LOUIS RAEMAEKERS

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'ARMED WITH PEN AND PENCIL'

How a Dutch cartoonist became world famous during the First World War



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followed by the article
‘The Kaiser in Exile: Wilhelm II in Doorn’
Liesbeth Ruitenberg

Louis Raemaekers Foundation

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THE TIMES FRIDAY JULY 27 1956

Obituary

MR. LOUIS RAEMAEKERS

A FIERCE SATIRIST

Mr. Louis Raemaekers, the biting anti-German cartoonist of the 1914-18 War, died yesterday at Scheveningen, near The Hague, at the age of 87.

It has been said of Raemaekers that he was the one private individual who exercised a real and great influence on the course of the 1914-18 War. There were a dozen or so people—Emperors, Kings, statesmen, and commanders-in-chief—who obviously, and notoriously, shaped policies and guided events. Outside that circle of the great, Louis Raemaekers stands conspicuous as the one man who, without any assistance of title or office, indubitably swayed the destinies of peoples.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 Germany made enormous efforts to win Holland to her side by attempts to purchase the sympathy of the Dutch Press, and by endeavouring to influence the minds of the Dutch people through the pens and platform speeches of a whole corps of professors. That the effort was a failure was chiefly due to the courage of the *Telegraaf*, of Amsterdam, in which Raemaekers's cartoons were published, and especially to those cartoons themselves. In those early months of the war Raemaekers's influence was confined to Holland; but gradually the power and passion of his drawings in the *Telegraaf* began to attract the attention of the editors of newspapers in other countries, and early in 1915 albums of reproductions of his first cartoons, published in Holland, were already beginning to make their way in the Allied and neutral countries of Europe. By the end of



A self-portrait from *Modern Caricaturists* by H. R. Westwood.

that year the name of Raemaekers was coming to be well known in most civilized countries, and that winter the first exhibition of the cartoons was given in London at the Fine Art Society's Galleries in New Bond Street, and created a profound impression. Immediately afterwards Paris gave itself up to a "Manifestation Raemaekers" when for a week the French Government, the city of Paris, the Press, the artistic community, and the people of the capital vied with each other in doing honour to the Dutch cartoonist.

From the beginning of 1916 Raemaekers made his home in England as being the most central point for the distribution of his drawings to the Press of Holland, France, and Great Britain simultaneously. Throughout the war he worked with unflagging energy and unfailing enthusiasm for the Allied cause. There were very few weeks in the course of the war in which he did not make at least four cartoons for publication in the Press, besides making an immense number of drawings for posters, programmes, &c., for charitable purposes in connexion with the war effort.

Obituary of Louis Raemaekers from *The Times*, 27 July 1956.



A cartoon about the Dutch Parliamentary elections in 1913 (13 July 1912).



In 'Atrocities', Raemaekers compared the crimes of the Allies (a mosquito) with those of the Germans (a rhino). 'The lecturer: "From a comparison of the two subjects, gentlemen, you will perceive that there is very little difference between Germany and the Allies"' (13 May 1915).

'The most fierce and terrible cartoonist was Louis Raemaekers. The agony of the War drew from his pencil more savage expressions of hate than I have ever seen elsewhere in black and white.'
Winston Churchill, 1931[1]

Introduction

Louis Raemaekers

In the summer of 1956, *The Times* published the obituary of a small, impassioned Dutchman, from the provincial town of Roermond, who had enjoyed a worldwide reputation during the First World War:

'Louis Raemaekers, the biting anti-German cartoonist of the 1914-18 War, died on July 26, 1956 at Scheveningen, near The Hague, at the age of 87. It has been said of Raemaekers that he was the one private individual who exercised a real and great influence on the course of the 1914-18 War. There were a dozen or so people – emperors, kings, statesmen, and commanders-in-chief – who obviously, and notoriously, shaped policies and guided events. Outside that circle of the great, Louis Raemaekers stands conspicuous as the one man who, without any assistance of title or office, indubitably swayed the destinies of peoples.'[2]

Who was this man who at the height of his career, both in the Netherlands and far beyond, was one of the best-known personalities of his time, whose work appeared in thousands of newspapers, whose cartoons were exhibited in the farthest corners of the world, who was received by heads of state and government, and who corresponded with prominent writers and artists?

The intention of this book is to explore the life of Louis Raemaekers and why he came to play such an active role in Allied propaganda during the First World War.

Chapter 1 deals with his youth in the southern Dutch town of Roermond, where his father was a prominent member of the liberal camp in the conflict between liberalism and clerical Catholicism. Chapter 2 follows the young Raemaekers to Nijmegen, Amsterdam and Brussels, where he trained, and where he needed to choose between the life of a creative artist and a more certain living as a cartoonist. This chapter goes on to consider Raemaekers' work as a drawing teacher in Tilburg and back in Roermond, followed by his move to Wageningen. There he was appointed head of the trade school and drawing teacher at the State School of Agriculture. In Chapter 3, Raemaekers' life takes a decisive turn when he accepts the invitation to draw political cartoons for leading Dutch newspapers, first for the *Algemeen Handelsblad* and from 1909 for *De Telegraaf*. Chapters 4 to 7 form the core of the book, dealing with Raemaekers' life and work during the First World War, the period when he challenged the neutrality of his own country and then became a leading figure on the Allied side, well-known throughout the world. Chapter 8 deals with the interwar years, when Raemaekers and his wife lived in Brussels and when he came to realise that he no longer played any significant role in discussions with world leaders. The same chapter goes on to consider the rise of Nazism, a period when Raemaekers continued to produce work for *De Telegraaf* but used his position to counter the national-socialist sympathies of its editors with his anti-Hitler cartoons. Chapter 9 covers the period that he spent in United States during the Second World War and his latter years before his death in The Hague in 1956. The final chapter provides a brief analysis of the significance of his work during and for the First World War.



