In the late afternoon of November 9, 1939, a shoot-out and a hijacking took place in the small southern border town of Venlo, the Netherlands.1 Through this incident Venlo unwittingly earned itself a place in the history textbooks of the Second World War, which had begun only two months earlier.2 On this fateful afternoon special forces of the SS kidnapped the two leading British intelligence officers in the Netherlands, Richard Stevens and Sigismund Payne Best. While this occurred on Dutch territory, the two men were taken across the border into Germany, where they would stay in captivity for the remainder of the war. An officer of the Netherlands’ intelligence agency GS IIIA (GS being the abbreviation for Generale Staf/General Staff), who accompanied the two British men, the young lieutenant Dirk Klop, was mortally wounded during the shoot-out. His body was also taken by the SS-forces.

The two British intelligence officers had been in contact with some German counterparts in the Abwehr, the counterespionage organization of the German armed forces, who had been opposed to Hitler’s war plans. The German officers wanted to stage a coup d’etat against Hitler, but before doing so they wished to sound out the British reactions towards the peace arrangements they had in mind once their coup had

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1 The author would like to thank Isabelle Duyvesteyn for the improvements of the English text.
succeeded. Through a Dutch female agent, the SD, the security service of Hitler’s national-socialist party NSDAP, learned of these German-British peace-feelers and decided to replace the real schemers by some fake ones. When the SD-agents were no longer able to keep up their intelligence game, they lured the British intelligence officers to Café Backus in Venlo, only a few hundred yards from the German border.

German counter-intelligence was surprised to find out that an officer of the Dutch General Staff accompanied Stevens and Best. His presence at the spot would be one of the excuses the German government used six months later in their official declaration of war on the Netherlands: its government had not adhered to its proclaimed policy of neutrality.

As a result of the events in Venlo, the British government decided to disrupt all ‘peace feelers’ with Germans that were taking place across Europe at the time. From this moment on, First Sea Lord Winston Churchill, who, pressed by Prime Minister Chamberlain and Foreign Minister Halifax, had reluctantly agreed to the contacts of Stevens and Best, was now strongly against every contact with the German opposition, as was the British intelligence service MI6. Thus the Venlo incident led to a toughening of the British position. The British government relinquished its hope for ‘the other Germany.’ No less than total surrender would be acceptable from then on.

The incident near Venlo is one of the very few events from the time of Nazi rule in Germany that earned the border areas of the Netherlands a place in Dutch national historiography of its traumatic relations with the Third Reich. Dutch history writing on this era is almost wholly centered on the western part of the country.3 There—in The Hague—was the seat of the government, where the policy of neutrality was formulated and executed, which afterwards could be appraised by historians. There was the Fortress Holland, which would serve as the final retreat for the Dutch authorities, military and business. If this retreat were used, the border areas would be given up. The offices of the major newspapers

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