A revolution unravelled.
Politics in Friesland 1795-1798

In The Netherlands the last decades of the 18th century were characterised by grave social and political upheavals. The catastrophic outcome of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) did not only bring economic disaster, but it stressed the decline of the oligarchically governed Dutch Republic. Stadtholder William V was the scapegoat; the patriot movement, consisting of republican regents, enlightened citizens, religious dissenters and other political malcontents, openly challenged his position. The patriots, who demanded greater influence in politics and government, at first did not succeed in this. In 1787 Prussian soldiers brought the revolutionary ambitions of the Dutch patriots to an end. Persecution and exile were their lot.

The year 1795 saw the second round. War with France led to a French invasion. The Stadtholder fled to England and in The Netherlands the Batavian Revolution broke out. Within the loosely organised Dutch state, in which loyalty to one's own region or town was marked, the stress was on the local activities of the revolutionaries. Local committees removed the sitting regents and appointed temporary governors. It was a bloodless revolution. The Batavian revolutionaries proved forgiving and the old rulers did not put up much resistance.

In Friesland, however, matters were rather more grim. In Leeuwarden especially, radical elements tried to spoil the party. Local hot-heads, spurred on by the populist mennonite preacher Abraham Staal, threatened to lay their hands on the sitting regents. More moderate forces among the Leeuwarden burghers could prevent a day of reckoning. On 7 February 1795 these patriot dignitaries also took the initiative for a regional revolution. They formed a provincial revolutionary committee, which steered the revolution towards calmer waters. The Friesian revolutionaries did not hesitate. In June 1795 the first democratically elected representatives were chosen, which marked the official end of the revolution. Friesland had taken a comfortable lead over the other provinces, which were as yet governed 'provisionally'. This filled the Friesians with pride.
SUMMARY

The new government, consisting of well-to-do merchants and industrialists, high civil servants, rich farmers but also a remarkable number of reformed village vicars, which gave it the name of 'vicars' government', took a moderate and federalistic course. In contrast to the radicals among the civilians, for whom the revolution in Friesland had not even begun, and who wished to reform society drastically by revolutionary means, the new rulers were content with things as they were. They rejected political violence wholeheartedly and did not want any further disturbances of the law. Political and social problems had to be solved gradually; dissenters ought not to be victims of revolutionary caprice, but should be reconciled to the new order by reasonable means.

The radicals, however, who had taken power at an early stage of the revolution in towns like Leeuwarden and Dokkum and in a number of rural areas, did not want to hear about reconciliation. From their main basis at Leeuwarden, the 'volkssociëteit', where revanchistic and anarchistic sentiments were rife, they set themselves against the Friesian rulers. Not only were the members of the new Leeuwarden town council recruited from this revolutionary society, but it dicted in a large measure the policies of the Friesian capital, policies that clung to civil autonomy for the town and refused to submit to the authority of the Friesian representatives, who did not want to accept such local particularism. A strong card in the hands of the radicals was the call for compensation. The fondest wish of these radicals, in which they were seconded by a great many Friesian armed civil regiments and popular societies, was to have their own back on the old regent classes for the injuries suffered by the Friesian patriots after 1787. The radicals, who soon had their own party journal and were tightly organised through a closely knit provincial network of societies sympathetic to their cause, had yet another card up their sleeve: the claim for national unity.

With its clear and broadly accepted provincialism Friesland was marked out for a militant federalism. The national unity propagated by the province of Holland, and the setting up of a National Convention, went against the grain of Friesian chauvinism. It was the fear of Holland's expansionism which fed the Friesian aversion against national unity. The leading classes feared the economic and financial consequences of unity, the man in the street was afraid of the demographical supremacy of Holland. The federalists, who cherished the old federative model as a stronghold of civil freedom against despotism, and who were supported by most of the Friesians as was proved by a referendum held in November 1795, formed a majority among the regional rulers. The radicals, however, who felt that the old system of government only served to support the old order, made good use of the call for unity. It ensured them not only political support from the ever powerful province of Holland, it gave them also a propagandistic weapon against the new political elite in Friesland which they thought were in the way of re-creating radical extremism drove them into the arms of the federalists or unitarists.

The controversy over the federalist question and the real controversy among the Friesians, when they took over power and changed their federalistic predilections, unfolded itself in Harmony or conflict, a series of crucial strategic questions which determined the quarrels between radical and moderate, and in all other political barriers. A unity movement was called the scene of a revolutionary reign of terror.

