

A new definition of resistance offers a more realistic picture

Resistance in the Netherlands was far more widespread than is often claimed

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Contact *magazine*, 1940–1945 Foundation, spring 2025

The newly published *The True Dutch Resistance: How a Million People Stood Up to the Nazis* offers a fresh perspective on resistance in the Netherlands. The Dutch-language anthology includes contributions from prominent historians and journalists. The book aims to correct common misconceptions about the nature of the resistance during the Second World War—and how extensive it really was. In doing so, it addresses an important gap in the country’s collective memory.

In recent decades, many have claimed that wartime resistance in the Netherlands was limited, involving only a small minority of brave fighters. Most Dutch people were, in this telling, merely cowardly bystanders who looked on passively while the Nazis committed their crimes. That image is partly the result of historian Loe de Jong’s definition of “illegality.”

In his seminal work *The Kingdom of the Netherlands in the Second World War (Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog)*, De Jong focused on “illegal workers.” These he defined as people who worked full time, within organized networks, to carry out sabotage, espionage, assassinations, raids, underground publishing, and document forgery. He excluded the huge numbers of people who acted alone, as well as those who went into hiding, sheltered people

in hiding, or took part in strikes. In this way, De Jong arrived at 45,00 “illegal” resistance fighters, almost all of them men.

Ever since, a “resistance fighter” has typically been portrayed as a man who carried out dramatic attacks and raids. That image has lodged itself firmly in the Netherlands’ collective memory—but it fails to capture the true scale and diversity of resistance to the German occupiers.

The full scale of the resistance

The True Dutch Resistance is a call for a new, broader definition of “resistance,” formulated as “everything people did—or chose not to do—to undermine and oppose the German occupier, consciously and deliberately, whether acting alone or as part of a group.” This definition covers a wide variety of resistance activities: organized and unorganized, collective and individual, armed and unarmed, one-off and sustained. These ranged from dramatic, high-profile actions to modest, everyday forms of defiance. What they share is that the people who carried them out, if caught, faced punishment or harm.

Resistance always involved risk—not only for the people taking action, but often for those around them as well. The consequences could include imprisonment, various forms of exclusion, intimidation, or violence. Of course, not every form of resistance carried the same likelihood of arrest, or the same severity of punishment. Hiding Jewish people was far more dangerous than listening to Radio Oranje in your attic. But in both cases, the act could be discovered and punished by the occupying forces.

If resistance is defined as actively opposing the occupier, with all the risks that entailed, it involved far higher numbers than previously estimated: roughly 20% of the Dutch population between the ages of 20 and 65. This includes not only the 45,000 counted by Loe de Jong, but also tens of thousands of people who produced and distributed forged identity cards, ration coupons, and underground newspapers; hundreds of thousands who went into hiding; hundreds of thousands more who helped those in hiding; and half a million people who took part in the strikes of 1941 and 1943.

Hiding

After the war, going into hiding was rarely viewed as a form of resistance. It was treated as almost “normal” precisely because so many were involved—not only the people in hiding, but also those who sheltered them and helped in countless practical ways. This view could be heard in comments like, “No, my parents weren’t in the resistance. But we did have people in hiding in the house.”

Yet going into hiding *was* a form of resistance. It disrupted the Germans’ plans—little wonder the occupiers hunted people down so relentlessly, especially Jews. Helping those in hiding was often punished severely as well. And yet hundreds of thousands of women and men did exactly that, making this the largest and most underestimated form of resistance. Taking together those in hiding and those who sheltered them, around 700,000 people were directly involved—a striking figure in a country where the population aged 20 to 65 numbered just 5.1 million.

Offering shelter often came at a high cost. For women in particular, hiding people in their homes and providing for them—sometimes for years—was exhausting, stressful work. This help was usually offered quietly and without fanfare. The helpers lived in danger, sacrificed a great deal, and endured the constant fear of betrayal or discovery. But by defying German measures and orders, they undoubtedly undermined the occupying forces and saved lives. The value we place on this kind of help and its scope within the resistance deserves a fresh look.

The April–May strikes

On April 29, 1943, the occupying authorities announced that Dutch soldiers who had attempted to defend the Netherlands when the Germans invaded in 1940 were to report immediately for forced labor in Germany. The order affected roughly 300,000 men. That same day, 3,000 workers at the Stork machine factory in Hengelo walked off the job. The next day workers went on strike in many other parts of the Netherlands.

