

Frustrated and fulfilled ambitions

The Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service, 1912-2022

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Good wine requires aging. This also applies to the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (NLD DISS), which is often said to have been born on 25 June 1914, the date on which the third division of the General Staff (GSIII) took shape. However, 1912 would appear to be a more accurate starting point, since this was when the Agency for the Investigation of Foreign Armies was established. However, anyone studying the 110-year history of NLD DISS and its predecessors would have to conclude that the maturation process for the Dutch service was a lengthy one, albeit not due to a lack of ambition. In this article I review the history of the service and its predecessors in a nutshell, based on the ambitions of the successive services and whether or not they were fulfilled.



Exercise involving a Raven, an unmanned reconnaissance system. This article discusses the history of the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service and its predecessors in a nutshell

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After the Second World War, the bar was raised even higher.

Ambitions and aspirations

Ambition was never lacking. After an inland security service had been placed under the auspices of GSIII in the neutral Netherlands in 1919, its leader, Major General J.W. van Oorschot, believed that the task of his service ‘was far from a limited military one, and was of a much wider purport encompassing the entire population’.¹ When, towards the end of the Second World War and in the period shortly thereafter, plans were made to create one or more Dutch military intelligence and security services, the bar was raised even higher. Various parties believed that while the Netherlands might struggle to contribute militarily to the new allied partnerships, its intelligence work could more than compensate for this. The

military intelligence organisation would enable the Netherlands to punch above its weight on the international stage.²

The fact that this plan had very little success was partly due to the fact that the Netherlands established three military intelligence services – the Army Intelligence Service (LAMID), the Air Force Intelligence Service (LUID) and the Naval Intelligence Service (MARID) – each operating entirely independently. When in 1987 the first Intelligence and Security Services Act stipulated that there would be just one Military Intelligence Service (MID), it took no less than thirteen years to create it and shed the remnants of the individual services. The new act that followed in 2002 stipulated that, in addition to the civilian service known as the Netherlands General Intelligence and Security Service (NLD GISS), the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Service (NLD DISS) would also be established. Its director from 2006 to 2011, Pieter Cobelens, sought to have his service participate in what he referred to as the ‘Champions League’ of Western intelligence and security services.³

In addition to its international aspirations, from the Second World War onwards the Dutch military intelligence service strove to remain on an equal footing with its civilian counterpart, initially known as the National Security Service (BVD) and later as NLD GISS. The archives of NLD DISS and its predecessors reveal ongoing irritation with the arrogant attitude displayed by what it referred to as the ‘ancillary service’. For a long time, the BVD’s superior stance was due to the special powers it had been granted to conduct activities such as wire-tapping, installing microphones and covertly entering homes, all of which were denied the military services. For these reasons, the BVD believed that the military services had only a very limited counter-intelligence task that was not permitted to extend beyond the gates of military sites. Based on this difference in powers, the Chief of the General Staff G.J. le Fèvre de Montigny asserted in 1960 that the distinction between the BVD and the military services should not be based on the ‘gates theory’. For him, the difference was simple: the BVD used improper

1 M. de Meijer, *De geheime dienst in Nederland, 1912-1947* (unpublished) 177.

2 B. de Graaff and C. Wiebes, Villa Maarheeze. *De geschiedenis van de Inlichtingendienst Buitenland* (The Hague, Sdu, 1998) 33-34; F.A.C. Kluiters, *De Nederlandse inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten* (The Hague, Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1993) 43-44 and 240-241; F.A.C. Kluiters, *De Nederlandse inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten. Supplement* (The Hague, Sdu Uitgeverij Koninginnegracht, 1995) 155-156.

3 ‘Het werk in Uruzgan is echt Champions League’, BN De Stem, 7 June 2011; ‘Directeur MIVD, Generaal-Majoor Pieter Cobelens verlaat binnenkort de dienst’, in: *Ingelicht. Informatiemagazine voor de MIVD*, March 2011, 4 (4-5); E. van Outeren and S. Derix, ‘Zondebok bij de politiek, succesnummer bij NAVO’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 June 2011; O. den Hollander, ‘Pieter Cobelens: “Nederland kan een digitale superpower worden”’, Quote, January 2021.



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Chief of the General Staff G.J. le Fèvre de Montigny receives a British general. According to De Montigny, the difference between the BVD and the LAMID was simple: the former used improper methods while the latter used proper ones

methods and the LAMID used proper ones. Unsurprisingly, his proposal to lay down the distinction in formal regulations failed.

