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THE POTATO BLIGHT IN THE NETHERLANDS
AND ITS SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES
(1845-1847)

The potato blight which in the 1840s became so destructive in Ireland as to cause wide-spread distress and much loss of life also brought the Netherlands to the verge of famine. The purpose of this article is to evaluate the extent of the damage to the Dutch potato crops in the "hungry forties" and to consider some of its consequences: the rise of the food prices, the spread of pauperism, social unrest, the attitudes of the population and the measures taken by the Government.

INTRODUCTION

In the Netherlands, as in most European countries, the potato was known long before it became a popular food. Potatoes were sold in the Amsterdam market in 1712, but only in the second half of the eighteenth century did they become the mainstay of the poor. By 1770 it was no longer an exception for working-class families in some regions to live on three potato meals a day, and the potato gradually replaced rye, till then the cheapest food available.¹ Poverty spread further in Napoleon's time. When between 1815 and 1850 the Netherlands went through a period of economic stagnation, the consumption of potatoes continued to rise rapidly. In 1845 the Minister of the Interior could write that in the nineteenth century the culture of potatoes had gained so much ground "that the potato should now be regarded as the most general and necessary food for the lower and even part of the middle classes in the Netherlands".² In many provinces it had become the principal agricultural crop. In the very fertile northern province of Friesland, for instance, there were more than 11,000 ha. of potato fields in 1844, rye coming second with over 9,000 ha. (1 hectare =

¹ L. Burema, *De voeding in Nederland van de middeleeuwen tot de twintigste eeuw*, Assen 1953, pp. 133-151.

² *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs in de provinciën 1840-1849*, uitgegeven door A. J. C. Rüter, III, *Periodieke rapporten 1844, 1845* [Werken uitgegeven door het Historisch Genootschap, *Derde serie*, No. 78], Utrecht 1950, p. 475.

2,471 acres).¹ Potato-growing in the Netherlands had become so important and so profitable that the most fertile clay areas were used for it.

Very probably it was partly on account of the potato that the Dutch population grew by 38 per cent. in thirty-five years. In this period (1815-1850) the volume of employment in the towns barely increased and the growth of population mainly occurred in the country.² In the rural province of Friesland, for instance, the population increased by more than 51,000 in the twenty-five years between 1815 and 1840 against an increase of only 41,000 in the sixty-seven years between 1748 and 1815.³ Country wages were certainly not in themselves a reason for this rapid growth: a rural labourer earned about two guilders a week. This was far below subsistence and life for the rural population was possible only when they rented a small potato plot. They often had to pay several times the normal rent for it,⁴ but it could be worked by the whole family. In this way they could put potatoes into stock against the winter in order to avoid being thrown back on relief.⁵

S. Vissering, one of the first Dutch economists, stated that as a potato-consuming country the Netherlands came second only to Ireland. He estimated the consumption for the Netherlands at four hl. per head per year (1 hectoliter = 3.531 cubic feet).⁶ The labourer took at least twice as much.⁷ A numerous family needed roughly 50 hl. a year.⁸

¹ Verslag van den Staatsraad Gouverneur en de Gedeputeerde Staten aan de Staten der provincie Friesland, Verslag over 1844, n.p., n.d., p. 91. All the reports to the States of the province of Friesland from 1844 to 1853 were consulted; after 1849 they are called Verslag van den toestand der provincie Friesland in [year] door de Gedeputeerde Staten aan de Staten van dat gewest, Leeuwarden. Henceforth they will be cited as Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over [year].

² I. J. Brugmans, *De arbeidende klasse in Nederland in de 19e eeuw (1813-1870)*, 3rd ed., Utrecht, Antwerp 1958, pp. 141, 81; M. J. F. Robijns, *Radicalen in Nederland (1840-1851)*, Leyden 1967, p. 57. The latter book was published after this article had been translated. Where necessary it is cited in the notes.

³ Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1848, Annex C.

⁴ Agricultural Commission in Friesland to the Governor of Friesland, September 26, 1845, Copy No 17, Algemeen Rijksarchief, The Hague, Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken (henceforth abbreviated ARA, BZ), Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 14 october 1845, no. 14, 2e afd.

⁵ Annual Report over 1846 from the Governor of South Holland to the King. All the annual reports from the Governors of the provinces used for this article are to be found in the Algemeen Rijks-Archief, The Hague, Afdeling Kabinet des Konings (henceforth abbreviated ARA, KdK), nos. 4473, 4474, 4475, 4476, 4477, 4478. These numbers will not be repeated below; the relevant annual reports will be cited as Annual Report Governor (Province, year).

⁶ S. V[issering], *Eenige opmerkingen ter zake der aardappelziekte*, Amsterdam 1845, pp. 9-12.

⁷ *Leydsche Courant*, May 7, 1847.

⁸ O. G. Heldring, *Wat te denken en wat te doen in den aardappelnood*, Amsterdam 1845, p. 5.

It is a pity that Vissering did not carry the comparison between the two countries further. In Ireland the rapid population growth previous to 1845 had also been possible only on account of the potato. There, too, the potatoes were grown "on very small properties rather with a view to support than sale". The rentals of the plots were likewise high.¹ Although the Dutch economy was still far from being dominated by the potato the situation that was developing on many clay soils began to show similarities to Irish conditions.

In the nineteenth century many foreigners noted that the Dutch labourer was physically weak and that he took great quantities of liquor. Dutch authors blamed the potato for this. As early as 1762 the well-known physician Petrus Camper wrote that it was difficult to conceive of a worse kind of food. In his opinion the potato was the cause of the laziness and indolence of the lower classes.² One of the first Dutch research chemists, G. J. Mulder, spoke of "that insipid, sluggish potato blood" which needed the stimulation of gin. He also stated that a better food must be found if poverty was to abate.³ There was probably some correlation between the rapidly spreading habit of taking gin and the high potato consumption, for complaints about the abuse of liquor did not become general until the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴ In the nineteenth century the situation further deteriorated. A single instance may suffice: the amount of liquor taken per male inhabitant of the town of Goes was 38.5 l. of gin a year (1 liter = 1.75 pints).⁵

These drawbacks were, however, balanced by a great many advantages. Up to 1845 potato crops hardly ever failed. Prices were therefore low and – unlike grain prices – very stable. For this reason the potato was regarded in the Netherlands as the "protector of Europe's growing population against failing crops",⁶ as a safeguard against famine,⁷ and as the last resort instead of God.⁸ It contained much Vitamin C, so that

¹ R. D. Collison Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870*, Cambridge 1960, pp. 3-10, 86-87.

² Burema, *op. cit.*, pp. 152-153.

³ G. J. Mulder, *De voeding in Nederland in verband tot den volksgeest*, Rotterdam 1847, p. 60. In Utrecht, a small group of scientists centring round F. C. Donders and G. J. Mulder was far ahead of its time, certainly in the Netherlands. The potato blight was one of the subjects into which they gained a fairly accurate insight (see p. 429, n. 3). See also *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 414, nn. 1, 2.

⁴ Burema, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-176.

⁵ Burema, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

⁶ Vissering, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁷ C. A. Bergsma, *De aardappel-epidemie in Nederland in den jare 1845*, Utrecht 1845, p. 5.

⁸ Heldring, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

scurvy disappeared. Also it constituted a good and cheap pig food and many agricultural labourers were able to fatten an animal.¹ Lastly, potatoes provided the raw material for the rising potato-flour industry and for gin and syrup distilleries.²

THE PHYTOPHTHORA INFESTANS ATTACK, 1845-1846

The blight that in July 1845 suddenly and violently attacked the potato was caused by *phytophthora infestans*, a small fungus that especially in hot damp weather multiplies exceedingly quickly to be disseminated by wind and mist in less than no time. It takes only a few hours for a whole field of potatoes to be destroyed. The leaves turn into a black mass and die, so that growth is discontinued. Rainwater carries the *phytophthora* spores from the leaves to the roots and in case of heavy rains the tubers themselves are infested.

Phytophthora probably reached Europe from America round 1840, and very soon agricultural experts began to feel anxious. The very wet summer of 1845 gave the potato blight every opportunity. At first only the leaves were damaged, but very soon the potatoes themselves rotted away.³ The edible potatoes were not so strong as the coarser factory kinds. They were, moreover, chiefly grown in the lower clay lands where the blight struck harder than in the higher sandy soils where the fodder and factory potatoes were grown.⁴

Precisely in the clay areas, where "the mass of potatoes was grown that fed the nation",⁵ and which were "famous for their favourable crops",⁶ there was a total harvest failure. In these regions the crop was ploughed under, or the poor were given permission to lift the potatoes.⁷ In all the provinces with extensive clay soils the yield fell to a minimum. In South Holland, for instance, it amounted to 15 hl./ha., and in Friesland to 20 hl./ha.⁸ The potato crops per ha. in the Netherlands in the period from 1842 to 1846 presented the following picture:¹

¹ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 446.

² Brugmans, op. cit., p. 34; Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 476.

³ Ibid., III, pp. 400, 432, 446.

⁴ Ibid., III, pp. 412-413, 431, 447, 454.

⁵ Heldring, op. cit., p. 18.

⁶ Annual Report Governor Groningen, 1847.

⁷ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, pp. 387, 447.

⁸ Leydsche Courant, July 10, 1846; Verbalen der Commissie van Landbouw in Vriesland beginnende met den 16den Juny 1845, etc., pp. 112-127, Rijks-archieff in de Provincie Friesland, Leeuwarden, 652 XII (henceforth cited as Verbalen Commissie van Landbouw in Vriesland).

1842	171.4 hl.
1843	178.5 hl.
1844	188.2 hl.
1845	44.5 hl.
1846	61.5 hl.

It should be added that most of the potatoes lifted in 1845 and 1846 were factory potatoes, and very few were winter potatoes. Most of them belonged to the early variety which was not damaged by *phytophthora* since it was already fully grown when the blight set in around the 15th of July each year.² Therefore even fewer edible and winter potatoes could be stocked than the above figures would seem to show.

In a normal year the Dutch potato crop reached a total of roughly 14,000,000 hl. Since three quarters of the crop had now failed, about 3,500,000 hl. of more or less undamaged potatoes remained. Even at a consumption of 2.5 hl. per head per year – the Government's estimate – the shortage on a population of 3,000,000 would be roughly 4,000,000 hl. The Government arrived at this excessively low figure by giving out that it was the smaller part of the potato crop that served as "food for pigs and cattle, for gin and syrup distilleries and for export".³ Over against this estimate we have the opinion of such a man as Vissering who thought the Government's view too optimistic; he put the shortage of edible potatoes at about 8,000,000 hl., basing himself on a consumption of 4 hl. per head per year. Vissering pointed out that the export of potatoes – the only figure that can be checked – was practically negligible,⁴ since it amounted to 131,600 hl. in 1843 and 220,750 hl. in 1844.⁵

In 1846 the blight was not so wide-spread as in 1845. This was in contrast with, for instance, Ireland where in 1845 it had destroyed roughly half the potato crop, but where in 1846 the crop failed completely.⁶ In the Netherlands the blight was halted by the great drought in August and September, and there was so little rain that *phytophthora* could not penetrate to the tubers; in consequence the potatoes were small, but much more suitable for storing. As in the preceding year the early potatoes had come off undamaged. In South Holland this variety

¹ R. H. Saltet, De aardappelziekte en het merkwaardige jaar 1847, in: Vragen van den Dag, XXXII (1917), p. 459.

² Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, pp. 412, 441.

³ Ibid., III, pp. 475-477.

⁴ Vissering, op. cit., pp. 11, 12, 15.

⁵ Staatscourant, December 12, 1845.

⁶ R. N. Salaman, The History and Social Influence of the Potato, Cambridge 1949, pp. 292-300.

yielded 150 hl./ha.;¹ In Friesland the crop of this variety was fairly good, while that of the middle variety was reduced by two-thirds. But – as in 1845 – the autumn potatoes, which should have been stored up against the winter months, were in a deplorable condition: “many, nay, by far most of the fields planted with these are being ploughed under” and the few potatoes left were inedible, wrote the Frisian experts.² The Governor of South Holland observed that it was true that the condition of the late potatoes was not so bad as in 1845, there being fields with a yield of 50 hl./ha., but there were also many fields with no more than 20 or 26 hl./ha.³ In 1846 it was the sandy soils again that came off best. The Governor of Drente put the yield in his sandy province at half the normal figure.⁴

Despite the slightly higher figure of 61.5 hl./ha., however, the total crop of 1846 was below that of 1845, because the area planted with potatoes was smaller.⁵ In addition, grain crops were damaged by mice and the drought. Wheat, for instance, in several parts of the country yielded two-thirds of the normal amount.⁶ Rye, the favourite working-class food, was affected by rust and the yield was nearly halved from 20 hl./ha. in a normal year to 10.5 hl./ha. in 1846.⁷ Thirdly, there was a greater demand for food in the world market because in several countries the potato blight had raged more violently than the year before and the rye rust had also diminished crops everywhere in Europe.⁸ After the crop failures in 1845 there were no large stocks of food left and, to make matters worse, the winter of 1846–47 was long and severe, in contrast to the winter of 1845–46, which had been exceptionally mild.⁹

¹ Annual Report Governor South Holland, 1846.

