gatherings could slow the spread of the disease. At the same time, people had to find ways to cope with feelings of uncertainty, fear, and grief. Historical research shows that cultural media played an important role in steering emotional and social reactions to catastrophes.¹⁷ They not only offered an outlet for emotions such as fear and uncertainty but also provided comfort and meaning because they connected people. Authors and artists also encouraged a sense of local and national community: they aimed at increasing solidarity among citizens by heightening empathy with victims and by fundraising. With regard to the cholera outbreaks in the Netherlands, the cultural media fulfilled four functions, which I will discuss below: they regulated emotions, offered moral and religious lessons, propagated solidarity, and gave shape to a memorial culture.

Expressing Emotions

While the newspapers published new reports on the number of casualties, authors and artists expressed their feelings of fear and uncertainty by means of poems, stories, and images. They made use of a specific stylistic device that was often applied to diseases: personification. In medieval and early modern times, for example, the plague was represented as an old, bent woman, sometimes wearing a black cape and carrying a broom and a rake. Cholera was visualised as a figure with frightening characteristics, who travelled around and brought death. It took different shapes: the disease could be portrayed as a masked ghost, a devil, an apocalyptic horseman, or a violin-playing skeleton. Sometimes, cholera and death were represented as one and the same figure and visualised as a skeleton, carrying a scythe with which it brutally ended people's lives.

Another way of depicting the disease was by way of comparison. Adriaan van der Hoop, a young and ambitious poet from the city of Rotterdam, compared cholera with other disasters that were familiar to his audience: the plague and floods: cholera was like 'the cruel plague, whose power cannot be described with words'. This plague now threatened the Dutch

17 See, for example, Gerrit Jasper Schenk, 'Images of Disaster. Art and the Medialization of Disaster Experiences', in Kondo Kenichi (ed.), *Catastrophe and the Power of Art* (Tokyo: Mori Art Museum, 2018), 145–49 and de Graaf et al., 'Dancing with Death'.

coasts, like a flood posing a danger to a dyke: 'A cruel plague, o Netherlands, / threatens your coasts, / Like the flood the constructed dam'.¹⁸ By comparing the new disease with other disruptive events, he tried to get a grip on the new situation.

The Dutch minister and poet J.J.L. ten Kate also wondered who this unknown and unwanted guest was. He described cholera as a female traveller, who departed from the world's end and managed to enter Europe without a passport:

Cholera! 't Is the Unknown,
Who triumphs over lock and key:
The wanderer of world's end,
Who finds access without a passport.
She silently sneaks in.¹⁹

Similar characteristics were used by another minister and poet: J.P. Hasebroek. He also described cholera as an unwanted perpetrator, who brutally manifested herself by wandering around, entering ships, and pushing poor infants into the grave. She wore a black mask over a pale face. The twinkling eyes betrayed her eastern origin (cholera had its origins in Asia).²⁰

Printmakers and draughtsmen also made use of personification. Sometimes the disease was represented as an apocalyptic horseman who was trampling people to death; other times the disease took the shape of a devil with a tale and wings. Cholera could also be one and the same person as Death, who was visualised as a skeleton with different attributes. A widespread print showed Death handing out contaminated water to people. Artists also portrayed cholera sufferers to show the disease's terrible consequences: patients turned pale, screamed from pain, threw up white substance, and displayed blue and red spots on their skins. Their situation was so unbearable that they longed for death in the end.

Images like these circulated across nations.²¹ This was also the case with the iconic figure of the 'danse macabre', which already circulated during

18 'Een wreede pest, ô Neêrland! Dreigt uw kusten, / Gelijk de vloed de opgeworpen dam'. Adriaan van der Hoop jr., *De cholera; graf- en boeteklanken* (Amsterdam: Brest van Kempen, 1832), 24.

19 'De Cholera! ... 't is de Onbekende, / Die slot en grendel overwint: / De wandlares van 's waerelds ende, / Die zonder paspoort toegang vindt. / Zij laat zich zwijgend binnensluiken'. J.J.L. ten Kate, *De cholera in Nederland. Zang des tijds* (Amsterdam: W.C.H. Willems, 1849), 6.

20 J.P. Hasebroek, 'De onbekende', in J.P. Hasebroek, *Winde-keiken. Gedichten* (Amsterdam: H. Höveker, 1856), 36.

21 See, for instance, Olaf Briese, *Angst in der Zeiten der Cholera* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2003).