Caught off guard, the occupiers panicked and responded with brutal force. After a week of arbitrary reprisals and terror, the strikers were driven back to work. Some 150 people were killed, and many others later died in prisons or concentration

camp. Those executed under the martial law regime (*Politiestandrecht*) imposed during this period simply vanished, buried in unmarked graves.

The April–May strikes were the largest outbreak of mass popular resistance to Nazi policy anywhere in occupied Europe. Around 500,000 women and men took part in what was, in reality, an uprising rather than a strike. There was no labor dispute between employers and workers, and many farmers and other self-employed people joined in as well. Refusing to work was the only tool they had to signal to the occupier that a line had been crossed. Their action was violently crushed, but the occupiers' brutality ultimately backfired. Public opinion hardened still further, and more and more Dutch people became willing to resist.

A mixed group

Resistance fighters came from every walk of life, with different backgrounds, views, and beliefs. They included women and men, young and old, city dwellers and rural communities, Jews and non-Jews, people from the former colonies, the religious and the nonreligious, university graduates and laborers. They didn't see themselves as heroes, though many of them did extraordinarily brave things.

Women played an essential role in the Dutch resistance, but their contributions have long been overlooked. The narrow definition of resistance meant that much of what women did simply didn't "count," and male historians often failed to pay attention to women's contributions. The latest research has shown just how unjustified this neglect was. In recent years, many biographies have been published about women who were deeply involved in resistance activities. Even so, we still lack a comprehensive overview that does justice to women's central role in the resistance.

Dutch Jews, too, were active in the resistance throughout the war, contrary to the still-prevalent notion that they did not stand up to their persecutors. The first anti-Jewish measures in the autumn of 1940 immediately sparked reactions: Jews protested openly, fought back, went on strike, produced and distributed underground newspapers, went into hiding, fled, and took part in armed campaigns. They did so both in mixed groups alongside non-Jewish Dutch people, but also in entirely Jewish resistance organizations.

People from the overseas territories also stood in solidarity with the Dutch population in rejecting National Socialism. Many took an active role in the resistance. As early as 1938, a board member of the Indonesian national student association publicly condemned the barbaric persecution of Jews. One of the best-known figures associated with this group is Anton de Kom, a Surinamese anticolonial writer and activist who later joined the Dutch resistance.

The mood in the country

From the outset, most Dutch people were anti-German and opposed to collaboration with the occupiers. The German *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) reported as much to its superiors in Berlin in January 1941. That hostility only grew stronger over time. In the privacy of their own homes, many people dared to say what they thought—even if they didn't always dare to defy the occupiers openly.

Resistance was rooted in the pillarized Dutch society of 1940. When the occupiers banned organizations, their communication channels were cut off. Only the churches escaped the clampdown—the Nazis did not dare to outlaw them—and large groups of people could still gather there. In churches, and in the underground press, moral authority still had a role to play.

People did their best to keep the country's social infrastructure intact, and despite all the prohibitions, informal networks continued to function. They mattered enormously. Within the safety of one's own circle, people shared information, kept an eye on one another, and could be urged to do—or not do—certain things. Many individual acts of resistance often began there.

Resistance frequently started with small, individual actions. Over time, loose networks gradually emerged. A minority took things further and formed groups for organized, nonviolent resistance. An even smaller group moved into organized armed resistance. These fighters faced risks comparable to those of soldiers. In practice, resistance activities were usually a blend of individual initiative and organized action. The entire resistance network was an interconnected web in which each link knew as little as possible about the next, left few traces, and tried to remain invisible.

A broader and thus more inclusive definition of resistance in the Netherlands reveals both its diversity and its true scale. Under this definition, roughly one million people in the Netherlands took action against the occupiers—some 20% of the population between the ages of 20 and 65. That stands in sharp contrast to the familiar claim that precious few had the courage to stand up to the Nazis.

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Mirjam Lange-Schoemaker and Paul van Tongeren (eds.): *The True Dutch Resistance: How a Million People Stood Up To the Nazis (Een Land in Verzet – Hoe een miljoen mensen opstonden tegen de nazi's*; Balance, €25). Foreword by Hans Blom; contributions by Liesbeth van der Horst, Gerard Mensink, Hans Morssinkhof, Rianne Oosterom, Ben Braber, Herman Keppy and Egbert van de Schootbrugge.