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Our history

# Being Brave Because It Is Right

- Features -

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**.April 13 marked the seventy-fifth anniversary of the death of Dutch socialist revolutionary Henk Sneevliet, whom the Nazis murdered alongside seven of his comrades. Sneevliet had served as leader of the Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front, an underground organization founded immediately after the German invasion in May 1940. By then, Sneevliet was already a prominent socialist; before the war, he traveled all over the world, supporting small communist parties and building solidarity.**

Born in 1883 to a poor family in Rotterdam, Sneevliet was raised by his grandmother and aunts after his mother's death in 1886. He excelled in school, and his family's relationships found him enough financial support to pursue secondary education. He later recalled feeling out of place among his wealthier schoolmates. There was no way he could continue studying after graduating â€" something he would look back on with regret â€" so, at seventeen, Sneevliet began working for a major railway company.

Witnessing his community's poverty and experiencing class difference firsthand made Sneevliet aware of social issues at a young age. He must also have followed the late nineteenth century's strike wave. In 1902, Sneevliet joined the Dutch Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP).

When he joined, the party and the labor movement were severely weakened after a failed strike effort. Sneevliet, however, belonged to a younger generation, unburdened by this defeat. He and others of his age set about rebuilding the movement.

At twenty-four, he became the first socialist city councilor in his new hometown of Zwolle. On election day, Sneevliet was not yet old enough to vote: for that, he needed to be twenty-five. He had also joined the railway workers' union and, in 1911, was elected as its chair.

Sneevliet gravitated toward the SDAP's radical left wing. There, he met Henriette Roland-Holst , or Aunt Jet as he affectionately called her. A well-known poet, Marxist theoretician, and figurehead for the Dutch radical left, Roland-Holst's socialism in those years was revolutionary, infused with a strong sense of ethical commitment to the cause of the oppressed. Sneevliet would voice similar sentiments when, years later, he described:

[T]he richness, the beauty, the luster of the Social Democratic Religion. For social democracy is, rightly understood, more than a political teaching. It brings with it the heavy burden of bearing witness, of sowing the seeds of propaganda at all times and in all places.

In 1906, Sneevliet married Maartje Visser, but the marriage was dissolved two years later when she left him. From 1909 until 1924, he was married to Betsy Brouwer, a teacher. In 1911, they had two sons, twins, nicknamed Pim and Pam. Two years after his divorce from Brouwer, he married Sima Zolkovskaja, whom he had met in Russia in the early 1920s. They had one daughter, also named Sima. The marriage dissolved, and their daughter explained that "the break was political. She was a true believer in Stalin," while Sneevliet had become an opponent of the Soviet leader. In 1931, he married Wilhelmina Hendrika Draaijer.

In 1911, Sneevliet left the party because it and its allied trade-union federation refused to support a strike of unaffiliated unions. Sneevliet saw this as an unacceptable breach of solidarity. His break with the party made his role in his SDAP-dominated union untenable, a situation that only worsened when he joined the party's left-wing split, the

SDP. Jobless, feeling isolated in the small and sectarian SDP, he decided to make a new life in the Dutch East Indies. In 1913, he left for the Dutch colony.

# Socialism in Indonesia

Sneevliet arrived in the Dutch colony at a crucial time. Capitalist social relations increasingly penetrated the islands, leading to growing class differentiation and the early formation of a working class. At the same time, a national consciousness was beginning to shape and the first journals and movements by *pribumi*, natives of the archipelago, were formed. The most important of these efforts was the Sarekat Islam (SI), the Islamic Union.

Originally founded in 1909 as a mutual aid society of Muslim traders, the SI developed into a mass movement that took on the social issues of broad layers of Indonesian society. Since Dutch colonialists controlled the economy, these issues quickly became political.

Sneevliet eventually got a job as the secretary of the Handelsvereniging (Commercial Association) in Semarang, the capital of Central Java. Sneevliet was lucky: Semarang was a rapidly expanding city at the heart of radical activity in the Indies. In her history of the rise of Indonesian communism, Ruth McVey writes:

Sneevliet did an excellent job of promoting capitalism during his working hours, and the Handelsvereniging made no objection to his extracurricular efforts on behalf of socialism. It only asked that he not set about actually organizing a revolution; but this is exactly what Sneevliet proceeded to do.