Figure 5.2 *Cholera as Apocalyptic Horseman*, illustration in *L'espiègle. Journal satirique, politique, artistique et littéraire* (Brussels, 1866). Source: Online Museum De Bilt, <https://onlinemuseumdebilt.nl/de-cholera-in-de-regio-de-bilt/> (accessed 26 April 2022)

the medieval plagues in churches, cemeteries, and other public spaces. It symbolised the idea that Death did not distinguish between the poor and rich or the young and old and was re-used during the cholera outbreaks. The German artist Alfred Rethel, for example, made a drawing in which Cholera and Death make their entrance at a masked ball in Paris in 1832. Death plays the violin made of human bones, whereas Cholera, dressed as an Egyptian mummy, sits on a throne carrying the scourge of disease as a sceptre.²² Such references to dances of death reminded the audience of the transience of life and the inevitability of death. They also entailed a social and moral message in showing the moral obligation of charity and solidarity.²³

Several Dutch authors implicitly referred to the motif of the 'danse macabre' by elaborating on the dangers of musical gatherings and festivities: the sounds of music and laughter attracted many people, but they could lead to death. The poet J.J. A. Gouverneur painted a macabre picture of cholera and the horrible pains which the sufferers experienced. These screaming

22 For an analysis and contextualisation of this print, see Christiane Hertel, 'Dis/Continuities in Dresden's Dances of Death', *The Art Bulletin* 82 (2000), 83–116.

23 Cf. de Graaf et al., 'Dancing with Death', 347–48.



Figure 5.3 M. Bos, after Alexander Ver Huell, *The Guard at Our Borders*, 1854–85, lithography, printed by Gouda Quint, 27 × 37 cm. Gelders Archief, Arnhem, 2039 – 4206-0042, A.W.M.C. Ver Huell / M. Bos

people sounded like 'festive music' in the ears of Cholera, who cheerfully waved his scythe.²⁴ This type of horrific music was also mentioned in an 1849 pamphlet, in which a pharmacist and a barkeeper discussed whether the fair had to be cancelled that year. The sympathy of the (anonymous) author clearly lies with the pharmacist, who dramatically sketches the death of a young mother with her two children; the partying crowd lets the burial procession pass, while the sound of violin music triumphantly fills the streets.²⁵ In another leaflet the people were also warned against visiting the fair with a little rhyme: 'Here entertainment is calling you, there the grave is waiting. Thus, refrain from the fair's joy'.²⁶ In such writings a sharp contrast was drawn between the temporary joys of entertainment and the long-lasting consequences they could have.

That fear could be instrumentalised in a political way becomes clear from an 1866 print by the draughtsman Alexander Ver Huell, entitled 'The guard at our borders'. It showed a ghostly skeleton in a large white cape, who was waving a flag with the text 'cholera'. The disease functioned as a guard against foreign enemies. At that time the Prussian ruler Otto von Bismarck was at war with Austria and strived for the creation of a German Confederation. Ver Huell feared that Bismarck would declare war on the Netherlands as well and portrayed cholera as a frightening enemy to the Germans.

By personifying the new disease and comparing it with other catastrophes, poets and artists tried to get grip on the new and unknown killer. By depicting cholera as a monster and equating it with Death, they may have increased fears amongst their audiences. At the same time, they offered all sorts of moral and religious lessons to steer these emotions in the right direction.

Moral and Religious Lessons

Most authors urged people to repent their sins and pray more. Van der Hoop stated that penance was the best remedy against the disease: people had to pray as much as they could. The title of his work, *De cholera; graf en boeteklanken* ('Cholera. Sounds of the Grave and of Penance', 1832) underlined his religious message.

24 J.J.A. Goeverneur, *De dichtwerken* (Amsterdam: Amsterdamsche Courant, 1889).

25 *Moet het kermis of geen kermis zijn te Amsterdam?* (Amsterdam: Wed. C. Kok, geb. Van Kolm, 1849).

26 'Hier wenkt het vermaak – gindsch wacht U het graf. Zie dus volgaarn van de Kermisvreugd af'. *Kermis of geen kermis?* (1849, Collection Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam).