² Verbalen Commissie van Landbouw in Vriesland, pp. 166–169.

³ Annual Report Governor South Holland, 1846.

⁴ Annual Report Governor Drente, 1846.

⁵ Annual Reports Governors South Holland and Zeeland, 1846; *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 476. Zeeland had 4,686 ha. of potatoes in 1845, but 2,900 ha. in 1846.

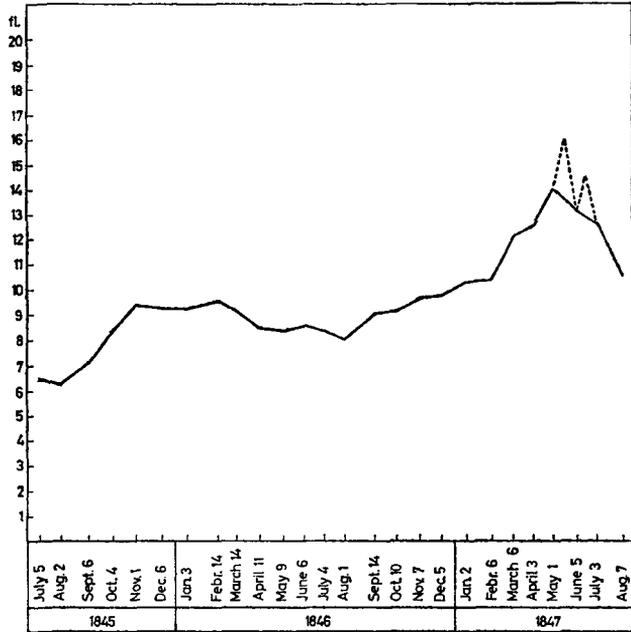
⁶ Annual Reports Governors Groningen, Zeeland, Utrecht, South Holland and North Brabant, 1846.

⁷ R. H. Saltet, loc. cit.; Annual Reports Governors Drente, North Holland, South Holland and North Brabant, 1846.

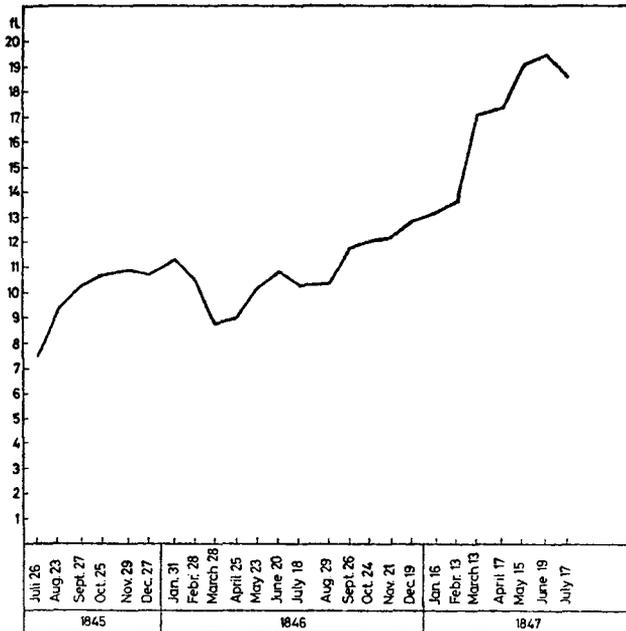
⁸ G. Jacquemyns, *Histoire de la crise économique des Flandres (1845–1850)*, in: *Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique*, Second series, XXVI (1929), p. 256.

⁹ Report from the Governor of North Holland to the King, March 16, 1846. The Governors of the provinces were obliged to write – personally – a report to the King every two weeks. These reports are to be found in ARA, KdK, no. 4481; henceforth they will be cited as Governor's Report. References to the mild winter of 1845–46 are very numerous. It made provision of employment on a large scale possible.

Graph of rye prices in Leyden market from July, 1845, to August, 1847 (from the *Leydsche Courant*, Weekly Price Quotations). Price fluctuations at Leyden in 1847 were slightly different from those elsewhere. In the other parts of the country the peaks were reached in the week June 12-19, 1847. At Leyden prices did rise sharply, but the peak there occurred around May 15, 1847.



Graph of wheat prices in Leyden market from July, 1845, to July, 1847 (from the *Leydsche Courant*, Weekly Price Quotations).



RISE OF THE FOOD PRICES

Naturally, the potato prices rose rapidly. It is very difficult to get a clear impression of these prices, because even at that early time there were a great many potato varieties and because locally the prices differed widely. But it is safe to say that after the blight potato prices were more than two and a half times as high as before. In the southern province of North Brabant the price of one hl. of potatoes fluctuated as follows:¹

	1843	fl. 1.28
	1844	fl. 1.33
last months of	1845	fl. 4.13 to fl. 4.37
	1846	fl. 3.47
first five months of	1847	fl. 4.65
	May 1847	fl. 5.88 (peak of that month).

In the large towns in the western part of the country the prices both before and after 1845 remained fl. 1 per hl. above the rural level, but they followed the same trend.

The potato was no longer the cheapest food now and the poor fell back on rye again. The caloric values of potatoes and rye per cubic measure are in the ratio of 1 to 4. Therefore, if a hectoliter of potatoes cost about fl. 3 and a hectoliter of rye fl. 11 or less, it was cheaper to buy rye. From 1845 to February 1847 the rye price stayed below fl. 11, and only in the spring of 1847 it temporarily rose above it. In the long run, too, the potato was ruled out as the popular food No 1. It became a delicacy for the higher classes. In January 1848 the Governor of Friesland wrote that at a price of fl. 2 to fl. 2.75 per hectoliter persons of small means could not afford potatoes. In 1848 the potato stock in Friesland was still limited to winter provision for the well-to-do and to seed-potatoes; the potato price there was still two and a half times as high as in 1844, when potatoes cost fl. 0.80 to fl. 1 per hectoliter.²

The serious shortage of potatoes could not be met by import since potatoes were scarce and prices abnormally high everywhere in Europe.

¹ Rapporten van de gouverneurs, III, p. 552; Verslag nopens den staat der provincie Noord-Brabant en de zaken van algemeen belang, voorgekomen bij den staatsraad gouverneur en de gedeputeerde Staten der provincie, Verslag over 1844, n.p., n.d., p. 20; Idem, Verslag over 1846, pp. 22-23; Idem, Verslag over 1847, p. 23. All the reports on the condition of the province of North Brabant from 1843 to 1852 were consulted; after 1849 they are called Verslag van den toestand der provincie Noordbrabant aan de Staten der provincie; henceforth they will be cited as Verslag nopens Noord-Brabant over [year].

² Governor of Friesland to the Minister of the Interior, January 3, 1848, Archief van de Provinciale Griffie van Friesland (henceforth abbreviated APGF), 1e afd., no. 3679.

Substitute products such as rye, buckwheat, oats, barley, beans and wheat had also risen in price, as is shown for rye and wheat in the graphs on p. 396.

The high price peak in May and June 1847 – so high that it was “a matter of some concern” for one of the provincial Governors¹ – gave evidence of the lack of food stores in the whole of Western Europe. In addition, the long winter 1846-47 prevented an early import of grains from the Baltic countries.² The rise of the prices in the last months of 1845 and the fall in the first six months of 1846 reflect the hoarding of stocks by private persons, but also by the municipal and poor-relief authorities, in the last months of 1845.³ Speculation, too, contributed to the high price level. Many merchants probably anticipated that the peak of distress would come at the end of winter and the beginning of spring 1846.⁴ They judged wrongly and lost: prices began to fall in February 1846 and caused “the disadvantageous outcome of many purchases of foreign grain”.⁵ Many merchants were not convinced and held on to their stocks as long as possible.⁶ Still, the grain prices in 1846 did not rise as sharply as had been expected, and certainly not as sharply as the potato prices. The average price of a hectoliter of rye in 1846 was, for instance, fl. 8.625, while in the period from 1838 to 1844 it had fluctuated around fl. 6.⁷

INCREASE OF PAUPERISM

Pauperism spread rapidly. Many labourers who – thanks to the potato – had been able to make both ends meet were now thrust back on some form of poor relief. One of the Governors stated it very clearly in his annual report for 1847: “People have been in hunger and penury, not only those who belong to the so-called destitute poor, but many who in normal times earned a reasonable living for themselves and their dependents”.⁸ The number of people in receipt of poor-relief in the province of Utrecht, for instance, was:⁹

¹ Governor's Report North Holland, May 10, 1847.

² Annual Report Governor Groningen, 1847; Groninger Courant, July 2, 1847.

³ See pp. 423-424.

⁴ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, pp. 494, 500, 502.

⁵ Annual Report Governor Groningen, 1846.

⁶ Governor's Report North Holland, March 16, 1846.

⁷ Leydsche Courant, March 8, 1847.

⁸ Annual Report Governor Groningen, 1847.

⁹ Annual Reports Governor Utrecht, 1842-1847.

1842-1844	roughly 19,000 a year
1845	21,761
1846	26,849
1847	more than 27,000.

In North Brabant their number rose from 32,000 in 1844 to more than 48,000 in 1847.¹ In Friesland (population 245,000) there were 34,859 recipients of poor-relief in 1844, roughly 40,000 in 1845, and 47,482 in 1847.²

The resources of many poor-relief and parochial boards gave out. To prevent the municipal authorities from sending them all the paupers the boards often refused municipal subsidies. In consequence the municipalities had to provide for the poor themselves, which was against the wishes of the Government.³ The above figures only refer to the poor-relief boards and help was given on a much larger scale than they would suggest. In these years many other bodies such as municipalities and special committees provided work for the unemployed and distributed food at low prices. In Leyden there were 12,000 persons on relief in 1845, but the municipality anticipated that before long they would have 12,000 more on their hands.⁴ The Mayors of the South-Holland island of Goeree-Overflakkee expected that of the 21,796 inhabitants of their island 9,455 would have to be aided.⁵ Although the situation during the autumn of 1845 and the spring of 1846 was not so bad as had been feared the number of persons in receipt of poor-relief was doubled at the least. At the end of 1846 and the beginning of 1847 it was undoubtedly higher.

Beggars and vagabonds were arrested in increasing numbers: 900 in 1844, 1,302 in 1845, and 2,137 in 1846.⁶ In 1847 the fen-colonies of the *Maatschappij van Weldadigheid* (Society for Charity) to which the beggars were transported became so crowded that the Government had to ask the provinces to put up their vagabonds and beggars them-

¹ Annual Report Governor North Brabant, 1847.

² Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1844, p. 86; over 1845, p. 69; over 1848, p. 64.

³ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 542; Annual Reports Governors Guelderland, Drente, Groningen, South Holland, 1846; Annual Report Governor Drente, 1847.

⁴ Annex to the meeting of the Municipal Council of the City of Leyden of September 24, 1845, No 268, September 20, 1845, Register der Deliberatiën van den Raad der Stad Leyden, Gemeentearchief Leyden.

⁵ Petition from the Mayors of Goeree and Overflakkee to the King, September 22, 1845, ARA, BZ, Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 29 September 1845, no. 28, 2e afd.