Sneevliet became active in the Indonesian railroad workers' union (VSTP), which, unlike other unions in the colony, welcomed both Indonesian and Dutch workers. He successfully moved the union in a more radical direction, toward the most impoverished Indonesian workers. In May 1914, on Sneevliet's initiative, a few dozen socialists founded the Indies Social Democratic Association (ISDV). Initially, the group consisted primarily of Dutch supporters of the SDAP's reformist agenda. But radicals like Sneevliet and his protégé Adolf Baars were convinced that socialists should be on the forefront of the anticolonial movement that was beginning to take shape.

Sneevliet helped convince the ISDV to reach out to Indonesian mass movements, most importantly the SI. Through its work with SI members, the group started to grow roots among the colonized people. The SI's political orientation was still vague, but increasingly, its supporters began positively associating socialism with support for an independent and prosperous Indonesia.

Baars and Sneevliet worked to develop a left wing within the SI and to attract young activists to socialism. Among them were future Indonesian Communist Party leaders like Semaun and Darsono. In 1920, the ISDV changed its name and became the first Asian party to join the Communist International. By this time, however, Sneevliet had been expelled from the Indies.

In early 1917, he had enthusiastically welcomed the news of the February Revolution in an article titled "Triumph." "[T]he cause of the Russian revolution," he wrote, "is the cause of humanity. The War is an insult to humanity. For us, it is certain that the Russian revolution will hasten the end of the world slaughter." Sneevliet's concluding lines really alerted the right wing: "Here, a people of millions has for centuries been enduring, and suffering, and bearing"; "People of Java, the Russian revolution also has lessons for you."

Sneevliet was charged with sedition and defended himself with a nine-hour speech. He was acquitted, and his

speech was published as an anticolonial brochure.

The ISDV radicals had indeed paid attention to Russia and, in late 1917, began organizing councils of soldiers and sailors into soviets. Within months, the movement gathered thousands. But in a heavy blow to the movement, Sneevliet was expelled in December 1918.

# On Assignment From the Comintern

During his stay in the colony, the SDP had become the Dutch Communist Party and won two seats in parliament. Sneevliet joined the leadership of what was then called the Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN) and became active in the National Labor Secretariat (NAS), the oldest trade-union federation in the country. The NAS took a more radical position than its competitor, the Dutch Association of Trade Unions, but it also had fewer members.

Sneevliet didn't stay in the Netherlands long. In 1920, as a representative of the Indonesian Communist party, he attended the second congress of the Communist International where the agenda included colonial strategy. Lenin was one of the first European Marxists to recognize the importance of liberation struggles. Some, like British Indian communist Manabendra Nath Roy , even envisioned that colonized countries would become the revolutionary movement's center of gravity. Sneevliet tended to agree with Roy on this point, but also supported Lenin's proposal that communists in the colonies should support bourgeois democratic movements on the condition that this alliance did not restrain social struggles.

The anticolonial struggle represented new terrain for many Marxists, and Sneevliet was one of the few people who had experience organizing a socialist movement in a colonial context. With Lenin's support, he became secretary of the Comintern's Commission for Nationalities and the Colonial Question and a member of the Comintern leadership. He was tasked with building Comintern activity in Asia, and one of his first assignments was to go to China and make contact with radical groups, gather information on the movements there, and investigate the possibilities for communism.

Sneevliet went to Shanghai in 1921, just a few years after the May Fourth movement had erupted. This combination of mass demonstrations and cultural initiatives aimed to free China from foreign domination and modernize its society. When Sneevliet arrived, the movement had passed its peak, but it produced workers' organizations and socialist groups, some of which coalesced into the Communist Party, which was founded in 1921. It is not certain if Sneevliet attended the party's founding congress: he probably only attended its first session, which the police broke up.

The party's beginnings did not impress the Dutch organizer; only around a dozen people were involved, forced to operate underground. Warlords still held power, and their internecine struggles were tearing China apart. Sneevliet felt that the party had been created prematurely.

In an attempt to gather more forces, Sneevliet contacted Sun Yat Sen, the leader of the nationalist Kuomintang or KMT party. In Indonesia, Sneevliet had seen how a communist party could be built by working inside a nationalist mass movement. He argued that the Chinese communists should "abandon their exclusive position towards the Kuomintang and develop political work inside" it, like the ISDV had done in the SI. They initially rejected Sneevliet's proposal, offended by his arrogance.