Many considered cholera as a punishment from God, who warned the people to behave more virtuously. The theologian and poet Bernard ter Haar represented cholera as a Luciferian figure, the personification of evil, who raged through the universe on his wagon. This monster held a long and furious monologue in which he blamed human beings for their sins. When people asked him how long he would stay, he did not have a clear answer: 'You ask, how long I will stay? O mortal being, no human being nor angel knows, only God knows the number of hours'.²⁷ The minister and poet J.J.L. ten Kate went even one step further and considered cholera as a sign that the end times had arrived. He stated that God sent these punishments as a means of purification and urged the Dutch to repent their sins.

The religious message was also spread in songs and sermons. The central message of the song *De cholera regeert niet* ('Cholera Does Not Rule', 1848) was that the Dutch nation was not ruled by cholera but, ultimately, by God alone. In his sermon *De cholera: eene roede in de hand des heeren* ('Cholera. A Rod in the Hands of God', 1853) the minister Jan de Liefde repeatedly stated that the people were to blame for the new cholera outbreaks. If they did not improve their behaviour, God would keep on sending his thorn. Some authors adopted a milder tone. The poet C.G. Withuys, for example, did not speak of an angry but a loving God. Death should be welcomed and not feared: 'The love of God is just as endless as great; / The grave brings his Essence closer'.²⁸

One sin was singled out in particular: alcohol abuse. The well-known preacher and philanthropist O.G. Heldring gave the debates a new twist by arguing that drinking gin was more harmful than cholera.²⁹ He argued that the overconsumption of alcohol was a structural societal problem whereas the cholera epidemics lasted only short periods of time.³⁰ When the fair was forbidden in 1849 in Amsterdam, Heldring became a point of reference in the heated discussions. The local shopkeepers and pub owners strongly disagreed with his plea against alcohol; they considered him to be the enemy of all kinds of pleasure in life.³¹

27 Bernard ter Haar, 'De cholera. Bij hare wederverschijning in 1849', in Bernard ter Haar, *Dichtwerken*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1880), 225 and J.J.L. ten Kate, *De cholera in Nederland*, 225.

28 C.G. Withuys, 'Bij het woeden der cholera', in *Aurora. Jaarboekje voor 1850* (Amsterdam: J.H. Laarman, 1850), 258.

29 O.W. Dubois, 'Ottho Gerhardt Heldring, 1804-1876, predikant en filantroop', in *Biografisch woordenboek van Gelderland*, ed. C.A.M. Gietman et al., vol. 3 of 7 vols (Hilversum: Verloren, 2002), 59-61, online: http://www.biografischwoordenboekgelderland.nl/bio/3_Ottho_Gerhard_Heldring (accessed 3 April 2023).

30 O.G. Heldring, *De jenever erger dan de cholera. Een volksboek, in voorbeelden en cijfers, voor arm en rijk, oud en jong* (Arnhem: Is. An. Nijhoff, 1838).

31 *Moet het kermis*, 2.

Only very few authors claimed that the cholera outbreaks had nothing to do with moral sins. In 1832 an anonymous critic stated that it was ridiculous to assume that God used disasters to punish people for their ways: 'Are the people of Groningen guilty of more violations than the inhabitants of Amsterdam? Are the people from Zeeland better than those of Holland? ... It's not righteous to consider disasters as a real punishment or revenge of the evil'.³² The physician Hendrik Jan Broers, who at the time of the cholera outbreaks worked in Utrecht, went even one step further by pointing to medical and socio-economic causes: the reason some neighbourhoods were hit harder than others was poverty. He spoke of the 'poor people's disease'. The only remedy was to improve the living conditions of the poor people in society. His socio-politically engaged call for a better distribution of welfare, however, was an exceptional voice.³³

Solidarity and Charity

Besides expressing emotions and offering moral and religious lessons, cultural responses also aimed at fostering a sense of community by raising money for the sufferers. Citizens were called to action in the local and national newspapers, poems, songs, and sermons. This led to impressive amounts being collected in a short time. This can be explained by the fact that charity was at the heart of Dutch society in the nineteenth century: it was considered every citizen's duty to help the needy.³⁴ Charity peaked in times of disaster: whenever a flood occurred, citizens' committees went to great lengths to collect money and goods. The infrastructure to help the cholera sufferers was already there.