⁶ Leydsche Courant, May 14, 1847.

selves.¹ People often begged to be arrested,² for in prison or in the workhouse they were at least fed. The rural districts were sometimes overrun by “vagabonds whose numbers and activity set all the resources of the police at nought”.³ This was probably the reason that “silent and separate” mendicancy was left alone,⁴ although the Governors pressed for extension of the police apparatus to deal with this kind of begging. Though group-begging was more dangerous, less was heard of it; when it did occur it was done by bands of foreigners in the border districts.⁵ The Governors were right in thinking that in view of the situation begging might have been worse.⁶

Delinquency, especially petty theft of foodstuffs, increased.⁷ In the province of Utrecht 102 persons were accused of theft in 1844, 277 in 1845, 559 in 1847, and 249 in 1848.⁸ Yet most Governors agreed with the Governor of Zeeland that these “misdemeanours [had] in no way reached the height that the destitution prevailing among the lower population class might have led us to expect”.⁹

It is strange that the documents of the time made little or no mention of the rapidly spreading misery. The Government, the Governors of the provinces, the lower Government bodies, the press, all were silent about a situation which, certainly in the badly stricken clay provinces, amounted to the beginnings of a famine. A national campaign in aid of the poor was organized too late to help some people in the Tielerswaard and the Bommelerwaard; they had died of starvation before the poor-relief boards sounded the alarm.¹⁰ The Government thought it expedient to represent the situation as favourably as was possible, but in 1847 they were forced to proclaim by Royal Decree a Day of Prayer

¹ Minister of the Interior to the Governors, March 9, 1847, No 30 (secret), ARA, BZ, Geheim archief.

² Annual Report Governor Overijssel, 1847; Governor of Overijssel to Minister of the Interior, March 11, 1847, No 1708/1686 (secret), ARA, BZ, Geheim archief.

³ Annual Report Governor Overijssel, 1847; Annual Report Governor Utrecht, 1846.

⁴ Governor's Report North Brabant, April 17, 1847; *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, pp. 503, 554-555.

⁵ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, pp. 523, 535; Annual Report Governor Zeeland, 1846; Governor's Report North Brabant, Febr. 1, 1846.

⁶ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 525; Annual Reports Governors Drente and North Holland, 1846.

⁷ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, pp. 522-523, 554; Annual Reports Governors Groningen and North Holland, 1846.

⁸ Annual Reports Governor Utrecht, 1845-1848.

⁹ Annual Report Governor Zeeland, 1846; Governor's report North Brabant, April 17, 1847; *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, pp. 522-523, 535.

¹⁰ C. Hooyer, *De groote nood des hongers in en bij Den Boemelerwaard. Een waar verslag voor alle menschen vrienden in ons Vaderland*, 2nd printing, Zaltbommel 1847.

“for a beginning of deliverance from deep suffering”.¹ Clearly, in 1847, the country was in a state of emergency.

The Governors of the provinces in their reports were also silent. If a Governor did mention the distress, “the scenes of trouble and misery of which in other regions of our country so many depressing tales have been unfolded” did not occur in his province.² But here, too, the advice of the Governor of South Holland to cancel the fairs in the spring of 1847 is revealing.³

The *Leydsche Courant* seldom wrote about the real situation. It spoke, for instance, in the most reassuring terms about the harvest of 1846 which in reality had remained far below the average for all products. Yet, enough emerges from its scanty reports. One item concerning North Brabant ran: “Many, and among them fairly well-to-do, people in the country live on the herbs of the field, on stinging-nettles, wild elder and such plants; but the poor have been picking them and the plants have become scarce”.⁴ The *Groninger Courant* also gave a glimpse of the actual facts when it wrote of “starving families clothed in rags, emaciated and without strength” roaming the countryside and begging, although the men had jobs. But these men did not receive their wages in money but in food only for themselves.⁵ The silence on the part of the authorities and the press was not confined to the Netherlands, the same thing occurred in Belgium.⁶

The weekly budget composed by the Rev. Otto Heldring for a working-man’s family (three adults and three children),⁷ clearly shows that the rise of the food prices as a result of the potato blight could not but turn every labourer into a pauper.

¹ *Leydsche Courant*, April 28, 1847.

² Governor’s Report Drente, April 9, 1847.

³ *Leydsche Courant*, May 24, 1847.

⁴ *Leydsche Courant*, May 14, 1847.

⁵ *Groninger Courant*, July 2, 1847.

⁶ A. Vermeersch, *De pers en het pauperisme in Vlaanderen 1815-1848*, in: *Bijdragen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, XIII (1958), p. 85.

⁷ O. G. Heldring, *De nood en hulp der armen, in betrekking tot de arbeid, de weelde en het medelijden. Eenige praktische blikken in den toestand onzes Volks*, Amsterdam 1845, p. 28. O. G. Heldring, minister of the church in Hemmen and Zetten, born at Zevenaar, May 17, 1804, died at Marienbad, July 11, 1876. He was a philanthropist and founded, e.g., institutions for “penitent and fallen women” and neglected girls. He also founded a training school for Christian female teachers. His institutions were intended to be “not houses of correction, but institutions where the strength of the gospel was to penetrate the hearts.” The administrators of these centres were mostly men from Réveil circles. *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, IV, col. 721-725.

	before 1845	1845
Bread, 12 Dutch pound loaves	fl. 0.90	fl. 1.40
Flour and buttermilk	0.50	0.75
Potatoes and vegetables or groceries	0.50	1.40
Other foodstuffs and beverages	1.17	1.18
Tobacco, sewing materials, pots, pans, soap, etc.	0.35	0.35
Clothing, firing and rent	2	2
Total	fl. 5.42	fl. 7.08

The wages of the Dutch factory hand were seldom more than seven guilders a week and often less than five.¹ According to Heldring therefore practically every labourer should have been on relief as early as 1845. By 1847 the labourer would have needed fl. 8.50 a week to buy the same necessities.

It should be borne in mind that this budget was not drawn up for the rural labourer. His wages were much lower, and in his diet potatoes figured larger. Especially in this group, therefore, the number of paupers reached appalling heights.

BIRTH-, DEATH- AND MARRIAGE-RATES

The only year since 1839 in which the Netherlands population did not increase but decrease was 1847.² Although the figures given by J. de Bosch Kemper are not wholly reliable they do create a picture which is confirmed by the annual reports of the Governors of the provinces. These figures are:³

1841-1845	per ± 27	inhabitants	one birth
1846	per 30.3	inhabitants	one birth
1847	per 33.4	inhabitants	one birth
1841-1845	per ± 39	inhabitants	one death
1846	per 33.2	inhabitants	one death
1847	per 30.8	inhabitants	one death
1845	per 132	inhabitants	one marriage
1846	per 148	inhabitants	one marriage
1847	per 159	inhabitants	one marriage.

¹ Brugmans, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-140.

² Saltet, *loc.cit.*, pp. 454-455.

³ J. de Bosch Kemper, *Geschiedkundig onderzoek naar de armoede in ons vaderland, hare oorzaken en de middelen die tot hare vermindering zouden kunnen worden aangewend*, Haarlem 1851, tables XII, XIII, XIV.

A more detailed investigation into these rates shows a direct correlation between the figures and the potato blight. In the clay provinces the number of deaths exceeded that of births. In Friesland, for instance,¹ there was

a natural increase of 3,408 in 1844
 a natural increase of 3,551 in 1845
 a natural increase of 783 in 1846
 a decrease of 176 in 1847
 a natural increase of 197 in 1848.

In the province of Utrecht,² these figures were:

a natural increase of 2,676 in 1843
 a natural increase of 1,894 in 1844
 a natural increase of 1,343 in 1845
 a natural increase of 125 in 1846
 a decrease of 1,159 in 1847.

In the province of Groningen the population normally increased by about 2,300 a year, but in 1847 it fell by 458.³ The clay polders in the Tieler- and Bommelerwaard came off worst, there was real famine there.⁴ In sandy provinces there was an excess of births over deaths even in 1847. In North Brabant, the normal yearly increase of 3,000 to 4,000 fell to 1,345 in 1846, but did not fall below 25 in 1847.⁵ In the province of Drente the population in 1847 even increased by 903.⁶ This relatively high figure in such a thinly populated province was, however, due to the rising number of inmates of the fen-colonies, which were practically all situated in Groningen and Drente.

The high death-rates were often ascribed to the many fevers that took their toll in the hot summer of 1846.⁷ Mayor and Aldermen of Amsterdam used the phrase "no hot summers without sickness". In Amsterdam no less than 5,538 persons died in the last six months of 1846, which was 2,563 more than in the corresponding period of 1845.⁸ The reason why so many people succumbed to these fevers is given in the words of the Governor of North Brabant: the victims mostly belonged to the lower classes who "in the last two years had to suffer

¹ Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1844, 1845, 1846, 1847, 1848, *passim*.

² Annual Reports Governor Utrecht, 1843-1847.

³ Annual Reports Governor Groningen, 1842-1844, 1846-1847.

⁴ Hooyer, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-33; J. de Bosch Kemper, *op. cit.*, 2nd ed., Haarlem 1860, p. 18.

⁵ Annual Reports Governor North Brabant, 1846-1847.

⁶ Annual Report Governor Drente, 1847.

⁷ Annual Reports Governors South Holland, Utrecht and North Holland, 1846.

⁸ Annual Report Mayor and Aldermen of Amsterdam to the Governor of North Holland, March 27, 1847, annex Annual Report Governor North Holland, 1846.

so many hardships to the detriment of their physical and moral strength that they were more particularly predisposed and could offer less resistance." The Governor of Utrecht also believed that the working class was exceptionally liable to catch typhoid fever because of "a lack of the necessary food which had weakened the bodies" and of "increasing poverty, inadequate clothing and covering".¹ The Governor of North Holland called the high death-rate of 1848 "a result of previous suffering".² In the fen-colonies many beggars died, for those who had been sent there had been "conspicuously decayed and enfeebled".³ Although, in 1860, de Bosch Kemper was right in writing "that in the Netherlands nowadays people very seldom die from complete lack of food",⁴ the death-rate between 1845 and 1848 was certainly indirectly influenced by lack of food.

SOCIAL UNREST

Twice, in September 1845 and in the period from June to August 1847, the food prices rose rapidly within a short time, and on both occasions a wave of disturbances followed. In 1845 riots occurred between 19 and 22 September in Leyden, the Hague, Delft and Haarlem successively. The trouble in Leyden, the Hague and Haarlem was of little importance and no pillaging occurred. There was some mobbing and smashing of grocers' windows, while a number of shopkeepers were demanded to cancel recent price rises. The disturbances in Delft were more serious. There was pillaging on a fairly large scale for which eight persons incurred heavy punishment: they got from three to seven years' imprisonment and four of them were put into the pillory for half an hour.

¹ Annual Reports Governors Utrecht and North Brabant, 1847; Annual Report Governor Utrecht, 1846.

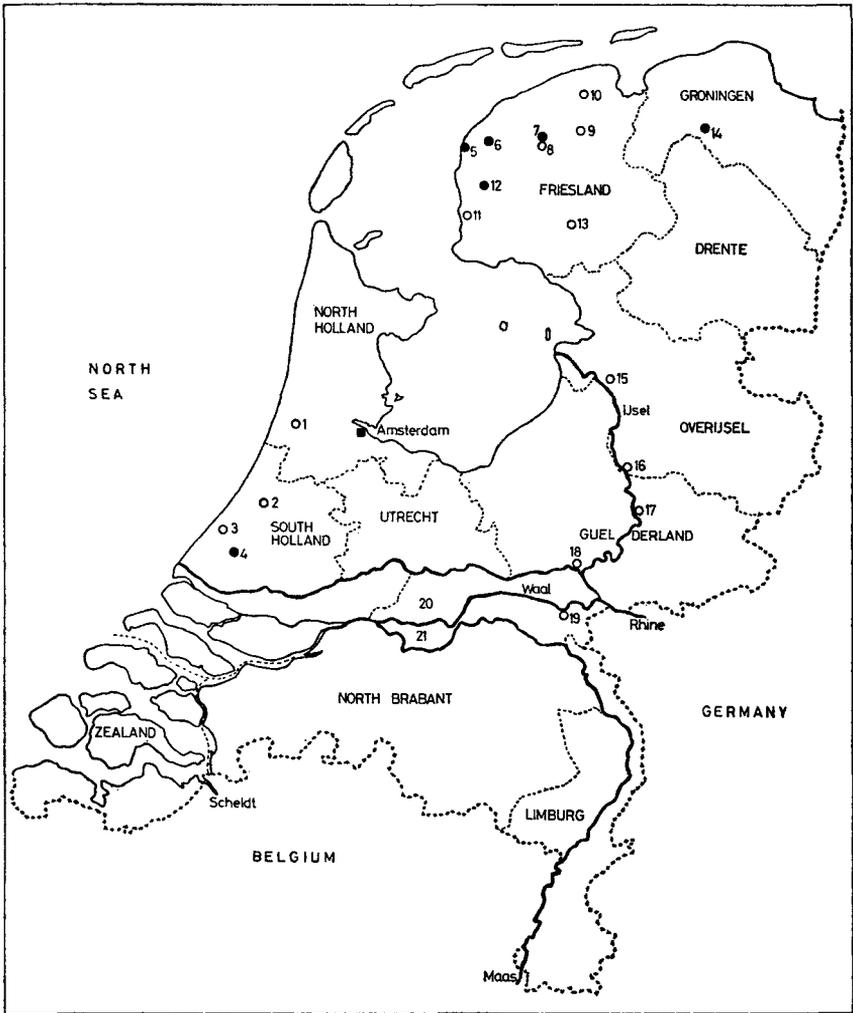
² Annual Report Governor North Holland, 1848.