According to CCP leader Chen Duxiu , Sneevliet invoked "Comintern discipline" to push through his proposal. The

 

Chinese communists joined the KMT, but Sneevliet had grown distrustful of Sun Yat Sen's militarism and the party's authoritarian character. He believed the Soviet Union should wait to offer military support until after the party had transformed into a revolutionary democratic party. Although the KMT eventually received this aid, it never reformed. Then, under Chiang Kai-shek, it turned on the Left.

Sneevliet had more skill as a tactician than as a strategist; he was always more focused on reacting to the present than on plotting a long-term course. His dissatisfaction with the SDP came from the same place as his insistence that Communists work in nationalist mass movements: he worried that revolutionaries would isolate themselves.

# From the CPN to the Fourth International

Sneevliet returned to the Netherlands in 1924 and was elected chair of the NAS, allowing him to dedicate all his time to politics. The NAS had been declining for some time, and Sneevliet tried to turn the tide by introducing organizational improvements.

His involvement with the NAS was the first source of conflict between Sneevliet and the Communist International. The Comintern wanted party members to work in mass workers' movements instead of closing themselves off in smaller, radical formations like the NAS. Sneevliet argued that unlike the larger NVV, the NAS organized political strikes and had a more horizontal structure. His personal experience in the NVV more than likely played a role in his analysis.

Trade-union policy was not the only source of disagreement. Sneevliet felt that the Russian party had too much power in the Comintern, which meant that Soviet interests guided its international strategy. He objected to the Soviet Union's repressive character and began siding with Leon Trotsky and his Left Opposition.

In 1927, the Comintern tried to force the Dutch communists to work inside the NVV, so Sneevliet and his supporters left the CPN. Two years later, they founded the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP). A strong syndicalist current in the NAS rejected political involvement, and Sneevliet wanted this new party to provide the militant workers' movement with a political outlet independent from both the CPN and SDAP.

In 1935, the party fused with a left-wing split from the SDAP to form the Revolutionary Socialist Workers Party (RSAP). The new party had a little over three thousand members, mostly concentrated in the larger cities. Its small size made its alliance with the NAS â€" which gave the party a foothold among the most radical Dutch proletarians â€" even more important.

The new party initially had close ties to the Left Opposition. After failing to reform the Comintern, Sneevliet and Trotsky both wanted to found a new international, but they didn't totally agree on all points. For one, Trotsky maintained that communists should work in the mass trade unions, not smaller groups like the NAS. In contrast, Sneevliet worried that the Fourth International's focus was too narrow, dooming its membership to marginal, purely Trotskyist groups. Sneevliet wanted to work with groups like the English Independent Labour Party and the Spanish Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (POUM), but Trotsky denounced them as centrists that couldn't decide between revolution and reform.

Trotsky thought that, in times of crisis, these movements' leaders were bound to fail. He thought in such times, their followers could become revolutionaries but that the Fourth International needed to offer a clearly alternative approach to attract them. Sneevliet, in contrast, prioritized working with radicalizing workers. Eventually, such disagreements

 

would create to a bitter break between the two revolutionaries.

# Midnight in the Century

In 1933, Sneevliet again faced sedition charges, this time for voicing his support for a mutiny on the navy ship *Zeven ProvinciÃ«n*. Protesting poor pay and conditions, a faction of the mixed Dutch and Indonesian crew seized control of the ship. After several days of negotiations, the Dutch minister of defense authorized an attack that killed twenty-three crew members. The mutiny became symbolic of joint Dutch and Indonesian rebellion and was seen as part of the Dutch colony's growing restiveness. Sneevliet received a five-month jail sentence, and his party campaigned under the slogan "Sneevliet: from jail to parliament!" He won.

Sneevliet's election represented one of the few points of light in those years. Hitler also came to power in 1933. Europe's largest and most established workers' movement had been unable to stop the rise of fascism. A short while later, the Moscow Trials wiped out a generation of revolutionaries, many of whom Sneevliet had known personally. As Victor Serge wrote, it was "midnight in the century."

The outbreak of the Spanish Revolution seemed to offer hope that the tide could still be turned. The RSAP threw itself into organizing solidarity for the fight against fascism. Enthusiasm for the Spanish cause rippled throughout the RSAP, which disseminated information, raised money to support the POUM, and organized members to go to Spain.