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SUMMARY

The controversy over the future Dutch form of government turned out not to be the real controversy among Friesian revolutionaries. This was soon shown by the radicals when they took over power in Friesland and came to be even more federalistic than their federalistic predecessors. The real conflict was between moderate and radical. Harmony or conflict, reconciliation or retaliation, persuasion or force, these were the strategic questions which radically divided revolutionary Friesland. The controversy between radical and moderate was so all-embracing in these years that it cut through all other political barriers. Those in favour and those against unity were to be found among both movements. The gap soon could no longer be bridged and Friesland became the scene of a revolutionary battle ending in a coup, followed by a revolutionary reign of terror.

The fraternal war escalated during the summer of 1795. Local militants plundered Leeuwarden and made short measure with everything remaining from the former regime of the stadtholders. High point of this truly iconoclastic fury was the demolishing of the tomb and the desecration of the graves of the Friesian Nassau family in the Grote Kerk, a barbaric act which was abhorred nationally. The Friesian authorities hit back harshly. The worst mutinists were arrested and submitted to severe ou-

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the Friesians, together with those from Zeeland, even though they had negotiated a great number of concessions in the matter of regional autonomy, still refused to join the National Convention, and even threatened to step out of the union, patience was up. It was decided to remove the Friesian government. The ruling moderates in Holland were even prepared to collaborate with the shaken Friesian radicals to achieve this. And the proposed coup in Friesland was agreed to in secret by the authorities in Paris. The coup was prepared by a mutiny among the almost 1000 men of the Leeuwarden armed civil force.

After the French had pulled back out of Friesland in the beginning of February, leaving the Friesian capital in the highest state of preparation, the federalistic 'vicars' government' was soon finished. A revolutionary committee, consisting of agents from Holland and prominent Friesian ultra-radicals, took over power in Friesland. A great many representatives were deposed and forced into exile. The Leeuwarden town council was reinstated, the officers of the local armed forces disarmed and disbanded. Elsewhere in Friesland too, e.g. in Harlingen, local government changed hands under the threat of violence. At first the new rulers governed by decree. Later manipulated elections had to keep up an appearance of democracy. Political purges on a grand scale, a strict declaration of loyalty, forced internments and the setting up of local watchful committees illustrate the reign of terror that the radicals now kept up.

The outside world at first closed their eyes. For the new rulers had immediately decided in favour of the National Convention, which replaced the States General on 1 March 1796. This was, however, no more than a first step towards national unification. Further unity required a new constitution, which took some time to be written. A first draft was ready in November 1796, a second one in the summer of 1797. The latter could not convince the Dutch electorate. When a new draft threatened to be rejected as well, the only remedy was seen to be a coup. Radicals led by Pieter Vreede took power early in 1798. They drew up a centralistic constitution and put this to a purified electorate, which accepted this one in the end. In May 1798 the Batavian Republic had become a modern unified state. The position of the former provinces was changed radically. Provincial autonomy was rejected and the provincial governments were submitted to a strong national authority.

Before 1798 however, the provinces had been fully autonomous. They could thank Friesian stubbornness for that. The rules of the National Convention only tolerated intervention in the provinces in a small number of exceptional cases. As long as the people's government in Leeuwarden kept its financial obligations – which they did – the national government gave strong warnings. The Friesian federalism, had great freedom to continue the Friesian rule.

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Quite revolutionary in these years too was the composition of the Friesian Council of Justice, the former 'Hof'. The distinguished lawyers of before had been removed to make place for completely unlearned and incompetent people such as the famous satirist and writer from Holland Gerrit Paape and the radical mennonite preacher Staal. Real and imaginary opponents of the people's government were given draconically severe punishments. The Provincial Council, which was chosen yearly by no more than a few thousand faithful adherents of the hated regime, consisted mainly of poor civilians, relatively many of these catholics, who were quite militant in Friesland in these years. The councils in towns and villages, who were controlled continuously by watchful committees, were little better. In some villages anarchy reigned.

In Bartradel in the north-west of Friesland, the local civil armed forces led their own reign of terror. Other municipalities were split in two by revolutionary factions, often fighting out old village feuds. Religious conflicts could also play a role. In towns like Sneek, Harlingen and Workum, revolutionary groups clashed severely. Government committees traveled far and wide to separate the fighters and bring them to order. The biggest threat to the regime in Leeuwarden, therefore, was not so much the representatives in exile with their non-violent opposition against the reigning radicals from outside, but the internal strife and opposition among the radicals themselves.