Poets considered it part of their profession to contribute to the general welfare. Hendrik Tollens, for instance, published many poems on behalf of

32 Review 'A. van der Hoop jr., *De cholera; graf- en boeteklanken* (1832)', *Vaderlandsche letteroefeningen* (1832), 728: 'Zijn de Groningers aan meer overtredingen schuldig dan Amsterdammers? Zijn de Zeeuwen beter Christenen dan de Hollanders? Wie zou dergelijke stellingen durven beweren? ... maar men is daarom niet gerechtigd, die rampen als eene eigenlijke *straf*, eene *vergelding* van het kwade te beschouwen'.

33 Hendrik Jan Broers, 'De cholera', in J.P. de Keyser, *Bloemlezing, ten gebruike bij de beoefening onzer letterkunde* (The Hague: Henri J. Stenberg, 1877), vol. 1, 688–94. On cholera and resilience in Utrecht, see Beatrice de Graaf, "Dat een ieder zich beijvert zijn zwakke krachten in te spannen". Veerkracht en cholera in de negentiende eeuw', *De moderne tijd* 6: 4 (2022), 272–98.

34 See Lotte Jensen, 'Floods as Shapers of Dutch Cultural Identity. Media, Theories and Practices', *Water History* 13: 2 (2021), 217–33, at 227–28; Fons Meijer, *Verbonden door rampspoed. Rampen en natievorming in negentiende-eeuws Nederland* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2022).

the distressed. Whether it was on behalf of the wounded, the poor, or the victims of an illness or flood, he was the first to express his sympathy by means of his work. Several ministers also published sermons in order to collect money for the cholera sufferers. In Utrecht J.D.A. Molster published a collection of songs and prayers, *Liederen en gebeden* ('Songs and Prayers', 1849), in support of the distressed, and in Sluipwijk (in the province of South Holland) Abraham ten Bosch published *Twee preken, naar aanleiding der heerschende cholera* ('Two Sermons on the Occasion of the Current Cholera Outbreak', 1849). He paid for the printing costs himself and donated all the income to local committees.

Money was also raised by organising benefit concerts. On 5 October 1832 the members of the rifle company played a tribute in the theatre of Amsterdam to the soldiers who were fighting against the Belgians. Although the performance had nothing to do with the cholera epidemic, the revenues nevertheless went to the victims. Another benefit concert was held on 30 September in Zandvoort, a village located on the west coast of the Netherlands. The entrance price was f 1.50 (€ 18.09), and extra trains were available for visitors outside the village.³⁵ In 1854 a big concert hall in Rotterdam was the venue of a large event: an orchestra of 100 musicians and a choir of 125 singers went on stage, at the initiative of the Jewish choir Jubal. Amongst other pieces, they performed a cantata by Willem Hutschenruyter, with lyrics by Hendrik Tollens. The audience was cheering and applauding when the old poet (he was seventy-four years old) came on the stage, hand in hand with the composer. The cantata was a call for charity and solidarity and ended with prayers. A total of f 800 (€ 8,176.51) was collected on behalf of the needy.³⁶

Memory Culture

A fourth function of cultural responses was the shaping of a memory culture. Although the number of publications and material tokens is much smaller than with other disasters that occurred in the Netherlands, such as floods, the remembrance of severe epidemics was passed on to next generation by means of cultural media.

In several cities memorial books were published with the aim to document what exactly happened. The minister G.H. van Senden from Zwolle,

³⁵ *Algemeen handelsblad* (26 September 1849).

³⁶ *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche courant* (28 January 1954).

for example, published an overview of the way cholera had spread in the province of Overijssel during the first outbreak. His intention was to preserve the events in the regional collective memory: 'This booklet has the purpose, to keep the memory of the ordeal, and the practical use which it can provide, for a long time'.³⁷ He published his book at the request of others, who had been very much impressed by the sermon he gave on 14 November 1832. The regional, communal, and church authorities provided him with detailed information, names of the victims, and all sorts of statistics. He also provided a historical overview of earlier epidemics in the Netherlands, the measures local authorities took, and the relief actions in Overijssel. Van Senden's memorial book furthermore contained a list of subscribers; most of them came from his hometown.

Such compendia were also published in other cities of the country, such as Leiden and Scheveningen (where the disease occurred for the first time on Dutch soil in 1832).³⁸ The course of events was accurately documented by tables, statistics, and official regulations. They also contained stories of people who survived, such as the cure of a certain lady in Leiden, who managed to stop vomiting by drinking *bouillon de veau*.³⁹ In this way these books also provided practical advice in case the disease would return.