Abandoned by the democratic powers, the Spanish Republic was driven into a corner while Franco's fascists received support from Mussolini's Italy and Nazi Germany. Although the Soviet Union supported the Republicans, it repressed dissident and anti-Stalinist leftists. Piet van â€˜t Hart, who published a biography of Sneevliet under his resistance alias Max Perthus after the war, fought with the POUM militia. He was abducted and tortured by the Soviet secret police, who also murdered Andrés Nin, a POUM leader and friend of Sneevliet.

Soviet attempts to destroy oppositional communists' movements had a direct impact on Sneevliet. As small as the RSAP was, it was still one of the largest socialist revolutionary groups in Europe, independent from both social democrats and communists. This attracted the attention of anti-Stalinist parties as well as the Comintern and NKVD. The Dutch Communist Party claimed Nazi Germany was financing the RSAP, and the Communist parliamentarians accused Sneevliet of being a Nazi agent.

In 1937, Ignace Reiss, a decorated Soviet spy, contacted Sneevliet. The two men had known each other since the 1920s. Reiss wanted Sneevliet's help breaking with the Soviet regime, but, on his way to the meeting, Soviet agents murdered him.

The NKVD also helped poison the relationship between Sneevliet and Trotsky. Trotsky's links to his European comrades went through his son in Paris, Leon Sedov, whose secretary, Mark Zborowski, was a Soviet spy. Sneevliet suspected him, but Sedov and Trotsky trusted him and objected to the accusations.

The differences between Trotsky and Sneevliet deepened. Sneevliet resented Trotsky's criticism of the POUM, which was fighting for its survival. An increasingly bitter and isolated Trotsky began to imply that Sneevliet's trade-union position was motivated by petty self-interest â€” even though Sneevliet had offered to give up this position on several occasions. In 1938, Trotsky wrote to his secretary, "Can one believe for an instant that in case of war, with Holland's participation Sneevliet will be capable of a revolutionary attitude? Only a blind man can believe it." In this, Trotsky was completely mistaken.

Trotsky's criticism of the NAS was closer to the truth. The federation had its roots primarily among radical workers in the construction and transport sectors, with few members in the modern industries. But even in sectors where it was strongest, the union never organized more than a minority, albeit a militant one. Although the NAS declined to around ten thousand members, Sneevliet refused to abandon it. The RSAP became increasingly isolated in the shrinking milieu of radical NAS members.

Meanwhile, Sneevliet faced incredible personal tragedy. Both of his sons killed themselves: Pim in 1932, Pam in 1937. Just before, Pam had argued with his father: he wanted to go to Spain, but Henk forbade it, insisting that his son's party membership meant he too was bound by the party's decision that members could not make this decision individually. A few years later, Sneevliet lost contact with his daughter, Sima.

Sneevliet was an overbearing, at times authoritarian leader, who adopted the kind of patriarchal leader style that was not uncommon in the socialist movement. His son-in-law, Sal Santen, would later write that Sneevliet assumed that he could make decisions on behalf of the party's youth group. Behavior like this contributed to pushing out a number of young activists, Santen included.

Sneevliet tended to treat political disagreements as personal betrayals. The RSAP was his party â€" he was its ideologue, its head, and its spokesperson. Personal disagreements quickly turned into conflicts with the party. But Sneevliet was also a committed leader with an unusual talent to inspire dedication and courage in others.

# The Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front

Before the war, the RSAP discussed what to do if Germany occupied the Netherlands. The leadership decided that the most trusted party members would set up an underground to organize clandestine resistance. They named it the Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front.

On May 10, 1940, Nazi Germany invaded the Netherlands and quickly overran Dutch defenses. Sneevliet was in Belgium when the war began. Defying a party order that he should leave the country in the case of invasion, he returned home. As a well-known leftist leader, he was already on the Nazi watch list. Sneevliet went into hiding, shaving his head and growing a long beard to avoid recognition.

The new underground organization's first publications showed a lucid assessment of the situation. It predicted that the war would last about as long as World War I and would eventually involve the colonies. They had no illusions that Nazi rule in the occupied Netherlands would in some way be less harsh than in Germany.

Sneevliet and his comrades called for a Third Front, their version of Max Shachtman's Third Camp. They published a call from Shachtman's Workers Party which described the Third Front's members as "the submerged, smoldering working masses of the world, those who do the working and starving in peacetime and the dying in wartime." They argued that socialism's task was to organize these people.