Early in 1797 a veritable civil war threatened. A discussion between the Council of Justice and the Provincial Council about the way in which the old regents had to repay the damage they had done, led to a violent row between government and judges. This row did not only lead in the end to the removal of the judges from the Council, but also to an unprecedentedly severe internal quarrel within the Friesian government, which threatened to be taken up in the rest of the province. The regime tottered, but it survived. The Kollumer Oproer (Revolution of Kollum), which broke out in the Friesian 'Wouden' area due to discontent over military service, and which brought many hundreds of Friesians together, brought a solution. This orangistic revolt was one of the scarce examples in the history of the Dutch revolution years when the spilling of blood was not just talked about. The radicals were forced to put their internal quarrels aside and temporarily close their ranks. The regime in Leeuwarden acted severely against the rebels. There were dead and badly wounded on both sides.
An attack on the radical stronghold Dokkum was fought off violently. Dozens of arrested revolutionaries were led through the packed streets of Leeuwarden. Some of them awaited a death sentence. The dauntlessness with which the people’s military repressed the revolt and the cruelty with which Friesian courts dealt with the rebels, were a demonstration of revolutionary decisiveness. Friesland would show the nation how these things ought to be done.

The rest of the nation was appalled, however. The National Convention, which investigated the situation in Friesland thoroughly, had no means of doing anything. But the regime in Leeuwarden had gone too far in one respect. A few dozen former Friesian regents had been arrested as alleged leaders of the revolt and were kept in the much feared Blokhuis (the ‘Friesian Bastille’) to support the loud clamours for compensation. This the political leaders in France considered a step too far. The limit had been reached. The Friesian ultra-radicals were forced to let the hostages go, and they had to put up with another disappointment soon afterwards. When in April 1797 they started confiscating the possessions of the refusing ex-regents in connection with the compensation question, once again the National Convention said no – probably once more under French pressure. The Leeuwarden regime, which had made this their prime issue, fell into a deep crisis, from which it would never arise.

The unity which resulted from the Kollumer Oproer was short-lived. Faction strife flared up again and the province became hardly governable. When the promised compensation was not forthcoming, people’s societies and militias started to grumble. Their supporters complained and they turned their backs on the Leeuwarden regime more and more. Local revolutionaries left the provincial network and went their own way. An ever greater threat to the revolutionary experiment in Friesland than this disintegration which could hardly be halted, were the moderating tendencies. The clearest manifestation of this was the gradually less militant position of the Leeuwarden town council, which removed themselves more and more from the strangulating influence of the local people’s society. In the provincial government too, more moderating sounds could be heard. Some people’s representatives openly called for reconciliation with their exiled predecessors, though without success. But even the most obdurate radicals felt the need for a stronger provincial unity. For the threat to Friesland came from outside. National unification, on which The Hague was working hard, threatened Friesian independence, and this was bound to lead to an early end to the revolutionary experiment.

It is ironic that the Friesian radicals, which in 1795, in their battle against the federalists, had been champions of unity, now fought their breath out against national unification. Their counterparts in Holland, who worked to achieve unity by means of a coup, were told not to.
violently. Dozens of arrests were made in Leeuwarden. Some of these were conducted by the people's military forces, as a reaction against the rebellion. The reaction would show the nation Convention, which insisted on doing anything. But the dozen former Friesian federalist leaders who were kept in the much overcrowded prisons for compensatory reasons. The limit had been reached, and they had to go. In April 1797 they started negotiating with the constitutionalists, probably once more to make this their prime moment of power. Short-lived. Faction strife between the promised coalition began to grumble. The Leeuwarden regime was too weak and went their own way more staunchly against the national radicals than this demonstrated tendencies. The clear vision of the Leeuwarden Vreede regime, the strangulating influence, was too strong, more moderate forces were called for reconciliation. But even the most moderate fear the threat to Friesland was working hard, for an early end to the coup, were told not to detract from the existing rules of the National Convention. They did not listen to their Friesian federalist friends. The radical coup of January 1798, which had even been financed secretly by means of Friesian tax revenues, helped the Friesian people's government out of its death struggle. The Vreede regime and its constitution brought Friesland's provincial autonomy to an end and liberated the province from a revolutionary reign of terror under which it had suffered for two years. Vreede's regime, however, did not live long either. A few months later the national radicals were chased from their cushions by yet another coup, this time a moderate one. This does not detract anything at all from the indeed paradoxical fact that it were their political friends that made clear to the Friesian revolutionaries that their experiment had no future. It was not the only piece of irony in the history of Batavian Friesland.