³ Leydsche Courant, June 29, 1846.

⁴ J. de Bosch Kemper, *op. cit.*, 2nd ed., pp. 18-19.

● *Pillaging:*

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------|
| 4. Delft (1845) | } 1847 |
| 5. Harlingen | |
| 6. Franeker (on a small scale) | |
| 7. Leeuwarden | |
| 12. Bolsward (on a small scale) | |
| 14. Groningen | |



○ *Small disturbances, mobbing, smashing of windows by groups of people, threatening of shopkeepers and tradesmen, extortion of foodstuffs, no pillaging:*

- 1. Haarlem
 - 2. Leyden
 - 3. The Hague
 - 8. Huizum
 - 9. Tietjerksteradeel
 - 10. Dokkum
 - 11. Workum
- } 1845
- } 1847

- 13. Schoterland
 - 15. Zwolle
 - 16. Deventer
 - 17. Zutphen
 - 18. Arnhem
 - 19. Nijmegen
- } 1847

20. Tielerswaard

21. Bommelerwaard

One thirteen-year-old "rioter" was even sentenced to twenty months' imprisonment."¹

The riots were inspired by fear of the approaching winter. The news of the potato blight and the rapid rise of the food prices caused disquiet and anxiety. In September 1845 the situation was not intolerable, but people were afraid that the end of winter would bring starvation. The reasons for panic were eloquently depicted by one of the counsel for the defence in the trials of 1845. He pointed at the "fright and dismay", at the daily papers with their many details of the potato blight, at the hoarding rage, the rocketing prices, the speculations, the conduct of the shopkeepers.² True, the Government and many pamphlet writers had tried to show that the situation was not very grave and to reassure the population, but their attempts had been of no avail.³

Except for the disturbances in Delft little really happened. Nevertheless the Government reacted violently: "the military, the police, the local authorities, all did their utmost to put a serious complexion on the affair".⁴ The Government and the police suspected that the rioting had a political aspect and that small-sized news sheets, the so-called lilliput press, were at the back of it. These sheets were written and edited by the "Radicals", to whom Dr Robijns recently devoted a detailed monograph.⁵ They contained criticism of the Government –

¹ *Weekblad van het Regt*, January 26 and September-November 1846; *Leydsche Courant*, September 22, 1845; Reports from the Director of Police in The Hague to the King, September 23, 24 and 26, 1845, ARA, KdK, no. 4179, La Q 32, geh., Y 42, geh., G 33, geh. Robijns, op. cit., pp. 183-184 also mentions for 1845 some riots in Rotterdam and Amsterdam. These riots were, in my opinion, of little importance and should be regarded as slight disturbances. I think Robijns tends to give too much relief to the riots in The Hague. He rightly points out that the instigators of these riots should not be sought in the pauper districts, where the King was popular, but in the district of public-houses and brothels of dark The Hague.

² *Weekblad van het Regt*, October 5, 1846.

³ *Leydsche Courant*, October 1, 1845; Anon., *Geen hongersnood of het middel uitgevonden om geruster den winter te gemoet te zien en door te komen*, Amersfoort 1845; Anon., *Geen oproer, geen hongersnood*, Schoonhoven 1845; W. van Houten, *Een hartelijk woord aan mijne landgenoten ten einde hen gerust te stellen tegen roekeloze voorspellingen van hongersnood, ten gevolge van het mislukken van den aardappel-oogst*, 2nd printing, Rotterdam 1845.

⁴ *Weekblad van het Regt*, October 19, 1845.

⁵ As in England, printed matter of a very small format was free of newspaper stamp duty, which made it much cheaper. In the English summary of his book Robijns writes that the Radicals adopted several of their ideas from foreign democrats, especially those in France and Belgium. "In spite of the great attention they paid to the needs of the lower classes, their remedial suggestions were somewhat ineffective. In their papers they wrote some very sharp and revolutionary articles, they stormed violently at aristocrats and capitalists while glorifying the suffering poor, but they paid more attention to the symptoms of

particularly of its most prominent Minister, F. A. van Hall –, of the States General and of social conditions. In The Hague, the most important man behind these papers was Eillert Meeter.¹ The good faith of Meeter and his friends should not be overrated. Professor Rogier calls the Radicals “more or less respectable Catalina types”; he regards Meeter as a “transitional form to the journalistic underworld” and calls him “unscrupulous”.²

social evil than to its causes; and they tended to indulge in personal attacks.” In contrast to the foreign democrats they did not dissociate themselves completely from the liberals. “They tried to activate the lower-middle-classes and the lower classes to demand a drastic democratization of state institutions; they also fought for the cultural and social elevation of the people. Many evils were strongly criticized: the prosecution system, the bad conditions both in the prisons and in the army, and the system of poor relief. One finds articles demanding absolute freedom of press, abolition of duty on primary necessities, and the introduction of a progressive income-tax. They also fought for the emancipation of women, for better medical care, better education, and an active government policy to encourage literature and dramatic art. They even already raised the colonial problem. About wider social measures, however, hesitation and uncertainty persisted.” (Robijns, *op. cit.*, pp. 336-337).

¹ E. Meeter, journalist and demagogue, born on March 3, 1818 at Oude Pekela, “of humble descent” (Robijns, *op. cit.*, p. 336), died on April 7, 1862, at Britonferry, England. In 1833 he entered the Dutch army and in 1837 he was in garrison in Groningen, where he tried to qualify for the officers’ examination by his own studies. He did not become an officer. From 1840 to 1841 (Robijns, *op. cit.*, p. 341) he was an editor of the news-sheet *De Tolk der Vrijheid* in Groningen. For incitement to rebellious movements – in my opinion for the fierce personal attacks on authorities and for his anti-monarchist ideas – he was repeatedly convicted. In November 1846 he went abroad on a grant from King William II (Robijns, *op. cit.*, p. 188), but in 1849 he was in Nijmegen, where he published *De Star der Hoop*. In 1851 he was in Rotterdam as an editor of the *Zierikzeesche Nieuwsbode* and was convicted to five years’ imprisonment and fined fl. 5,000. He then departed to England for good. *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, V, col. 340.

² L. J. Rogier, *Katholieke herleving: Geschiedenis van Katholiek Nederland sinds 1853*, The Hague, Antwerp 1956, pp. 27-28, 121; cf. *id.*, *Terugblik en uitzicht*, Hilversum, Antwerp 1964-1965, II, pp. 158-159. Robijns points out that many Radicals – as did Meeter – belonged to an intellectual proletariat which in the backward Netherlands was fairly large and whose members could not enter upon a career for lack of connections and capital. “They were partly members of the higher classes now in reduced circumstances, partly born from the lower-middle-class, but all of them frustrated by the unfavourable social circumstances, which they resisted.” In his first period as a journalist in Groningen Meeter was still something of an idealist, but after he had tried in vain to curry favour with William II, “a cynical attitude soon became predominant”. He had arrived at the conclusion that in one respect he was feared, viz., as an editor of an opposition paper. In this way he hoped to force money or an official position from the King. Then he tried to blackmail the King with scandals and play upon William’s fear of opposition sheets. He was in touch with the underworld and consequently became an underworld figure (Robijns, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-64, 170-191, 329, 336, 338).

It is, however, very improbable that Meeter and his colleagues were at the back of the troubles of 1845. Meeter himself was caught unprepared: the first lilliput paper published by him which contained an account of the riots appeared on September 23, that is one day afterwards. It was called *De Ontwaakte Leeuw*. The title spoke for itself: at long last the sleepy Dutch lion had woken up, and now "it" would happen. From the contents of the news sheet it is clear that Meeter was fully aware of the cause of the riots: "The rise in the prices of flour, groceries and other foodstuffs that must replace the spoilt potatoes has induced the people to rebel". But Meeter tried to direct the disturbances into other channels: "In the meantime we advise the inhabitants of the Hague . . . to try to understand that it is not the grocers, bakers and so on that should be regarded as the cause of the misery, but these gold-aristocrats who have enriched themselves and use their money to live in luxury and lust while the respectable citizen and artisan is reduced to want". The people would no longer carry the yoke forced on them by "faulty institutions and the self-interest of proud gold-wolves and damn-worthy, miserly miscreants" now that the approaching winter "grinned at the emaciated husband and father like a terrifying spectre". Earlier, on the occasion of an unimportant disturbance, Meeter had written: "But should you take revenge, oh people of the Hague, only on those that want to sell you bad potatoes? Should not you rather wreak your vengeance on those that scandalously deceived you, that possess millions and even now daily rob your money?"¹

And who where these people that "rose in revolt"? At Delft they were workmen, a child and a girl, who all stated that they had never read or heard of anything written by Meeter; they had only uttered such cries as "bread, hunger" and "bread, bread".² Later Meeter also complained of having been made into an accomplice of "the dozen destitute vagrants who had committed theft and plunder at Delft".³ The editors of the Hague lilliput papers did not succeed in putting a political aspect on the affair. The working-class people in the Netherlands were in no respect ripe for political action,⁴ while those who wanted to evoke it lacked the capacities and the necessary idealism. Chartism in England showed that there was no comparison between the Dutch and the English working classes, no more than there was between

¹ *De Ontwaakte Leeuw*, September 22, 1845.

² *Weekblad van het Regt*, September-November 1846.

³ E. Meeter, *Holland, its institutions; its press, kings and prisons*, London 1857, p. 336.

⁴ Robijns writes: "In about 1840, when it was still very difficult, if not actually impossible, to induce the Dutch lower classes to political activity..." (op. cit. pp. 335-336).

the economically very backward Netherlands and the industrially highly developed England of the time.

By order of the Director of Police in the Hague, who was continuously in close contact with King William II, Meeter and his colleagues, "the instigators of seditious incitement throughout the country", were arrested.¹ A monster trial of ten days was mounted against them, but the solicitor-general of the Hague court of justice did not succeed in proving any connection between Meeter and the riots. Authors and editors of the lilliput papers were acquitted.² One result of the trial, however, was the introduction of a draft bill by the Government extending the newspaper stamp duty to these papers.³ Meeter and his fellow-writers were set free after a year's custody. They went abroad on a payment from the exchequer and Meeter wrote a book on the Netherlands in English.⁴ Clearly the Government had seen fit to use all possible means, however dubious, to silence the men who had attempted to direct the prevailing dissatisfaction into political channels.

The second wave of disturbances was more serious. This time there were riots in the provinces of Friesland, Groningen, Overijssel and Guelderland. They began on June 24, 1847, at Harlingen. In the preceding months prices had risen spectacularly but the populace had been very quiet. The immediate cause of the riots was the high bread price and the fact that the new crop of potatoes on which all hopes had been set turned out to be sent abroad. The English steamboat *Magnet* lay in the harbour of Harlingen and the people tried to prevent a new shipment of potatoes to England. When the shipbroker and a police official appeared on the quay they were molested, and the steamboat, but also the houses of the broker, the Burgomaster and the notary were plundered. Bakers and grocers were pressed for food. By seven in the morning of June 25 the excitement had died down; shortly afterwards the Governor of Friesland arrived with 180 soldiers.⁵ The news of the plundering rapidly spread to Leeuwarden, where feelings had been

¹ Director of Police in The Hague to the King, September 26, 1845, ARA, KdK, no. 4179, La G 33, geh.

² Weekblad van het Regt, November 2, 1846. Although in the Netherlands freedom of the press was official, the Government often used the weapon of press persecutions against the lilliput press. The Judicature, however, was independent (Robijns, op. cit., pp. 78-79), but much could be achieved by means of a long detention.

³ N. Cramer, Parlement en pers in verhouding tot de overheid, Tilburg 1958; Robijns, op. cit., p. 193.

⁴ A. H. van Gorcum to the King, November 1, 1846, ARA, KdK, no. 4503; E. Meeter, op. cit.; Robijns, op. cit., p. 188. Bribing or buying off newspaper editors were the means of the Government when the press trials failed (Robijns, op. cit., pp. 78-79).

