



## GERMANY IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PART II: THE VIEW FROM THE NETHERLANDS

By David Danelo



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In January 2011, Colleen Geske, a Canadian expatriate and Amsterdam resident for seven years, started the blog "[Stuff Dutch People Like](#)" as a forum for describing the Netherlands to foreign visitors. Unexpectedly, her online community became an internet portal where Dutch citizens reflect on their own eccentricities. Based on the comments, the blog's popularity comes more from Dutch readership than tourists or transients. The discussion threads, as much as the posts themselves, offer a glimpse into one of northern Europe's most distinctive cultures.

According to Geske, high on the list of stuff the Dutch enjoy is making fun of Germans. Mockery at Deutschland's expense is almost a national sport in the Netherlands, as the Dutch weave colorful parodies of German stereotypes into common and uncommon events. Order, efficiency, and precision are roasted as German extremes, as the Dutch contrast with their own self-image of balance, practicality, and tolerance. With 16.9 million inhabitants compared to Germany's 80.7 million, the biting humor suggests sibling rivalry. Many common jokes end with cruel punch lines, such as:

*A Dutch man sees a man on his knees using his hand to drink water from one of Amsterdam's canal. He walks up to him and says in Dutch: "Hey – you can't drink that water, it's dirty and will make you sick."*

*The tourist shouts back in German: "What are you saying?"*

*The Dutch man responds in German: "Use both hands, it's much better!"*

Jokes are often rooted in painful truth, and seventy years ago, the German-Netherlands relationship was no laughing matter. About 230,000 Dutch citizens died during World War II, or 2.5% of the wartime population of nine million, many from disease and famine as much as violence. Before World War II, bicycles had come quickly to Holland, and the flat terrain made cycling the most affordable and functional form of public transport. After Nazi Germany occupied the Netherlands in 1940, soldiers confiscated bicycles and recycled the metal and rubber for war materiel. Dutch citizens responded by making bicycle possession a protest symbol; as Nazi convoys careened through Amsterdam's streets, Dutch cyclists would join hands, up to four abreast, and slow their pace to thwart the convoy's progress. Even today, Dutch football fans are often seen holding

bicycle signs during matches against Germany, and Dutch citizens feel no shame in asking new German acquaintances to “give me my bike back.”

The countries share more common World War II heritage than the Dutch might want to admit. As Holland’s most visited tourist attraction, the Anne Frank House has endured in Holland’s consciousness as a physical symbol of the inhumanity the Nazi regime visited upon the Netherlands. Visitors are told of the horrors “the Germans” brought; when touring the house, German schoolchildren, according to an Amsterdam resident, are often brought to tears.

Although the Netherlands was occupied during World War II, the scope of complicity the Dutch shared during the Holocaust seems to have been greater than Holland may care to publicly admit. About 20,000 Dutch men fought in the SS, and close to 100,000 were members of the Dutch Nazi Party. Dutch citizens sheltered the Frank family, but it was also Dutch citizens who betrayed them to the Gestapo; Dutch police who supervised their detention; Dutch municipal workers who loaded them onto trains; and Dutch rail workers who drove them to execution. The Nazis killed about 107,000 of the 140,000 Jews, or 80%, living in Holland during World War II. The only country with a higher percentage of Jewish residents murdered was Germany.

Historical tragedies aside, Holland in the 21<sup>st</sup> century welcomes Germany’s rise to continental power. “Relations have never been better between the Netherlands and Germany,” an official from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs told me. “We share the same mindset, interests, and values, especially with the European Union.” The Netherlands is the largest foreign investor in Germany, and 20% of Dutch exports go to Deutschland. The Netherlands says Chancellor Angela Merkel is “firm at the helm” of Europe, and her policies have the Dutch foreign ministry’s full support. “Through Europe, Germany became strong,” said the policy official. “And through Germany, Europe will remain strong.” It is a far cry from 1989, when then-Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers opined that German citizens lacked the right to choose their own future when Western European heads of state discussed German reunification.

Beyond sharing the same mindset, interests, and values—traits that have endured, in varying degrees, throughout the history of Dutch-German relations—the Dutch believe Germany grew to power as a collaborative unifier rather than a belligerent authority. Having struggled stoically through reunification in the 1990s, the Dutch culture affirms a working class sensibility that the German heartland shares.