The front's lucidity was remarkable compared to much of the rest of the Left: the NAS simply ceased to exist, the leaders of the SDAP declared resistance useless and disbanded, and the Communists tried to continue legally, refusing to raise political slogans for the duration of the Hitler-Stalin pact.

In contrast, the MLL Front tried to develop workers' actions that combined the struggle for socialism with the fight against fascism. The organization stayed away from nationalist resistance groups led by right-wing figures. It also

kept its distance from other leftist groups that in their opinion didn't distance themselves from the warring countries. As its name indicated, the MLL Front saw World War II as similar to the previous war: for them both represented a clash of imperialist powers.

The front concentrated on reaching out to former SDAP supporters. More numerous and less ideologically hardened than the CPN's members, the MLL hoped these workers, after watching their leaders fail, would be convinced of the front's strategy.

The February strike of 1941 marked a high point in Dutch anti-Nazi resistance. That month, a Dutch fascist was killed in Amsterdam while fighting with a Jewish self-defense group. In response to continuing resistance, the Nazis started to seal off the Jewish quarters and violently round up Jewish men. At a protest, two members of the Communist Party, Piet Nak and Willem Kraan, called on the people to go on strike.

The protest quickly spread to cities outside Amsterdam with much of the organization of the strike done by members of the Communist Party. But it was violently crushed. Maurice Ferares, one of the CPN members who typed the famous leaflet calling for the work stoppage, later said, "No-one can claim ownership of the strike. It was an action of the whole population of Amsterdam against the anti-Jewish measures of the occupying Nazis."

In the days leading up to the strike, there had been a growing feeling of unrest. The front called on people to resist Nazi antisemitism by forming self-defense groups and organizing protests:

When men and women from the workers' neighborhoods rally in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam . . . when they take on the fight against the paid gangsters of the Dutch nationalist-socialist movement, we are seeing a beautiful manifestation of spontaneous solidarity, one that needs to come to an higher and more sufficient level in the workplaces. . . . Leave the factories, leave the docks and the works and join in massive numbers with the fellow members of your class who are fighting in the threatened neighborhoods.

Sneevliet and his comrades thought the strike proved that a Third Front was possible.

# Come Brothers and Sisters

The MLL Front members had little or no experience with underground work. They tried to reach Dutch workers through journals, leaflets, posters, and graffiti. The front refused to think of ordinary German citizens as the enemy. It spread propaganda among the soldiers and smuggled illegal publications into Germany. How much effect these activities had is difficult to assess. But reaching out to others and showing it was possible to resist Nazi rule helped keep hope alive. Throughout the war, members of the MLL Front and its successor organizations risked their lives for these activities and for hiding and aiding people wanted by the Nazis.

In early 1942, a front member was betrayed to the Nazis. After hours of horrific torture, the Germans got more names. Over the following weeks, most of the group's leaders were arrested, including Henk Sneevliet. In addition, Ab Menist, Willem Dolleman, Cor Gerritsen, Jan Schriefer, Jan Koeslag, Jan Edel, and Rein Witteveen received death sentences. Cor Gerritsen took his own life in his cell, and the others were executed on April 13, 1942.

After the war, a prisoner who had been held in a cell across from Sneevliet and his comrades described their last hours:

By then they had all been brought together in one small cell, right across mine, size 90 by 200 centimeters. And then this moving movement: “Let’s join hands” and boisterously seven men sang “The Internationale,” one hour before their deaths. What a melody and what words! I have often listened to concerts, but never heard I singing with such feeling and conviction. I am not ashamed I cried.

In his farewell letter to his stepdaughter and son-in-law, Sneevliet wrote:

Of course I would have liked to have been spared from giving my life for my ideals. It could not be thus. Suddenly, the end is coming. I have reconciled me with it in the knowledge to have been a loyal soldier of my duty . . . Do not forget [your] friends and acquaintances. I hope to have until the last moment the strength to live up to the Malay saying “Berani karena benar” â€” being brave because it is right. Goodbye dear children, support each-other, hold on to each-other, an ardent kiss farewell.

Sneevliet lived his life with an unwavering faith in socialism. For him, it did not mean the dictatorship of a party or a leader: the core of his socialism was worker emancipation, freedom, and internationalism. Avoiding illusions about the Stalinist dictatorship and refusing to make peace with capitalism, Sneevliet and his comrades made their own way through the political tumult of the early twentieth century. Their memories remain an inspiration and their principles as valid as ever.

Jacobin