⁵ Leydsche Courant, June 30, 1847.

tense since the rise of the bread price a few days before. The first sign of trouble was the abuse of three English cattle dealers at two o'clock on June 25. After that people began to break the windows of merchants who traded with England and to plunder food shops. Military and police remained passive until the Governor of Friesland returned from Harlingen. His arrival was the sign for shooting and two people were wounded. During the night the state of unrest persisted, but in the course of the following day the town quietened down. A civic guard was set up and a curfew was imposed.¹

As the map shows there were troubles in many other Frisian towns. Houses and shops were looted, shopkeepers and farmers were made to hand over their foodstuffs.² On June 28 the unrest spread to Groningen. Groups of unemployed labourers went to ask the Burgomaster for work and bread; many, however, began "brazenly" to beg. The town was patrolled by dragoons from elsewhere. Cavalry was a curiosity and the dragoons were constantly followed by a numerous crowd; at the evening tattoo the market place was full of people. After the tattoo the crowd began to hoot at a group of soldiers who remained stationed in the market place and to smash the windows of the town hall. Some went through the town smashing windows everywhere. They were dispersed by the dragoons. In the meantime, after repeated warnings, shots had been fired at the crowd in the market place. After this the town was soon quiet, although on the 29th the Governor wrote that there were still "groups of people, especially tattered women and children" begging at the doors. In this riot fifteen persons were wounded and five killed.³

This drastic action prevented further trouble in the province; the authorities were, however, very much afraid. "There are so many that would stretch forth their hands, but who are as yet withheld by fear,

¹ F. de Haan Fzn., *Het broodoproer van den 25 Juni 1847 door een ooggetuige beschreven*, Gemeentearchief, Leeuwarden, no. C25a; Mayor and Alderman of Leeuwarden to the Governor, June 25, 1847, No 77/820, APGF, 1e afd., no. 1775.

² Municipality of Dokkum to the Governor, June 25, 1847; Grietman of Leeuwarden to the Governor, June 26, 1847; Municipality of Workum to the Governor, June 28, 1847; Grietman of Tietjerksteradeel to the Governor, June 29, 1847; Grietman of Schoterland to the Governor, June 30, 1847, APGF, 1e afd., nos. 1651, 1701, 1711, 2232, 1748; *Weekblad van het Regt*, February 28, 1848.

³ *Groninger Courant*, July 2, 1847; Governor of Groningen to the Ministers of the Interior and War, June 29, 1847 (confidential), Rijksarchief Groningen (henceforth abbreviated RAG), Kab. no. 2131-b. Robijns (op. cit., pp. 93-133) deals extensively with the situation in the province of Groningen about 1840. He points out that it had been in a state of unrest for a long time on account of the active resistance of the farmers, although in Groningen these were prosperous. Radicals and farmers collaborated for a time there. Hence the touchiness of the authorities on the subject of unrest.

only fear and nothing but fear".¹ Whenever a relatively large group of labourers gathered, the authorities took fright and asked for dragoons. A man who lived in that neighbourhood did not see any reason for all the measures that were taken, since the workmen were "completely quiet", behaved more sensibly than the civic guards and went to bed at the usual time.² The overcrowded beggars' colonies were another source of unnecessary fear.³ In Friesland there were rumours of crowds of poor on the move,⁴ but they never came. Disorder rumbled on till well into the month of August, particularly in the towns on the river IJssel in the provinces of Guelderland and Overijsel. Here, too, the rioters sought out food shops and threatened the potato dealers who bargained away the new harvest. There was no looting.⁵

These riots were hunger riots. In Leeuwarden and Groningen the people must have been hungry indeed to go on begging without regard to the shooting. A Leeuwarden shopkeeper, though loathing the riots, thought it "a sad sight" to see how ravenously the people gobbled up the stolen bread, for, he said, each bite showed up the true cause of the rebellion.⁶ The food prices had been expected to fall at the end of June; it was therefore a bitter disappointment when at the end of June the price of bread rose once more. The large quantities of potatoes and cattle that were shipped to England were the last straw. In the hunger years of 1845 and 1846 export to England boomed. Shippings from Rotterdam to England included:

in 1844	2,378 head of cattle and	2,548 sheep
in 1845	7,912 head of cattle and	12,860 sheep
in 1846	15,411 head of cattle and	47,726 sheep.

In 1846 the small Frisian harbour of Harlingen alone shipped nearly 5,000 head of cattle and more than 13,000 sheep to London. Towards

¹ Mayor of Appingedam to the Governor, July 1, 1847, RAG, Kab. no. 2136.

² G. Reinders to the Governor of Groningen, July 3, 1847, RAG, Kab. no. 2139.

³ Mayor of Hoogezand to the Governor, June 30, 1847; Governor of Drente to the Provincial Commander in Friesland, Groningen and Drente, June 29, 1847; Mayor of Leek to the Governor, July 1, 1847; Mayor of Marum to the Governor, July 5, 1847: RAG, Kab. no. 2132, 2135, 2137, 2144c.

⁴ Report from the Grietman of Schoterland to the Governor, June 29, 1847; Report from the Grietman of Ooststellingwerf to the Governor, July 2, 1847: APGF, 1e afd., no. 2232.

⁵ Governor of Overijsel to the Minister of the Interior (with, *i.a.*, a report from the Mayor of Deventer appended), June 29, 1847, Nos 1752 and 1780/1751, ARA, KdK, July 2, 1847, La P 23 geh.; Mayor of Nijmegen to the Deputy Governor of Guelderland, July 20, 1847, ARA, KdK, La B 27 geh.; Minister of Justice to the King, July 29, 1847, No. 11, ARA, KdK, July 30, 1847, no. 4; Leydsche Courant, July 23 and 30, August 9, 1847.

⁶ See F. de Haan, *Ooggetuigeverslag*, mentioned on p. 410, n. 1.

the end of that year, when a third steamboat had been put in on this line, transportation was doubled in size.¹ Small wonder then that the disturbances of 1847 started at Harlingen. All the riots were spontaneous, there was no question of an organization, of leaders or of a common aim.

The disturbances created a great deal of excitement throughout the country and events were watched anxiously. The slightest street-gathering was reported to the King.² On account of the events of September 1845 the King cancelled his holiday in Germany.³ After the riot in Groningen the Governor observed that it "would have entailed the most disastrous consequences for the whole State" if it had not been suppressed so quickly.⁴ In June 1847 the Ministers met on two consecutive days and then there followed a Cabinet Council.⁵ In 1847 dragoons were sent post-haste to the north of the country; from Leeuwarden they rode through Friesland, sometimes distributing weapons among the well-to-do citizens.⁶ Nearly everywhere in Friesland civic guards were set up following a request from the Governor. They were often armed only with pikes, which were sometimes "old, rusty and mouldy", or with weapons found on the farms, such as pitch-forks. Often these civic guards tried to avoid putting people on the alert and enlisted their members in secret.⁷

The riots were put down severely and rapidly. In Groningen shots were fired without warning. Some people thought the firearms had been used too rashly; a member of parliament observed that the country had not been very prudent, for "speculative buyers had been allowed as it were to sweep away the few quantities of stock [...] from the markets to send them out of the country, and then in Groningen shots were fired at close range while there were seventy soldiers present in the market place. Many, however, agreed with the Minister of War

¹ Annual Report Governor South Holland, 1846; *Leydsche Courant*, October 7 and 19, December 23, 1846 and March 1, 1847.

² See p. 411, n. 5.

³ Director of Police in The Hague to the King, September 24, 1845, ARA, KdK, no. 4179, La Y 42 geh.

⁴ Annual Report Governor Groningen, 1847.

⁵ A Cabinet Council is a meeting of the Council of Ministers in the presence of the King. *Leydsche Courant*, June 30, 1847; *Groninger Courant*, July 2, 1847.

⁶ Minister of War, Personnel Department to the Governor of Friesland, June 28, 1847, No 1B, APGF, 1e afd., no. 1719; Report from the Commander of the Detachment of the Third Regiment of Dragoons to the Governor of Friesland, APGF, 1e afd., no. 1888.

⁷ Replies from the Municipalities in Friesland to the Governor to a circular order from the Governor, June 27, 1847, concerning the taking of measures for the maintenance of peace and order, APGF, 1e afd., no. 2232.

that "a whole province might be abandoned to looting and burning".¹ Indeed the disturbances were apt to spread. Hunger, misery and discontent were so great and general that one riot could easily have provoked many others. The sentences imposed in Friesland were severe. Thirty-five persons were found guilty, among whom ten women and only two recidivists. They were sentenced to flogging and terms of imprisonment from six to eight years, although one of the accused had only taken part in a raid on a baker's shop, where a crowd of fifty had taken thirty half-loaves of rye bread. If it was not their first offence they were also branded "with the halter round the neck fastened to the gallows" or sentenced to "the swinging of the sword above the head", a punishment sometimes inflicted on murderers.²

ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE POTATO BLIGHT

The reaction of the higher classes to such a disaster can only be understood in the light of the times. The potato blight was regarded as a judgment from Heaven. This wide-spread view was also held, for instance, in England.³ Why did God see fit to punish? First of all because people no longer took account of class differences, and also because they lived only for pleasure. An anonymous pamphlet writer who called himself one of the "religiously and philosophically enlightened children of the nineteenth century" and who thought it unnecessary to begin with Days of Prayer, urged the working classes "to prudent thrift and grateful harvesting" (this was in 1845), "to desist from liquor and to stay away from the all-devouring autumn fairs". For only then "shall the Lord dispose the hearts of the rich to compassion and charity" and the well-to-do citizens will set aside "all purpose of gain, all tendency to speculation and will demand only what is useful and necessary for the benefit of all". These citizens will become "Josephs in the lean years".⁴

Here are some "Verses for Encouragement" by another anonymous writer:

"Tis a sign of God's great majesty
Sent forth to try us, and to make
Our hearts and lives pure for His sake.
Shall we then grumble and complain,

¹ J. de Bosch Kemper, *Geschiedenis van Nederland na 1830*, Amsterdam 1873-1882, V, pp. 126-127; *Weekblad van het Regt*, October 14, 1847.

² *Weekblad van het Regt*, October 11 and 25, 1847; February 28, March 2, May 11 and 22, 1848.

³ Salaman, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

⁴ Anon., *Geen hongersnood etc.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 13, 4, 5-8.

Feed care, anxiety sustain?
 No, Ne'erlands People, not defiance
 of order and law will bring deliverance!"

And at the end the poet recommends his readers to "wait in faith".¹

The very public-spirited Heldring, whose leaflet was better than most, observed that according to Holy Writ national calamities had their origin in national sin. Had not the potato taken the place of God as the saviour in times of need? People should also bear in mind that any castigation by God contained some blessing: in this case it had put an end to the potato-gin mills. In this respect, fortunately, the potato had become one of the humblest and least promising fruits" as the "most eminent scholars" had assured him. There was the added fact that an exclusive diet of potatoes was damaging to health and made for unchastity; wise men had told him that the potato heightened the "sensual drives". Once more, "presumption" was the root of all evil: "of embellishment and vanity [of domestic servants] there is no end"; cursing and desecration of the Sunday were also among the sins of the time. However, things were better in the country. At the beginning of his leaflet Heldring stated that he had his closest friends among those labourers who only possessed a potato field and never received relief. They "carefully saved, kept, gathered all things". They worked "in the sweat of their face as long as they could earn something" and ended their day with such exclamations as "God with us" and "Thank the Lord God for potatoes". Heldring believed the number of such humble and godfearing labourers to be "overlarge". Indeed, the higher classes had often exaggerated the faults of the poor, their intemperance and thriftlessness. In a town in the Betuwe, for instance, seventy-eight families were on relief; in these households only three of the fathers were drunkards and eight had not been abstemious and thrifty during summer.² But Heldring did not allow his conscience to be soothed and openly stated that the distress was not exaggerated. He wanted committees to be set up which would include both the curate and the priest; clearly he was one of the few Dutchmen who thought social distress more important than differences of denomination. In his leaflet he gave a great deal of practical advice, and to the rich he said: "some speak confusedly of the sins of the people, but the sins of the people are my sins, too".³ Heldring's writing, however, was an exception. Another author gave a long list of lower-class sins:

¹ Anon., *Dichtregelen ter bemoediging van mijne landgenoten in den tegenwoordige tijd*, Amsterdam 1845, pp. 5-6.

