HISTORY AND MYTH OF DUTCH POPULAR PROTEST IN THE NAPOLEONIC PERIOD (1806–1813)

Johan Joor

Introduction

The ‘Napoleonic period’ was a time of great importance in Dutch history. Napoleon’s proclamation of the ‘Kingdom of Holland’ (Koninkrijk Holland) and subsequent elevation of his younger brother Louis to ‘King of Holland’ on the 5th of June 1806 in Paris finally ended the old Dutch republican polity. It was, moreover, under the successive authoritative Napoleonic regimes that several fundamental changes took place. The process of administrative centralization, which had already started in 1795 as a result of the Batavian Revolution but that had come to an almost complete standstill after the conservative regime change in 1801, was enforced as quickly as possible. A strictly hierarchic and standardized civil service was constructed. The judicial system was radically unified and finally a recently developed fiscal system was successfully implemented on a national scale. In short: in the Napoleonic period the nation-state was practically shaped and therefore the process of modernization had its real start in Holland.

In historical terms the Napoleonic period can be divided in two phases. In the first four years of this period the Netherlands was a formally independent kingdom under Louis Napoleon. In the last three years, from July 1810 until November 1813, the country was a part of the French Empire. In this period of ‘Incorporation’ (Inlijving) Holland lost her national independence completely, although the northern part of the territory, above the rivers, remained a separate administrative entity, the ‘Dutch Departments’ (Les Départements de la Hollande), under an own governor, the former ‘Third’ Consul Charles François Lebrun, Duke of Piacenza, and an own administration, the ‘general government’, in Amsterdam.

Although of course nuances can be made, the Napoleonic period can be considered as a ‘neglected’ part of Dutch history and for a long time
the dominating image in Dutch historiography was that of an ultimate calm in the country and an extreme passivity amongst the people. The people of Holland would not wake from this lethargy until November 21, 1813, the day that Gijsbrecht Karel van Hogendorp proclaimed in The Hague a national ‘General Government’ (Algemeen Bestuur) in the name of Orange. Congruent to this view, concerning the attention paid to the Napoleonic years, the image of dullness and passivity also became part of the public memory in general. It is fascinating that in this general view one exception was made: the forced introduction of the Registry Office (Burgerlijke Stand) in 1811 was according to oral tradition fiercely opposed by a massive and wilful refusal to choose an official surname and by frequent registering with protest names, especially funny names and names who were conflicting decency.

In the Napoleonic time itself officials and prominent figures regularly came to a quite opposite conclusion about the behaviour of the Dutch people. In a letter to Talleyrand the deputy French envoy in the first years of Louis’ kingship Serurier classified the Dutch as ‘a people more rebellious than in any other country’. In several of his police bulletins Fouché underlined the strong undercurrent of anti French feelings amongst the people in the Kingdom of Holland and Napoleon himself during his visit to the Dutch Departments in the Fall of 1811 was obviously relieved when he did not notice any form of direct protest. This visit was accompanied by extensive safety measures and according to persistent rumours in that period had already been planned in the summer of 1810 but then postponed because the Emperor had feared an assault.

An elaborate and systematic research into the archives of administrative, judicial, police and military authorities on different operational