Beneath the platitudes of shared interests, it is the view that Germany achieved power in Europe through simple, determined hard work that enables the Netherlands citizens to affirm German continental primacy. Consider Herbert Grönemeyer’s [\*Bochum\*](#), a 1984 song about the artist’s hometown that is, for many Germans, an unofficial cultural anthem.<sup>1</sup> Located in the Ruhr Valley 50 miles from the Holland-Germany border, Bochum combines with ten other cities and parts of four districts to form Germany’s largest metropolitan area. The song frames modern Germany’s view of itself, and the [lyrics resonate across borders](#):

*I know you're no beauty  
For work's lined your face  
You don't like wearing make-up  
You're an honest place...*

*Your heartbeat's of metal  
It hammers out through the night  
The foundation of prosperity  
You're a working town*

Reactions to another cultural unifier, European football, offer more insight into the evolving Holland-Deutschland relationship. During the Cold War, football matches between the two countries were metaphors for war; the 2-1 loss to West Germany in the 1974 World Cup Final was, for the Dutch, a national humiliation. Vengeance came June 21, 1988, when the Netherlands defeated West Germany 2-1 in Hamburg during the European Football Championship (Euro) semifinals. Following the victory, Dutch defender Ronald Koeman mocked German fans by pretending to wipe his backside with a German player’s shirt. Despite public repudiation, Koeman refused to apologize, citing “hatred” he felt for Germany. Amsterdam residents describe the cathartic revelry as a “moment of national liberation,” and their eventual championship victory against the Soviet Union was, by comparison, anticlimactic.

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But when I asked an Amsterdam resident how he felt about Germany's 2014 World Cup championship victory, he struck a different tune. "I was happy the Germans won," he said, going on to describe how Germany's style of play and team attitude had changed since the old days. The German Mannschaft and Dutch Oranje remain rivals, but now they seem to share mutual respect. Germany is the abusive older brother who went to rehab and made good. "The Germans represented Europe well in the World Cup. They won the right way."

Unfortunately, football also highlights less pleasant parallels between darker forces lurking in the cultural consciousness of both countries. In April 2015, Dutch fans of FC Utrecht were captured on video chanting anti-Semitic slogans at their opponents, Ajax Amsterdam, while waving Nazi salutes. "Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas," they sang. "My father was in the commandos, my mother was SS; together they burned Jews because Jews burn the best!" The team apologized after the video surfaced, claiming they would be conducting an investigation to identify and punish those responsible.

Offensive chants at European football matches are nothing new, but racism and anti-Semitism in the Netherlands seems to be a just-barely-unacceptable social taboo. "I feel more comfortable in Brussels than Rotterdam," a Dutch citizen of mixed racial ancestry told me. Despite its iconic status as a symbol of tolerance, the Anne Frank House has never had a Jewish director, and, according to writer Jeffery Goldberg's March 2015 *Atlantic* report, members of Amsterdam's Jewish community widely understand that none of them should apply for the job. Every Christmas in the Netherlands, thousands dress up in blackface as Zwarte Piet (Black Pete), who arrives on ship for an annual parade as a white Sinterklass' "helper." Dutch protestations that the tradition is "cultural and not racist" might be easier to accept if two hundred years ago, those same ships had not been carrying real slaves, and if *apartheid* was not the most commonly recognized Dutch word worldwide.

At the same time, the Dutch reputation for tolerance, particularly in Amsterdam, also has well-earned history. In February 1941, Dutch workers, none of whom were Jewish, were the first to defy Nazi anti-Jew policies by holding a two-day national strike. Three organizers died and 12 were jailed for the resistance. After World War II ended, Queen Wilhelmina, who was exiled in during the war, added a scroll bearing Amsterdam's city motto—"valiant, steadfast, compassionate"—to the city's coat of arms as a sign of national respect. "Never will I forget the emotion that overwhelmed us, when eyewitnesses first notified us in London of how the entire population had actually turned against the inhumanity of the cruel tyrant," the Queen said during a 1947 ceremony.

Significantly for the Netherlands given their cultural connections, and for all of the continent because of German dominance, no European leader has been more vocally opposed to xenophobia than Chancellor Angela Merkel. "Anyone who hits someone wearing a skullcap is hitting us all," Merkel said in September 2014 at a rally against anti-Semitism in Berlin. "Anyone who attacks a synagogue is attacking the foundations of our free society." The German leader has also affirmed Islam as "part of Germany," repudiating anti-immigration activists following the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks. "I am the Chancellor of all Germans," Merkel said. "And that includes everyone who lives here permanently, whatever their background or origin." The nation that was once Europe's cruel tyrant has become the continent's moral compass.

"*Wilhelmus van Nassouwe ben ik, van Duitsen bloed,*" read the first lines of *Wilhelmus*, Holland's national anthem. When literally translated, they read: "William of Nassau am I, of German blood." In 1574, when the anthem was penned, Deutschland was not yet a nation, and the modern Dutch bristle at any hint that they are of German ancestry. William's leadership in the Dutch Revolt against Spain enabled the Netherlands to become an independent country. Ultimately, his bloodline mattered little in what defined his national identity.

And it is the question of German—and European—identity that we will examine in the third and final article. Will working class towns like Bochum affirm Chancellor Merkel's vision of cultural harmony, or are racial ideals still a bridge too far for northern Europe to cross? How will Germany respond as increasing numbers of economic migrants, asylum seekers, and war refugees travel north from throughout Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and even southern Europe in search of opportunity? Can the country balance the tension many of its citizens feel between preserving and sustaining prosperity and reducing the political influence of racism and xenophobia? What will it mean to be German in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?