In the late 1990s, the chief of the MIS, Brigadier J.C.F. (Hans) Knapp, based his argument that the director of the service should be a two-star general entirely on the service's foreign and domestic aspirations. In his view, the second star was indispensable in dealing with the heads of foreign partner services and, moreover, was justified on the basis of the equality that now existed between the BVD and the MID. There

were no longer any material differences between the two services in terms of staffing numbers and duties or, once the new law of 2002 came into force, in terms of powers. However, Knapp's argument was extinguished by the Director-General for Defence Personnel, who believed that the MID still lacked the same social relevance as the BVD.⁴

⁴ See also C. Wiebes, *Intelligence en de oorlog in Bosnië, 1992-1995. De rol van de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten* (Amsterdam, Boom, 2002) 120.

The argument used was that the BVD had developed a higher profile than the MID, which did not publish its first annual report until 1998 (after Knapp had issued his), while the BVD had been doing so for years. It also took another 10 years before a press conference was held to announce the publication of the MID / NLD DISS annual report. Following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, political and public interest in NLD DISS grew, with the number of visits to the service by national authorities increasing sharply. The Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services, which for many years had served only the BVD, began to treat the services as equal entities. The same was also true for the independent Review Committee on the Intelligence and Security Services, established in 2002. The directives that laid down the national intelligence requirements⁵ for both services from 2003 onwards and the national security requirements⁵ for the two services from 2015 onwards also contributed to their equality.

This equality became visible to a broader audience during debates in the run-up to the referendum on the third Intelligence and Security Services Act laid down in 2017, with the

Director of NLD DISS, Onno Eichelsheim, and his NLD GISS counterpart, Rob Bertholee, regularly appearing side by side. The first major sign of the service's increased visibility was the press conference held in November 2018, during which Eichelsheim revealed how his service had thwarted a hacking operation by the Russian military intelligence service GRU at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in The Hague.

Although there will always be some traditional rivalry between NLD DISS and NLD GISS, as Cobelens mentioned at his farewell in 2011,⁶ the two services now work together on an equal footing in diverse fields. Moreover, their legitimacy in their own country is hardly debated, and both enjoy a sound international reputation.

Funding

Why did it take so long for the military services to achieve the prestige to which they always aspired? Above all, this was a matter of funding. The Agency for the Investigation of Foreign Armies founded in 1912, and initially also GSIII, were one-man businesses. Although GSIII grew into a workforce of two dozen employees during the First World War, this remained a small number for a neutral country that was to become one of the most important 'spy nests' for the warring countries.⁷ This situation prompted the then head of GSIII, H.A.C. (Han) Fabius, to introduce a system that was in line with both the government's neutrality policy and its financial position. Individual employees in the service each maintained contact with the military attaché of a specific warring nation, who was stationed in the Netherlands. They agreed with these military attachés, and informally also with the leaders of the foreign espionage networks operating in the Netherlands, that while these intelligence services were permitted to operate on Dutch soil, they could only spy on other countries and not on the Netherlands itself, were forbidden to use violence or otherwise violate Dutch laws, and were required to share their information with the Dutch service.⁸ By treating all parties

5 Referred to from that point as 'Integrated Directive'

6 'The Director of NLD DISS, Major General Pieter Cobelens, will soon be leaving the service.'

7 E. Ruis, *Spionnennest 1914-1918. Spionage vanuit Nederland in België, Duitsland en Engeland* (s.l., Just Publishers, 2012); W. Klinkert, "'Espionage Is Practised Here on a Vast Scale'. The Neutral Netherlands, 1914-1940', in: F. Baudet, E. Braat, J. van Woensel and A. Wever (eds.), *Perspectives on Military Intelligence from the First World War to Mali. Between Learning and Law* (The Hague: Asser Press/Springer, 2017) 23-54.

