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The crisis years

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1929 - 1940

The crisis years

Society in the depression

The years from 1929 to 1940 are usually referred to as the “crisis years” or the “great depression”: a long period of a falling economy and large-scale unemployment. The crisis began in October 1929 in the United States after the Wall Street Crash and soon the whole world was in the grip of the depression.

The number of unemployed in the Netherlands in 1930 totalled about 100,000 and reached its peak in 1936 with 480,000 people out of work. The numbers fell somewhat after this time but until the outbreak of the war, hundreds of thousands of people remained out of work. Up until then, unemployment rates in the Netherlands had never been this high and the situation had never lasted for so long. One out of every four Dutch citizens had been out of work for a year or longer.

The government decided to provide the unemployed with financial support.

This support could not be too high, because – according to the government – that would make the unemployed lazy. The benefit paid out was just enough to pay the rent and provide a simple meal. There was no money left for entertainment, sports or clothes. To prevent the unemployed from accepting cash-in-hand work alongside their benefit, they had to have their dole card stamped at the unemployment office once or twice a day. This was considered very humiliating. In addition, the unemployed could be forced to work in the relief work programme. This meant that a teacher could be forced to take a spade and dig ditches or build dykes. Large public works like the *Amsterdamse Bos* (Amsterdam Woods) date from this time.

The government, under Prime Minister Colijn, chose to keep its hands on the purse strings as much as possible.

The budget had to be balanced, and for a long time Colijn refused to reconsider the value of the Dutch guilder. This policy of economising was highly criticised – particularly by the socialists who believed that the government needed to implement a much stronger economic policy.

The government appeared powerless to resolve the crisis and many Dutch citizens began to have doubts about their parliamentary democracy: the system seemed to represent division and lack of decisive action. This criticism did not, however, lead to a significant shift of votes to the right or left at the elections. The large democratic parties managed to retain most of their support. The National Socialist Movement, which promoted powerful leadership, remained a small right-wing party with little support.

After World War II, new ideas arose about tackling the problem of



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unemployment. Unemployed people were approached in a more human, less suspicious manner. In addition, the government made greater efforts to assist the unemployed in finding work.

Sub-topics

Primary education sector

The social circumstances of the employed and unemployed in the 1930s

The rise of national socialism in Germany
Unemployment, the people and the state

Secondary education sector

The different approaches to unemployment in the Netherlands, Germany and the United States
The differences between the socio-economic policy of the 1930s and that of the post-World War II period
Colijn and the crisis
Keynes and the crisis
Malaise and extremism

Past and Present

Comparisons between the life of the unemployed in the 1930s and the life of today's unemployed
Unemployment today, in the Netherlands and its neighbours
Government policy: economising or large-scale spending?

In the Treasure Chest

Dole card
The free Bicycle Tax Plate with a hole signifying unemployment

References

Places to Go

Amsterdam: De Burcht, Vakbondsmuseum

Books for young people

Benny Lindelauf, *Negen open armen* (12+)
Aline Sax, *Wij, twee jongens* (emigration to the US) (12+)
Miek Dorrestein, *Aardappels met lawaaisaus*

Background literature

Norbert-Jan Nuy, "Het Jordaanoproer (1934)", in Els Kloek (ed.), *Verzameld verleden: Veertig gedenkwaardige momenten en figuren uit de vaderlandse geschiedenis*, (Verloren Verleden 24), Hilversum 2004
J.C.H. Blom, *Crisis, bezetting en herstel: Tien studies over Nederland 1930-1950*, Rotterdam 1989

Websites

www.iisg.nl (Institute of Social History)
www.schooltv.nl/vroegerenzo [the 1930s]
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