'The promise'. '"We shall never sheathe the sword until Belgium recovers all, and more than all that she has sacrificed." Mr. Asquith, 9 November 1914' (21 July 1915).

Louis Raemaekers achieved his greatest successes outside his native country. His leaving the Netherlands for London at the end of 1915 was a godsend for all concerned. Henceforth, the Dutch government could distance itself from the cartoonist and his work in its diplomatic relations, thus stabilising its position vis-à-vis Germany, while Raemaekers himself could cease his hopeless campaign to get the Netherlands to abandon



In America, Raemaekers would produce cartoons for the Hearst Press. Tens of millions of copies were printed each month.



'Better a living dog than a dead lion', a print that made Raemaekers highly controversial in the Netherlands.



A cartoon by Raemaekers from *De Telegraaf*: 'Pounding away at the Somme front' (22 September 1916).

Raemaekers, the Greatest World War Cartoonist, Comes to the United States to Work for the New York American

Announcement of Raemaekers' visit to the United States in July 1917

its neutral stance. He may also have realised for himself that his aim of persuading his country to take up arms and thus avoid the fate of Belgium was not very realistic.

Arriving in Britain, Raemaekers quickly took on a new challenge, namely to ensure the mass distribution of his work both in that country and elsewhere in support of Allied propaganda. This was the beginning of a new phase in his life, one which brought him world renown. According to the historians Horne and Kramer (2001), 'Raemaekers became the single most influential figure in projecting the Allied vision of the German enemy to home audiences and to the rest of the world'.[3]

Among the Allies and in neutral countries, it was not so much Raemaekers' anti-neutral stance that brought him praise; it was specifically his own neutral status that gave him credibility. This was most effectively expressed by a good friend, the journalist Perry Robinson, in the album *The Great War: a Neutral's Indictment* (1916): 'Raemaekers' testimony is a testimony of an eye-witness. He saw the pitiable stream of refugees which poured from desolated Belgium across the Dutch frontier; and he heard the tale of the abominations which they had suffered from their own lips. … His message to the world, therefore, when he began to speak, had all the authority not only of a Neutral who was unbiassed, but of a Neutral who knew.'[4]

This book

Although the First World War occupies an important place in the life of Louis Raemaekers, this book is not intended as an historical treatise on that conflict. Rather, it focuses on the war as seen through the eyes of Raemaekers himself, the way he viewed the German invasion of Belgium, how he and *De Telegraaf* ignored the request to respect Dutch neutrality, how he was welcomed with open arms in London and Paris, how his work was quickly distributed to all corners of the world, and how – at the request of the British Prime Minister – he crossed to the United States to contribute there to the Allied cause.

The main purpose of this book is revive the public's acquaintance with Louis Raemaekers the man, his role in wartime propaganda, and his political cartoons. Over the course of time, we have lost sight of the importance of this world-famous cartoonist. In the first few months of the war, the passion expressed in Raemaekers' cartoons worked in his favour, but later his obstinacy came to be appreciated much less. In the long run, his message became less clear and was even misinterpreted. In his own country, people objected to his supposedly anti-Dutch attitude, a criticism that continued to pursue him for the rest of his life; in other countries, it was above all his interference in political matters after the war that aroused irritation and led to him being forgotten.

The most important aspect of Raemaekers' career is undoubtedly his role in Allied war propaganda. Although 'objectivity' was often very much absent during the First World War, the word 'propaganda' had not yet taken on the highly negative connotations that it has nowadays. All the various parties made use of propaganda to sway public opinion in favour of their cause. Daily newspapers were the most suitable vehicle for this, with visual



Two very different cartoons by Raemaekers: the symbolic alliance between Kaiser Wilhelm and Death and a gruesome depiction of the effects of poison gas (1917 and 1915).

material playing an important role. A political cartoon acts as an eye-catcher within the monotonous layout of a newspaper; the combination of image and text reinforces the impression that its message leaves on the reader, and even people who are only semi-literate can appreciate its meaning.

Raemaekers' cartoons brought the European war into American living rooms, after he had already won over the somewhat hesitant British public to the Allied cause. A member of staff at the British War Office already wrote to him early in the war saying: 'We have no doubt you have greatly influenced public opinion in the cause for which we are all fighting.'[5]

But did Louis Raemaekers really influence public opinion? Just who was this man who has been called the most important political cartoonist of the First World War? What led him to condemn the German invasion of Belgium so strongly and to choose the side of the Allies immediately after the outbreak of hostilities? How did his work come to be distributed internationally? What were the methods he used to get his message across, and to what extent do they explain his success?

Although Raemaekers produced a number of particularly powerful cartoons, and his own term 'ephemera' [*eendagsvliegen*, literally mayflies] does not always apply, one can safely say that his great reputation was due not so much to the artistic value of his drawings but to the way he conveyed his message. As H.R. Westwood rightly pointed out in 1931, 'He would never have attained to international fame if he had not turned from painting to political caricature'.[6] But Westwood's comment does not do full justice to Raemaekers' work. The present publication reproduces a large number of his cartoons. Some of these are primarily intended to illustrate the narrative, but in between the chapters selections are shown from his best drawings, and these include what are – by any measure – masterpieces. Although Dutch cartoonists such as Albert Hahn and Johan Braakensiek were less famous than Raemaekers during the First World War – certainly internationally – their works have stood the test of time better. Unlike Louis Raemaekers, they are considered to be among the leading lights in the history of political cartooning in the Netherlands. It is high time that Louis Raemaekers took his rightful place alongside them.



Raemaekers (centre, with black tie) surrounded by French cartoonists. Seated on the left is Théophile Steinlen (February 1916).


België