8 See, for example, H.A.C. Fabius, 'De inlichtingendienst van den Generalen Staf. Het z.g. bureau G.S. III. Herinneringen uit de mobilisatiejaren 1914-1919', *Bijdragen voor Vaderlandsche Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde*, series 7, part 8 (1937), 199-200 and 210-211 (196-212); A. Wolting, 'De eerste jaren van de Militaire Inlichtingendienst (GSIIIJ914-1917)', in: *Militaire Spectator* 134 (1965) (12) 566-51, 569; Ruis, *Spionnennest*, 78-79, 153, 192, 209, 227-228, 239; W. Klinkert, 'A spy's paradise? German espionage in the Netherlands, 1914-1918', in: *Journal of Intelligence History* 12 (2013) (1) 21-35, 21 and 24; idem, 'Fabius', 389; M. Smith, *Six. A History of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service* (London, Dialogue, 2010) 71-72; idem, 'Hendrik Anton Cornelis Fabius, 1878-1959. Stille strijder achter de schermen', in: W. Klinkert, S. Kruizinga and P. Moeyes, *Nederland neutraal. De Eerste Wereldoorlog 1914-1918* (Amsterdam, Boom, 2014) 374-421; 'Neutraal Nederland was werkterrein van spionnen en contra-spionnen. Men liet agenten rustig hun gang gaan en trok profijt uit gegevens van beide partijen', *Het Parool*, 2 July 1949.



Air Force intelligence personnel view photos. Various investigative committees emphasised the need for the military intelligence service to possess sufficient capacity of its own

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equally, at least officially, neutrality was maintained and GSIII had itself a good deal.

When a Central Intelligence Service was established in 1919, the government camouflaged this national security service division – referred to as GSIIIB – by accommodating it under the General Staff, with GSIIIA continuing to be tasked with gathering intelligence on foreign countries. It was precisely this camouflage that prevented the expansion of GSIIIB, since the government paid the service from the meagre funds for secret expenditure allocated by the Ministry of War. Since the government did not want to place GSIIIB in the public spotlight, its secret expenditure could not be drastically increased as this would have attract the attention of parliament.⁹ Throughout much of its existence, GSIIIB consisted only of a director and an administrative clerk, assisted by the director's brother working in a pro bono capacity from 1930 onwards. When in the second half of the

1930s intelligence units were created in the navies in both the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies, their personnel could be counted on one hand.

The financial limitations that were imposed ultimately had a disastrous effect. The system that Fabius had introduced during the First World War became unbalanced in the 1930s because Germany was no longer cooperating. However, GSIII continued working as if nothing had changed. When, in November 1939, two British intelligence officers held talks near Venlo with individuals they believed to be representatives of the German military opposition to Hitler, they were accompanied by an officer of GSIIIA, Lieutenant Dirk Klop, who posed as a British national. After a German SS command had abducted the British and Klop on

⁹ See, for example, National Archives, The Hague, 2.04.26.01, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, inv. No. 541, exh. 11 October 1919, No. 1095.

9 November and taken them across the border, the Germans found papers on the person of Klop (who had been killed in the incident), which revealed his Dutch nationality. This seriously discredited the Netherlands' neutrality policy, and Service Director Van Oorschot was forced to resign. When the Germans invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, they cited Klop's actions as one of the Dutch government's breaches of neutrality that legitimised their invasion.¹⁰

The Venlo incident brought home to the Dutch government that it would have to think carefully about what it was actually doing in the field of military intelligence and what it could confidently entrust to foreign partners. When it rolled out intelligence operations from within England, Australia and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) during the occupation of the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies, this necessity became even clearer. Because the governments of these two countries had left behind no organisations and the Resistance was struggling to find its way to unoccupied territory, the Netherlands and the Netherlands East Indies were the areas in Europe and Asia from which the least intelligence reached the Allies, at least initially.¹¹ This naturally caused irritation among the British and Americans, who therefore threatened to send out their own agents, which would of

course have been an affront to Dutch sovereignty and a threat to national interests. The lack of transport and communication resources, among other things, also rendered the Dutch intelligence organisations dependent on their British and US partners.

Once the war was over, the Dutch had certainly learnt their lesson. However, the structure of the Dutch intelligence landscape was such that the military services had little material to exchange with foreign services. Operations by foreign agents were generally reserved for the civilian Foreign Intelligence Service (BID), renamed the Intelligence Service for Abroad (IDB) in 1972. The only material gathered by the Dutch services themselves which was of interest to partners related to signals intelligence and consisted of information received from the defence attachés in Belgrade and Warsaw (the only two Dutch posts behind the Iron Curtain) and material acquired during submarine patrols.¹²

This changed after the IDB was abolished in the early 1990s. From that point on, the MID and later NLD DISS began to conduct interesting intelligence operations involving human resources, which afforded the service prestigious allure in its contacts with foreign sister services. Also important was the conclusion reached consecutively by two separate committees, which stressed that NLD DISS required sufficient capacity of its own in order to continue independently collecting and analysing intelligence. The first was the Dessens Committee, which investigated the legitimacy and efficiency of the Defence organisation's intelligence and security capacity in 2005 and 2006, and the second was the Davids Committee, which in 2010 investigated the decision-making process in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war.¹³ This laid a solid foundation for a considerably expanded workforce, a foundation that was further reinforced by a system developed by NLD DISS itself in 2012 and which became known as Weighing and Prioritising. It was intended to confront recipients of the service's products with the costs involved in each request.