² C. Hooyer, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

³ O. G. Heldring, *Wat te denken van en wat te doen in den aardappelnood*, Amsterdam, 1845, pp. 7-8, 11-28.

“the foulest, most scurrilous language, the most terrible curses and blasphemy”, pride, vaingloriousness, carousing and drunkenness. Even on Sundays the money was “debauched away amidst songs of praise of hell and the devil”. Tradespeople behaved like preachers of penitence. A shopkeeper said to his grumbling customers: “For shame, you people! What grumbling! You are not protesting against me but against God, our sins have brought us to this”, and everybody fell silent after this admonition.¹

For many preachers the blight was a fruitful subject. Especially the Day of Prayer proclaimed by Royal Decree for May 2, 1847, brought forth many exhortations from the pulpit. At Leeuwarden a minister blamed man for having disturbed the “eternal order of nature”: did not God take care of the sustenance of the people by “a multitude of grains and leguminous plants”? But, recklessly, man had put his faith in one plant only. He had not remembered that the poor as well as the rich depended on God’s will; the poor “in order not to succumb to penury”, the rich “to avoid being threatened in *our* [sic] quiet and possessions by a crowd grown desperate with starvation”.² *De Reformatie*, a Protestant periodical, went even farther. It saw the potato blight in connection with the signs of the last times enumerated by Christ, that is to say, “famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes in divers places”. Famine and earthquakes were already with us, and if people wondered about the pestilences they should realize that these would follow automatically once there were famines.³

The potato blight was a judgment from Heaven, so the riots were rebellions against God. One pastor urged his flock not to offer resistance against the Lord by taking out of the people “what He does to us”. To be “quiet, subdued and resigned”: that was the duty of the people. The chairman of the Provincial Court of Friesland pointed out to the rioters “how they, too, had failed to realize that it was not the will of man but the will of God everywhere, inside and outside the country, that had caused this dearth and these high prices which had led them to defy the established order of society”.⁴ What should the poor do to enable their well-to-do compatriots to enjoy “the pure pleasure that is

¹ Anon., Eenvoudig gesprek met behoeftigen over de mislukte aardappelteelt, 2nd printing, Amsterdam 1845, pp. 4, 8, 10-11, 16.

² Een aardappelreep op de biddag van 2 Mei 1847, Provinciale Bibliotheek, Leeuwarden, no. 760.

³ De aardappelziekte in verband tot de teekenen des tijds, in: *De Reformatie*, Third series, I (1845), pp. 136-146.

⁴ C. H. van Herwerden, Leerrede over Jeremia VI: 8a; naar aanleiding van den mislukten aardappeloogst, uitgesproken te Groningen in de Groote Kerk, op den 28 September 1845, Groningen 1845, pp. 13ff.; *Weekblad van het Regt*, February 28, 1848.

always the fruit of the certainty of having done good, of having dried the tears of those who are unfortunate and relieved the sufferings of those who are in pain"? They should keep quiet, and the "fatherly councils" were entitled to insist on that. The real poor should know that disorder and violence would never lead to alleviation of their lot.¹

The poor were continuously threatened that in case of unrest nobody would come to market and the benefactors would close their purses, but this was not what really happened. As soon as in the Jordaan district of Amsterdam there were signs "of grumbling and dissatisfaction" the Municipal Council decided to set a maximum price for rye bread.² After the riots in Friesland the Frisian municipalities took two measures on the advice of the Governor. They set up a corps of guardians of the peace and reduced the bread price.³ After the disturbances in Groningen a great collection was held.⁴ An increase in the tension was sufficient for the Municipal Council of Roermond to reduce the bread price.⁵

The attitude of the lower classes towards the potato blight was one of apathy. The Governors of Groningen and Utrecht both used the term despondency. The eloquence from the pulpits had a great effect. The Governor of North Brabant thought it a matter for admiration that the lower classes were so "unruffled" and "subdued". The Governor of Zeeland spoke of the "good and quiet spirit" of the lower classes. They bore "their misfortunes in resignation and subjection to the dispensations of Providence".⁶ In 1847 the *Leydsche Courant* pointed out that cries of rebellion were heard everywhere in Europe, but that in the Netherlands peace had never been disturbed.⁷ A clergyman praised the poor in the following words: "the hungry are starving in their hovels but each of us walks unmolested along the dykes and sleeps undisturbed in his house".⁸ Another sign of apathy was that begging and criminality increased so little. The hunger riots of 1847 did not begin until June, which was also remarkable. This lethargy is not so surprising as it seems. The Dutch labourers had been paupers since the middle of the eighteenth century. The working class of the time

¹ Anon., 's Gravenhagen, Haarlem, Delft. Een blik op de wanordelijkheden aldaar gepleegd. Met eenen toespraak aan den gegoeden burger, een woord aan den gemeenen man, een bede aan de regeering, Gorinchem 1845, pp. 12-15.

² Governor's Report North Holland, May 24, 1847.

³ See p. 412, n. 7.

⁴ Groninger Courant, July 2, 1847.

⁵ Governor's Report Limburg, May 15, 1847.

⁶ Annual Report Governor Utrecht, 1846; Governor's Report North Brabant, April 17, 1847; Governor's Report Zeeland, May 20, 1847; Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 525.

⁷ *Leydsche Courant*, May 21, 1847.

⁸ Hooyer, op. cit., p. 27.

has been described as of uncertain health, weak, poorly trained and educated, dully resigned and not capable even of thinking about improving his lot.¹ Nor were there any leaders capable to guide it.

GOVERNMENT MEASURES

The most prominent Minister in the Netherlands Government from 1845 to 1847 was F. A. van Hall.² This Minister had reconstructed the finances of the country in 1844 and thereby prevented a State bankruptcy, so, naturally, he did not wish to endanger the position of the treasury by unexpected extra expenditure. Moreover, Van Hall had completely embraced the free-trade doctrine. In his opinion, therefore, the only course open to the Netherlands Government in relation to the consequences of the potato blight was to promote the import of foodstuffs.³ In contrast to what was done in many other countries "in our country alone the Minister left recovery wholly to trade, regarding the merchants, so it seems, as protectors and as constant, infallible benefactors".⁴ The country's only hope of salvation was free trade. Like the liberal theorist S. Vissering, Van Hall thought that things should be left to take their own course.⁵ In the *Staatscourant* the view was expressed that the speculative buyer was not a criminal, but a rescuer by whose efforts prices rose. High prices caused a large supply of foodstuffs, and a fall of the prices would ensue.⁶ According to Van Hall, price rises were conducive to "trade speculations and large supplies".⁷ Van Hall therefore disagreed with his colleague of the Interior who thought it wrong to leave the prices to "individual greed". Nor was King William II convinced. He proposed that the Government should buy up pota-

¹ Brugmans, *op. cit.*, pp. 177, 181-182.

² F. A. van Hall was born in Amsterdam on May 15, 1791, and died in The Hague on March 29, 1866. He studied law at the Athenaeum in Amsterdam and took his degree at Leyden University. In 1842 he was appointed Minister of Justice and in 1843 Minister of Finance. He succeeded in preventing a bankruptcy by issuing a voluntary loan of 127 million guilders at 3%. With these millions he was able to discharge loans with higher interests. Although the loan was voluntary there was a threat attached: if this unattractive loan was undersubscribed, special taxes would be levied. In 1847 Van Hall resigned as a Minister; after 1853 he twice went into office again. *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, VII, col. 517-518.

³ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 473.

⁴ *Verslag der Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, gedurende de zitting van 1846-1847 (Bijblad tot de Nederlandsche Staats-Courant)*, The Hague 1859 (henceforth cited as *Handelingen 1846-1847*), p. 487.

⁵ Vissering, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁶ *Leydsche Courant*, October 1, 1845.

⁷ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 395.

toes. Van Hall pointed out to the King that commerce would be scared away by Government buying. Hotly and with success Van Hall opposed any suggestions on the part of the King, the Minister of the Interior and some Governors to put some foodstuffs, especially potatoes, under an export prohibition. But an export embargo, he said, might lead to reprisals by other countries and might cripple commerce, because the foreigners would look elsewhere for free markets. A ban on the use of potatoes in factories was also unnecessary since the factory owners would inevitably sell their raw material, that is to say, the potatoes, if the prices rose.¹

For a time Van Hall turned down all such suggestions as total abolition of import duties on foodstuffs and suspension of the milling duty on grains. In 1845 the only concession he was prepared to make was the reduction of import duties on a limited number of foodstuffs. He was willing to put premiums on the import of potatoes and the like, but only if "absolutely necessary".² Van Hall shared the opinion of Lord Russell's Government in England that "we are almost wholly dependent upon commerce [...] We must abstain from any attempt to tamper with prices."³

The Government measures against the food shortage therefore did not cost the treasury a great deal, precisely because they were exclusively based on free trade. The first of these measures was a Royal Decree on September 1845 which reduced the import duties on potatoes, barley, rice, beans and green peas. Because the import of these articles, except rice, had never been considerable this measure could never involve the treasury in any great loss.⁴

The second measure was a law enacted on December 15, 1845, which put the operative minimum of the sliding scale in grain duties at the lowest point possible under the grain laws. As in England, the height of the import duties on grains depended on the prices: high grain prices – low duties, low grain prices – high duties. The law now enacted was of no importance in the period 1845–1847 because during these years the grain prices moved at a level considerably above the prices that would have induced this minimum.⁵

¹ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, pp. 388–393, 457, 451, 461–462, 488, 491, 493, 496, 498, 499.

² Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 394.

³ Collison Black, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁴ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, pp. 473–474; For the import of foodstuffs see *Leydsche Courant*, October 28, 1846.

⁵ Bijlagen van het verslag der Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer van de Staten-Generaal, 1846–1847 (henceforth cited as *Bijlagen Handelingen 1846–1847*), pp. 461–484. From these annexes it may be concluded that the rye price, which automatically caused the minimum, was roughly fl. 6.50.

Thirdly, in the Netherlands, as in England, the potato blight was the immediate cause of the repeal of the grain laws in 1846. A press campaign had been carried on for the abolition of the sliding scale and some professors had even conducted a propaganda tour for it.¹ Even Van Hall now agreed that the time had come to stop protecting the farmers at the cost of the lower classes.² This measure did not cost the Government money either. The new flat-rate tariff on rye (fl. 0.20 per hectoliter) was, in fact, above the minimum that was possible under the grain laws and which had been paid since September 1845 (fl. 0.15 per hectoliter).³

In addition, in May 1847 the Government wanted to abolish the excise duty on rye bread. Ever since 1845 the pressure to abolish the excise duties on all bread had been great.⁴ Excises had become a cancer in the Dutch tax system. More than 36 per cent. of the income of the treasury, and 75 per cent. of that of a number of towns, consisted of excise duties.⁵ The inland revenue on rye was relatively low, amounting to fl. 0.015 on a three-pound rye loaf. The local authorities, however, often took fl. 0.015 to fl. 0.045 extra duties. Since the lower classes were the only ones to eat rye it was they who paid the duties on it. In September 1845, as soon as it had become clear that rye had replaced the potato as the principal working-class food, the Council of State voiced the opinion "that a temporary dispensation or abolition" of this excise on rye "would create a very favourable impression and have a salutary influence".⁶ Moreover, people were obliged to eat much more bread than before the blight and therefore they paid much higher taxes than before. In 1845 Heldring had said: "Since the State is not allowed to enrich itself at the cost of the poor it is reasonable for the nation to ask its King that the taxation of bread be reduced in proportion to the increase of consumption."⁷ But his words had been of no avail, and in 1846 Heldring had therefore published a "Cry of Distress concerning the Milling Duties".⁸

¹ See, e.g., *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, *Leydsche Courant*, September 10, 15 and 26, October 22, 1845; Vissering, *op. cit.*; speech of C. A. den Tex in *Leydsche Courant*, December 16 and 23, 1846.

² *Bijlagen Handelingen 1846-1847*, pp. 461-466.

³ See p. 418, n. 5.

⁴ O. G. Heldring, *Noodkreet over de belasting op het gemaal en den hoogen prijs van het brood*, Amsterdam 1846; *Annual Reports Governor Drente, 1846-1847*; *Annual Report Governor North Holland, 1846*; *Leydsche Courant*, May 14 and March 31, 1847.

⁵ *Leydsche Courant*, January 22, 1847; *Annual Report Governor South Holland, 1846*.

⁶ *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 470.

⁷ Heldring, *De nood en hulp der armen etc.*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁸ See n. 4.