The cholera epidemics were not only remembered in memorial books but also by means of medals. On 23 November 1867 King William III awarded bronze medals to persons who had excelled in helping people during the outbreaks, for example physicians. One side showed a Greek male figure holding a staff of Aesculapius with the text 'Ob cives servatos' ('For the saving of citizens'). On the other side, a laurel was engraved with the text: 'For good care and help during the cholera asiatica in 1866'. However, the number of memorial books and medals is very low in comparison to those issued to commemorate floods. And unlike in other European cities such as Sheffield, Hamburg, or Dresden, there are no monuments in the Netherlands which commemorate the cholera deaths in the Netherlands. This probably has to do with the fact that epidemics are long-onset disasters, which have

37 'Het werkje strekke, om, met geheugenis der bezoeking, ook het nut, dat zij te weeg zou brengen, nog lang te bewaren'. G.H. van Senden, *Uren van godsdienst ter gelegenheid van de cholera te Zwolle; met bijvoegselen* (Zwolle: J. de Vri en M. Brinkman de Vri, 1833), 260.

38 J.G. Waardenburg, *Praktische aantekeningen betreffende de cholera te Scheveningen* (Leiden: J.C. Cyfveer, 1832); J.F. d'Aumerie, *Herinneringen uit de cholera-epidemie te Scheveningen en proeve eener oplossing der raadsels van de Aziatische cholera* (The Hague and Amsterdam: gebroeders Van Cleef, 1833); C. Pruys van der Hoeven, C.W.H. Kaathoven, and G. Salomon, *Geschiedverhaal van de cholera-epidemie te Leiden, in 1832* (Leiden: C.C. van der Hoek, 1833).

39 Ibid.



Figure 5.4 Jacob Samuel Cohen Elion, medal to commemorate the 1866 cholera pandemic, signed on the obverse: J ELION F, 1866, bronze, diam. 5.7 cm, 91.2 g. Museum Lakenhal, Leiden, 3244

no clear beginning and ending. Unlike floods, where there is a sudden disturbance of life, clear heroic actions, and instant recovery, epidemics lack this ‘narrative’ structure. And the geographical location is more difficult to determine: Whereas flood monuments are erected at the exact spots of the disastrous event, epidemics are everywhere and thus nowhere in particular.

Parallels Between the Past and Present

Cultural responses to the Dutch cholera outbreaks show that coping with the disease entailed more than practical strategies, such as hygienic and social measures. People sought ways to express their emotions, make sense of the distressing events, and help the victims. Cultural representations appealed to solidarity and charity and can be considered as one of the ‘mechanisms for unity’, as Cohn calls them.⁴⁰

Inspired by the historical, contextualised approaches of Snowden and Cohn, historians Beatrice de Graaf, Rina Knoeff, Catrien Santing, and I have argued that history may provide valuable lessons for present-day crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹ Societal responses to epidemics, we argue, reveal striking similarities across countries and time and entail knowledge about successful and unsuccessful (‘failure paths’) efforts at coping with diseases. One of the historical insights that is still applicable today is that

⁴⁰ Cohn, *Epidemics*, 68.

⁴¹ de Graaf et al., ‘Dancing with Death’, 346–67.

legitimacy is crucial in explaining the success or failure of governmental measures: tensions, calls for reform, and civil protest are an integral part of the societal repertoires that occur in times of long-lasting epidemics. Therefore, medical interventions alone will never suffice: a pandemic is never about viruses and bacteria alone, and it poses a so-called wicked problem for society: some solutions (e.g. closing schools, shops, and museums) will inevitably lead to new problems. A second insight which may be derived from history is that the developing cultural and social rituals, symbols, and repertoires can contribute to the resilience of societies. History offers many examples of how local and national communities tried to adapt to crises through cultural practices. The variety of cultural representations helped people to find a shared narrative and language for coping with fear and grief, and for fostering solidarity.⁴²

The cultural responses to the Dutch cholera outbreaks provide a telling example: authors and artists gave direction to suffering people, tried to make sense of the events by pointing to higher meaning, offered different explanatory models, and called for action to help those in need. Stories, poems, music, theatre, and other art forms offer a medium in which people can express emotions, escape, reflect, and mobilise help. For that very reason, culture remains indispensable in today's society when confronted with new diseases.

About the Author

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42 de Graaf et al., 'Dancing with Death', 360.