10 B. de Graaff, 'From seduction to abduction: how the Venlo Incident occurred', in: B. de Graaf, B. de Jong and W. Platje (eds.), *Battleground Western Europe. Intelligence Operations in Germany and the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century* (Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 2007) 49-70; B. de Graaff, 'Trefpunt Venlo: Amerikaans-Belgisch-Brits-Frans -Nederlandse spionagesamenwerking ten aanzien van nazi-Duitsland in 1939', in: *Mededelingen van de Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis van de Landmachtstaf*, part 15, The Hague 1993, 105-142.

11 L. de Jong, *Het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, IX (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1979) 890, 917, 927, 954 and 969; L. de Jong, XIV, 280-281; B. de Graaff, 'Hot intelligence in the tropics. Dutch intelligence operations in the Netherlands East Indies during the Second World War', in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 22 (1987) 568-569 (563-584); Ch. Cruickshank, *SOE in the Far East* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1983) 137 and 150.

12 W. Platje, *Een zee van geheimen. Inlichtingenoperaties tijdens de Koude Oorlog* (Amsterdam, Boom, 2010) 22 and 197-198.

13 Research group on Intelligence and Security at the Defence department, *Inlichtingen en Veiligheid Defensie: Kwaliteit, Capaciteit en Samenwerking*, The Hague 2006; Report from the Committee investigating decision-making on Iraq (Amsterdam, Boom, 2010).

Government service or commanders' service?

For a long time it was also difficult to achieve a certain level of ambition because the military intelligence and security services were regularly at loggerheads as to their purpose. Until 1940, GSIII was partially a service for commanders. This was particularly true of GSIIIA, which was tasked with collecting information pertaining to orders of battle and the intentions of foreign armies. At the same time, GSIIIB was primarily a government service. It was set up by the government in 1919 in an effort to avoid a repetition of the incidents that had occurred in November 1918 during the Troelstra revolution. Around the time of the truce at the end of the First World War, when the thrones in Europe were teetering, the leader of the Social Democrats, P.J. Troelstra, believed that the Netherlands could use a revolution as well. Little came of his ideas, but some figures of authority had been so impressed that they were prepared to indulge him. The Central Intelligence Service/GSIIIB was therefore explicitly tasked with reducing any threats to their true proportions. As a result, the service had a tendency to minimise threats and, in particular, to focus on best-case scenarios.

After the Second World War, the LAMID, LUID and MARID believed that they existed primarily and almost exclusively to serve the commanders of the three branches of the armed forces. Conversely, the successive ministers – first the Ministers of War and the Navy and later the Ministers of Defence – had shown little interest in the military services for many decades. This only really changed in the first half of the 1980s, when the alleged involvement of the military attaché in Suriname, Hans Valk,¹⁴ in the Bouterse coup and a number of counter-intelligence incidents relating to the Association of Conscripted (VVDM) and antimilitarists painfully exposed the lack of political control that existed at the time. This reinforced the demand issued by Parliament during the debate on the proposal that would culminate in the 1987 Act that the three services be merged into a single military intelligence service.

The structure of the Dutch intelligence landscape was such that the military services had little material to exchange with foreign services

However, more than a decade of conflict ensued between the successive heads of the MID and the central organisation on the one hand, and the commanders and their representatives at the central organisation on the other. The key issue came down to this: Whom exactly was the MID intended to serve? The ministry or the commanders? And should the service only collect strategic intelligence or also operational intelligence? In the late 1990s, this led to a major slump among MID personnel, who were constantly facing complaints that their intelligence products were not valued by their recipients in the armed forces.