Up to May 1847, however, Van Hall thought such a measure “less urgent”;¹ evidently he had no objection to the unexpected profits for the treasury after the potato blight. The first time that Van Hall admitted that the milling duties had to go, not at once, but by stages, was during the debates on repeal of the grain laws. He had to promise the States General that a beginning would be made before the end of 1847. Van Hall’s willingness to abolish the milling duties induced many to approve the repeal of the grain laws for it was hoped that the disappearance of the duties would increase the bread consumption. In this way the farmers would be compensated for their loss of protection by the sliding scale.² This, and not hunger, was the main reason at the back of the Government proposal to abolish the rye excise duties. Fear began to rear its head, too. Van Hall said: “We shall have to resort to abolition of the grain laws which press on the lower classes and we can do [it] by our own free will now”.³

Van Hall was, therefore, in a hurry, and this explains the defects in the draft bill. During the debates in the Lower Chamber of the States General the supporters of the bill pointed out that the fl. 1,500,000 flowing in from the rye duties were “nearly completely” raised by the lower classes, for whom the advantage of abolition per family could be estimated at about fl. 6 a year. One supporter thought the advantage would be less (fl. 4.50), but added that this still amounted to three per cent. of a yearly income of fl. 150. Van Hall defended his draft bill very aptly. He expressed his conviction that the burden of taxation should be divided “according to the capacities of each” and that the rye duties were unjust. They amounted to five per cent. of the income of a large family, and he wondered what the people who drew high incomes would have had to say about an income tax of five per cent. (there was no income tax in the Netherlands at the time). The Government’s duty was “to prevent poverty as much as possible while saving the sense of honour of the destitute”; without the excise duties on the common necessities of life, pauperism (= relief) would never have attained such proportions. The Minister conceded that the prospect of other taxes to replace the lost income from the rye duties was not attractive, but he believed that the proposed increase of the excise duties on spirits and wine would weigh less heavily on the population than one cent on the rye bread. The Chamber should think of the great

¹ Rapporten van de Gouverneurs, III, p. 472.

² Bijlagen Handelingen 1846-1847, pp. 552-556. Handelingen 1846-1847, pp. 491-492.

³ Draft minutes of the Council of Ministers, May 12, 1847, ARA, Notulen Raad van Ministers en Bijlagen bij de notulen van de Raad van Ministers.

responsibility they would have to bear "if they had not done everything in their power". His opponents, however, adduced economic arguments to show that an increase of the excise duties on spirits and wine and of the house tax by fl. 2.50 to fl. 4 would be disastrous to economic activity, while a taxation of fl. 4.50 or more would be negligible for a working-class family. They won the day: the draft bill was rejected by 44 against 13, although the members had seen the distress and the "ruin" and although "those days" were "still too indelibly impressed on their memory".¹

The Netherlands Government did purchase seed-potatoes and potato seed to an amount of fl. 5,000 in America. It was hoped that these new varieties would not be subject to blight, but they suffered just as much. The Government also bought fl. 1000 of Indian corn in America as a replacement for the potato. It was soon clear, however, that the Netherlands climate was not suitable for Indian corn.²

In this way Van Hall succeeded, between 1845 and 1847, in keeping his treasury safe. The income from import and export duties had risen since the potato shortage had promoted the Amsterdam grain trade, and the income from excise duties had increased because bread consumption had risen spectacularly. At the beginning of 1846 the country's income had risen by at least two per cent.³ The potato blight actually gave Van Hall a surplus. A comparison of Van Hall's measures with those taken by the English Governments of Sir Robert Peel and Lord Russell with regard to Ireland in these years is illuminating. In 1845 the Conservative Peel provided "public works" and food, so that those who earned money on public works could buy food with it. Lord Russell's Government, however, believed that state purchases "paralyzed the provision trade" and therefore they bought nothing. This was one of the reasons why 1846-7 were such tragic years for Ireland. Russell's solution was free trade: "any other line of conduct would expose us to the most fatal results".⁴ Van Hall might have said this.

The Netherlands Government thought that the provinces should

¹ Bijlagen Handelingen 1846-1847, pp. 552-558; Handelingen 1846-1847, pp. 482-500.

² Report of the Council of Ministers to the King, December 31, 1845, ARA, Bijlagen bij de notulen van de Ministerraad; Annual Reports Governors North Holland, Utrecht and South Holland, 1846, Governor Utrecht, 1847. In the Verbalen Commissie van Landbouw in Vriesland the results of these experiments often come up for discussion, see pp. 93-97, 103, 152-154, 187-188, 192-198, 504-505.

³ *Leydsche Courant*, April 20, 1846. In the first three months of 1846 excises and import and export tariffs yielded roughly fl. 689,000 more than in the first months of 1845. The total revenues of the Government in 1846 were fl. 54,446,067.

⁴ Collison Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-117.

not provide aid either. Guelderland, however, proposed to make available fl. 200,000 for free loans to the municipalities.¹ This was against the directives of the Minister of the Interior, who wrote *Nota bene* in the margin of the request for authorization many times and advised the King to reject it. If there was money to be borrowed this should be done by the municipalities: only then there was a guarantee that not more was borrowed than was necessary. It had not been done in the hunger year of 1816; if it was done now, people would think that the situation was worse than in 1816. The Government should avoid even “the semblance of fearing a shortage”. The Government aimed at abolishing every law that might give the poor a right to aid. The province was not allowed to do anything and the Governor of Guelderland should once and for all realize that the Government did not intend to do anything either.² After some pressure, however, the Government allowed the province of Guelderland by secret decree to make fl. 40,000 available to the municipalities. This was only permitted to Guelderland. Later a special committee from Guelderland urged the King to promote Government aid, but “H.M., although very deeply sympathizing with the lot of the suffering poor, agreed with the soundness of the objections against interference by means of gifts on the part of the Government”.³ The Provincial Government of Guelderland did not renew its attempts, but it had at least done what it could to prevent the famine it expected to break out in the province.

The municipalities, as public bodies, were also instructed to prevent any semblance to charitable institutions. The Government “would think this very unadvisable especially at this juncture to give the poor the idea that they had a *right* to be aided and could demand it”. The Poor Law of 1818, according to the Minister of the Interior, should be replaced by a law that put charity into the foreground. Here, too, the Government clearly advocated the liberal economic concepts. Classical English economists were also against poor laws that gave a right to aid.⁴ The Dutch municipalities were not charitable, but they should see to it that special committees were set up “in order to act as intermediaries – in concurrence with the municipalities – for the promotion

¹ Governor of Guelderland to the Minister of the Interior, September 26, 1845, ARA, BZ, Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 28 September 1845, no. 2a, 2e afd.

² Minister of the Interior to the King, September 28, 1845, ARA, BZ, Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 30 September 1845, no. 61, 2e afd.

³ The Governor of Guelderland to the Minister of the Interior, November 29, 1845 (secret), ARA, BZ, Geheim archief, 12 December 1845, no. 151, geh.; Minister of the Interior to the Governor of Guelderland, December 1, 1845 (secret), ARA, BZ, Geheim archief, 4 December 1845, no. 154 geh.

⁴ Collison Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92.

of collections, the control of money, the distribution of the stores that had been bought and other such activities". The Minister advised the municipalities to put foodstuffs into store and organize the provision of work for the unemployed. The working class should be "kept busy" on public works and in the employment of private persons, who should be induced to collaborate. First and foremost, however, order must be maintained. "At the first sign of trouble" the militia should be called out, and everywhere the services of the police and the nightwatchmen should be organized as effectively as was possible.¹

The reactions of the Governors to this ministerial letter differed widely. They were agreed about the provision of employment. The Governor of South Holland thought that the aid to be given "should consist as little as possible in handing out money or food", but rather in employment, for instance the deepening of waterways and the improvement of roads. He believed – with the Minister – that the wages to be paid for this work should be "sufficient"; if necessary they should be supplemented from the municipal funds. The Governor of North Brabant pointed out that the provision of employment would bear fruit "that could not be obtained by providing money and feeding laziness". He was of the opinion that "keeping labour going" was also necessary for "public order". Other Governors also pointed out the great use of keeping the labourers "occupied" to prevent lawless conduct. The pressure for the provision of employment was evidently largely inspired by fear.

All the Governors urged the improvement of police and night-watchmen services. Some immediately asked for cavalry. The Governor of Guelderland wanted to have dragoons stationed in the most afflicted region, the Bommelerwaard, for there was talk of labourers begging in groups, whose numbers "caused the husbandmen thus addressed great anxiety"; he feared that it "might easily come to worse than asking" and expected that "some cavalymen showing themselves from time to time in the vicinity" would be a powerful support to authority. The Governor of Utrecht was likewise convinced that the presence of dragoons would "immediately produce a moral influence", especially with "feelings in a state of ferment, with robberies and theft" that could not be suppressed by the limited means at the disposal of the rural authorities.

Few Governors agreed with the Minister's advice of laying up stores. The Governor of South Holland pointed out that the chief cause of the

¹ Minister of the Interior to the Governors, September 19, 1845, ARA, BZ, Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 19 September 1845, no. 173, 2e afd.

price rises was precisely the wide-spread hoarding, also by municipalities, while the harvest was still in progress and large supplies were expected. His colleague in Guelderland thought financial aid would be by far the most effective, partly because people ask more easily for bread than for money. The Governor of Overijssel wrote that the laying up of stores would induce carelessness, while there was always the possibility that the storehouses would attract “layabouts and malcontents”.

Several of the Governors were convinced that charity would not cure all ills. The Governor of Zeeland was afraid that order and peace could not adequately be maintained if he put his trust in charity alone, because the thousands who used to live on their own potatoes had nothing now. His colleague from Groningen thought that in case of famine aid from collections alone would not be enough. The Governor of South Holland wrote that the question of “whether what was given to the poor in order to prevent them dying from starvation was handed over voluntarily or by virtue of their rights” was academic. “Their distress would force them to demand it or take it by violence if it were withheld from them”. He warned that it was a “chimerical notion” to expect everything from charity, certainly in the rural districts, where the farmers, too, had suffered great losses in the crop failure and where everyone felt the consequences of the high prices in his purse. He believed that only money from the municipalities could help. He had not much confidence in the better situated citizens who, he expected, would only contribute when the poor threatened to attack them. The Governor of Overijssel was of the opinion that even committees had an appearance of official charity and he wanted to leave everything to the poor-relief boards. The Governor of Guelderland replied to the Minister that when the means of the charitable institutions failed the municipalities had to make up the deficiency even if the Minister did not speak of municipal aid. His colleague in North Brabant also wanted to seek the solution in municipal subsidies.

The Governors did not produce many new ideas. They preferred to leave everything to the local authorities who were best informed of the local situation. Some Governors proposed suspension of the milling duties.¹

¹ Replies from the Governors of Guelderland, South Holland, North Holland, Utrecht, Groningen, Overijssel, North Brabant, Zeeland and Drente, September 23, 23, 22, 24, 24, 24, 28, 27 and 22, 1845, ARA, BZ, Het verbaal van het verhandelde, 26 September 1845, no. 14, 2e afd.; no. 18, 2e afd.; no. 19, 2e afd.; no. 20, 2e afd.; no. 21, 2e afd.; 27 September 1845, no. 19, 2e afd.; 29 September 1845, no. 39, 2e afd.; 1 October 1845, no. 13, 2e afd.; 28 September 1845, no. LaB, 2e afd.

The viewpoint of the Government was clear: the State, the provinces and the municipalities were no charitable institutions and therefore they need not provide money. All the money needed to compensate the high food prices should be obtained from charity, that is to say, on a voluntary basis. The Government did not say what should be done if charity failed. The local authorities, however, who – together with the relief boards – were landed with the responsibility did not expect too much of charity. In the stricken rural areas this was impossible. Money was needed for the provision of employment and for making good the deficits of the special committees in charge of the distribution of food. They could not raise the excise duties which were already excessively high, and in 1845 the Government had also rejected a proposed increase of the local direct taxes which were levied according to income.¹

The Government did consent – though reluctantly – to extraordinary loans to be raised by the municipalities, but it insisted on controlling them itself. In spite of the urgent requests of Governors to leave the authorization of these loans to the provincial authorities in view of the large number of applications for loans, the Government in 1845 absolutely refused such authorization.² Many applications for the authorization of fairly large loans were entered with the Ministry of the Interior; evidently the municipalities were little concerned about the liberal views that the Government wished them to apply to the granting of aid. They helped as much as they could in their often weak financial position. With the money they had borrowed they bought rye and barley, sometimes wheat, oats, peas and beans in order to make these available at low prices later. A great many municipalities also provided employment. Few of them, however, suspended the milling duties. The inhabitants of the villages often supported their municipalities by making available loans without interest, by selling articles at relatively low prices, by providing employment and by offering all kinds of unpaid services such as milling grain. The municipalities helped

¹ Minister of the Interior to the Cabinet of the King, October 8, 1845, with reference to a request from the Municipality of Kethel en Spaland, ARA, BZ, *Het verbaal van het verhandelde*, 8 October 1845, no. 19, 2e afd. In 1846, the increases of the municipal, direct taxes were allowed, however.

² Deputies of the States of Zealand to the Minister of the Interior, September 19, 1845; Deputies of the States of South Holland to the Minister of the Interior, September 26/30, 1845, and the reply to this letter from the Minister to the Governor of South Holland; Deputies of the States of Zealand to the Minister of the Interior, September 26, 1845, and the advice given by the Minister to the King on this request: ARA, BZ, *Het verbaal van het verhandelde*, 23 September 1845, no. 19, 2e afd.; 30 September 1845, no. 12, 2e afd.; no. 13, 2e afd. In 1846, however, the provincial councils were allowed to authorize the municipalities to contract loans.

in much the same way as they had always helped in times of stress.¹

The very mild winter 1845-46 inspired the Governor of Groningen to the following somewhat pastoral utterance: "In the last winter the sight in many localities of labourers daily employed in the fields brought enjoyment and sympathy". In the rural districts useful employment could be found, such as "digging up the soil", "digging and cleaning out canals and ditches, [...] laying out and improving footpaths, etc."² In Brabant there was even a question of new reclamation of waste lands: "the best expedient [...] against an increase of poverty and begging and for the preservation of peace and public safety"³

Private charity was very active. The "pure pleasure" of doing good could be indulged in to the full. "Collections and subscriptions, [...], raffles of articles of female art [...] and public amusements" abounded.⁴

In 1845 and in the first half of 1846 the situation was better than had been expected. The large number of people on relief was not very alarming at the time and the situation was under control, especially in the towns, where the people did not exclusively depend on the potato. In Belgium, France and England in this period the beginnings of a serious slump became apparent, but in the Netherlands, where there were no large-scale industries, this slump had much less importance.⁵ On the contrary, the grain trade provided much extra employment, for instance in the grain mills along the river Zaan. In Amsterdam the transit trade to Germany was doubled by the rapidly rising grain trade.⁶ In many towns money that had been put aside for aid remained unused.⁷ The Government had been right. There turned out to be sufficient foodstuffs and the high winter prices fell in the spring of 1846. Commerce had seen to it that food did not become scarce and the speculative buyers were landed in a loss.⁸

¹ In the period of September 13 – October 25, 1845, about 50 municipalities made requests to the Minister of the Interior to be allowed to take certain measures needing the Minister's approval against the consequences of the potato blight. They often included a description of their plans in their requests, ARA, BZ, *Het verbaal van het verhandelde*, September-October 1845, 2e afd.

² *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, pp. 521-522.

³ *Ibid.*, III, p. 555.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, p. 549.

⁵ Brugmans, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73; Robijns, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-69, 335: "In the Netherlands the social misery was not caused by an industrial revolution; it was the outcome of a process of economic and social fossilization which had been going on for more than a century."

⁶ *Annual Reports of Mayor and Aldermen of Amsterdam to the Governor*, March 27, 1847, and March 26, 1849, annexes *Annual Reports Governor North Holland*, 1846 and 1848; *Annual Reports Governors North Holland and South Holland*, 1846.

⁷ *Annual Reports Governors Zeeland and North Holland*, 1846.

⁸ *Annual Report Governor Groningen*, 1846; *Governor's Report North Holland*, March 16, 1846.

In the autumn of 1846 the prospects were not thought too bad, either; the previous winter had rendered everybody optimistic.¹ Yet events were disturbing enough. The rye crop had failed, the harvest of other products was bad and the potato blight had struck again. There was, however, no question of a systematic enquiry into the spread of the blight such as had been made in 1845. The municipalities had also become much less active. The winter from 1846 to 1847 was long and severe, and the premonition of the Governor of Groningen in 1845 of "the deep misery that might have prevailed if a severe and continuous cold spell had increased the needs and the distress of the poor and had hampered the work of the labourers" now came true.² No trace was left of the pastoral enthusiasm of the preceding year in the annual reports on 1846. The Governor of Utrecht observed that several families were threatened "with ruin" because so many calls had been made on charity already and the possibilities of employment were also exhausted.³ The Governor of North Holland had to admit that the inhabitants of his province "had suffered very much" partly because the poor-relief funds had not been able to cope with the exceptionally high expenditure. In his opinion there was, however, abundant reason for gratitude if one considered the famines in the surrounding countries.⁴

Gratitude was justified only if the Netherlands were compared to Ireland. In the second winter the situation in the Netherlands was fully as bad as in Belgium, France or England. Perhaps Dutch charity was more effective so that famines could be checked in their early stages. The death-rates in Belgium gave the same picture as those in the Netherlands, and social unrest in the Netherlands was as wide-spread as in France and Belgium.⁵ In that winter the Dutch municipalities could no longer do without financial support. Their hope "that serious measures [would] be taken by the Government to stop the spread of pauperism, the principal cause of the financial failure of the municipalities",⁶ was bound to be frustrated by the principle of non-intervention adopted by the Government. This principle therefore made victims as soon as it was accepted. What was said of Russell's Government also applies to the Netherlands: "In trusting to private enterprise almost

¹ Annual Report Governor Zealand, 1846.

² *Rapporten van de Gouverneurs*, III, p. 522.

³ Annual Report Governor Utrecht, 1846.

⁴ Annual Report Governor North Holland, 1846.

⁵ Jacquemyns, loc. cit., pp. 321-334, 355; *Aspects de la crise et de la dépression de l'économie française au milieu du XIXe siècle, 1846-1851*, La Roche-sur-Yon 1956.

⁶ *Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1847*, p. 30.

entirely to make food available in 1846-7 the Government made a grave mistake, but a mistake resulting from a too rigid application of the economic doctrine of the time".¹ Fortunately the attitude of the Netherlands Government was far less disastrous in its consequences than the English attitude towards the famine in Ireland, where the economy was completely dominated by the potato. In the Netherlands there were, however, more writers and politicians who urged the Government to act as buyer in the food market. The "economic doctrine of the time" was by no means generally accepted. Neither the Dutch nor the English Government wanted to have recourse to the treasury. Russell wished the public works in Ireland to be met out of a "local charge".² Van Hall in 1845 opposed even an increase of the "local charges". Peel also believed in free trade, repeal of the corn laws and the "ordinary medium of private adventure" and opposed export embargoes. But he was not so rigidly dogmatic as to leave no room for Government purchases of food and for loans or grants from the treasury to the provincial or local authorities.³

EPILOGUE

The consequences of the potato blight dominated life in the Netherlands – as in other countries – from 1845 to 1847. The country was on the brink of famine and there were so many deaths that their number exceeded that of births. Pauperism, already abnormally wide-spread, increased. The state, the provinces and the municipalities expended much time on it, and the municipalities much money and energy. The old, but perhaps eternal, view persisted that a disaster like the potato blight was a judgment of God. The Dutch free-trade ideas were also old, but they were reasoned along new lines laid down by the classical, liberal economists who also opposed state intervention in social questions. Not everybody – not even the King, nor some of his Ministers and Governors – was well-grounded in the new doctrine. Fortunately the municipalities did not attach much importance to it. They kept to the established practice of having the poor-relief boards combating poverty with the financial support of the municipality. The Government, however, thought that the new liberal principles should also be applied on the local level and that poor laws that gave the poor a right to aid should disappear.

It seemed new for the Government to urge the provision of employment, but its motive was old. They feared rebellion and the masses

¹ Collison Black, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

² Collison Black, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³ Collison Black, *op. cit.*, pp. 112-117; Salaman, *op. cit.*, pp. 296-297.

should be kept occupied. There were no new approaches to the social question in these years. Liberal economic ideas might have induced the Government to abolish the excise duties on foodstuffs. Much was said about it, but nothing was done, although it was clear that even in parliament most of the members were in favour of abolition.

Social unrest was wide-spread, at least in comparison with other periods. Although a year later the food prices, except of course the potato prices, had returned to normal, this unrest should be regarded as foreshadowing the events of March 1848. The revolutions elsewhere in Europe and some disturbances in the Hague and Amsterdam were reasons for King William II to give the Netherlands a liberal constitution. The contemporary documents reveal the depth of the fear inspired by the lowest layer of society. This fear must have been even greater when events between 1845 and 1847 proved it was not without foundation. The Government, and especially William II, was mortally afraid of the phantom of the revolution and they saw its head in every sign of dissatisfaction.

The higher classes did a great deal of charitable work but were far removed from reality. They had no conception of the misery of the poor. There was even in these years a proposal for the foundation of a savings bank to prevent the "poverty and immorality" which combined "in brutalizing the lower classes and in keeping them from the great purpose of life, which was to be human in the noblest sense of the word".¹ There was no lack of cant and empty phrases in the Netherlands.

The lower classes sank deeper into pauperism but remained full of devotion to God's will. Poor relief enabled them to bask in the "pure pleasure" of charity.

Finally, *phytophthora* itself. It acclimatized very rapidly and in 1853 the blight was called the "usual disease".² Especially in the clay provinces the small fungus continued to do great damage. It was not to be defeated until long afterwards, when it was discovered that the leaves should be sprayed with Bordeaux mixture, a fungicide made by reaction of copper sulfate, lime and water. Indeed the principle of this remedy had been discovered in 1845 by some Dutch research chemists,³ but their advice had not been accepted.

On the clay soils of Zeeland a normal crop before 1845 was 169 hl. of

¹ Plan for the foundation of a savings bank, annex to Governor's Report North Holland, May 10, 1847.

² Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1853, p. 337.

³ Jac. Moleschott and E. H. von Baumhauer, *Het wezen der aardappelziekte en de middelen ter voorkoming en genezing van dezelve*, Utrecht 1845.

potatoes per ha., but in 1848 one ha. yielded only 67 hl.¹ The figures from Friesland also show that the abundant potato crops had come to an end:²

1844	161 hl./ha.
1845	58
1848	72
1850	106
1851	114
1852	118
1853	91.

North Brabant had the following figures:³

1845	33
1846	90
1847	120
1849	100
1850	80
1851	110
1852	81.

The lowest yields were returned in 1845, but for years the national average remained under 170 hl./ha., which was normal before 1845.

For a long time the potato prices remained high. In Friesland, for instance, fl. 0.80 to fl. 1 was paid for a hectoliter of potatoes before 1844,⁴ but after 1848 it cost:⁵

1848	fl.2
1850	1.05
1851	2.45
1852	2.15
1853	3.20.

In North Brabant the following prices were in force:⁶

1843	fl.1.28
1850	1.76
1851	2.24
1852	2.23.

In the long run the potato prices were therefore doubled by the blight.

¹ Annual Report Governor Zealand, 1848.

² Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1844, 1845, 1848, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, *passim*.

³ Verslag nopens Noord-Brabant over 1846, 1847, 1850, 1851, 1852, *passim*.

⁴ See p. 396, n. 2.

⁵ Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1848, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, *passim*.

⁶ Verslag nopens Noord-Brabant over 1844, 1851, 1852, *passim*.

The position of the lower classes deteriorated accordingly, particularly in those regions where the custom of three potato meals a day prevailed.

Special mention should be made of the fact that after 1845 the potato blight was combated by removing the cultivation of potatoes from the clay regions to the sandy soils. A comparison of the rich clay province of Friesland with the sandy province of North Brabant makes this clear:¹

Friesland, ha. of potatoes		North Brabant, ha. of potatoes
1845	12,376	12,953
1852	7,238	17,071

Before 1845 precisely these clay soils with their famous, rich potato crops had witnessed a rapid population growth. It was therefore in these regions that pauperism spread most rapidly when the basis of existence, the potato, dropped out. The polders of the Tiel- and Bommelerwaard are an example. Till very recently this region was known as one of the poorest of the Netherlands. The rural district of the province of Friesland became the first bastion of Dutch socialism, and it is not too far-fetched a notion to relate the radicalization of Friesland to the poverty that came in the wake of the potato blight.

¹ Verslag aan de Staten van Friesland over 1845, 1852, passim; Verslag nopens Noord-Brabant over 1846, 1852, passim.