Successive appointments of directors with extensive operational experience, including Joop van Reijn (1999-2002), Bert Dedden (2002-2006) and Pieter Cobelens (2006-2011), meant that MID / NLD DISS began viewing itself as a strategic service pursuing an operational objective. Once the service began providing on-site support to deployed units, it was occasionally even charged with providing tactical intelligence support. This was also a consequence of the fact that in crisis

14 E. de Vries, Hans Valk. *Over een Nederlandse kolonel en een coup in Suriname* (1980) (Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2021).

management operations, the sharp distinction between the strategic, operational and tactical levels often disappeared. Nevertheless, there was still room for discussion on how and in what proportions intelligence support could be provided at the various levels. For example, NLD DISS performed the J2 task of the CHOD for several years under Dedden, but this was later reversed.

The Directive and Integrated Directive also still had the potential to place NLD DISS in a situation in which it would be torn between meeting the wishes of the government and those of its military clients. In the 1990s, this became the fate of the Technical Information and Processing Centre, formerly MARID VI or Mathematics Centre (WKC), which carried out interception operations for both the government and the navy. The Admiralty Council had almost abolished the centre, since its usefulness to its own branch of the armed forces was unclear and the use of a frigate was therefore believed to be preferable.¹⁵

¹⁵ See also M.W. Jensen and G. Platje, *De MARID. De Marine Inlichtingendienst van binnenuit belicht* (The Hague, Sdu Uitgevers, 1997) 389-390; Wiebes, *Intelligence en de oorlog in Bosnië*, 145



It was also problematic that the intelligence chain (NLD DISS's relationship with other Defence intelligence units) was not sufficiently tight. The Dessens Committee had already noted this in 2006,¹⁶ and today this problem still appears not to have been fully addressed, since the old controversy between the central organisation and the commanders still seems to play a role behind the scenes. Apart from understandable conflicts of interest, one reason for this could be that the central organisation has constantly shied away from developing an overarching intelligence philosophy.¹⁷ It always left this task initially to the Military Intelligence Service School and later to the Netherlands Defence Intelligence and Security Academy (DIVI).

New ambitions?

Perhaps formulating an intelligence philosophy is an ambition that NLD DISS should nurture. There appears to be a need for this, particularly since a number of traditional principles of military intelligence operations are shifting. Whereas a sharp distinction has always been made between intelligence and policy until recently, NLD DISS seems to be increasingly inclined towards defining perspectives for action. And while NLD DISS still mainly prefers to present objectifiable data behind the closed doors of government consultations, its British and US partners have begun to issue daily information concerning the course of the war in Ukraine and the intentions of the Russian regime.¹⁸

The past has proven that the successive military intelligence services were compelled to continually reinvent themselves in changing circumstances, since remaining static for too long involved risks. But over the past two decades, NLD DISS has demonstrated its ability to actively and promptly adjust its modus operandi, for example by conducting offensive operations that involve human sources or take place in the cyber domain. However, the fact that it has fulfilled many of its past ambitions is no reason for the service to rest on its laurels, particularly since changes in the task-related environment are occurring at an accelerated pace. Initially, changes were slow to occur, with nearly 30 years of neutrality policy followed by 40 years of allied cooperation during the Cold War. But the pace of change accelerated quickly from that point onwards, with activities ranging from providing support in crisis management operations between roughly 1990 and 2010 to combating terrorism from 2001 onwards and conducting cyber operations in the second decade of the 21st century. More recently, there has been a shift towards interstate and perhaps even large-scale conflict. Moreover, different threat aspects no longer displace each other but exist side by side. It is therefore time for an ambitious intelligence service to consider the future of its own modus operandi and facilitate the debate on this subject. ■

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- 16 Research group on Intelligence and Security at the Defence department, *Inlichtingen en Veiligheid Defensie: Kwaliteit, Capaciteit en Samenwerking*, The Hague 2006, 73, 90, 202 and 221-222.
- 17 See, for example, www.stichtingargus.nl, Report from the Executive Council of the NLD DISS, 5 November 2003.
- 18 B. de Jong, 'Amerikaanse inlichtingendiensten en de Russische invasie', in: *Clingendael Spectator*, 6 April 2022; W.P. Strobel, 'Intelligence Sharing Marks New U.S. Front In Information War', *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 April 2022; 'A real stroke of genius': US leads efforts to publicize Ukraine intelligence. Release of Russia's military woes is latest twist in novel spying strategy', *Financial Times*, 6 April 2022; K. Adam, 'How U.K. intelligence came to tweet the lowdown on the war in Ukraine', *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2022.