Rudolf de Jong
Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis: Anarchist and Messiah
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In this historical essay the redeemer of the Dutch proletariat is reviewed against the background of his own day and age. Author Rudolf de Jong (born 1932) studied political and social-science, and since 1960 works at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. He has published books on the Spanish Civil War and articles on anarchism, Latin America, and Spain. A summary of his essay on Provos and anarchists appeared in the Autumn 1967 issue of Delta. The present article is translated by Elizabeth Wentholt-Haig. Text digitalized by Forum voor Georganiseerd Anarchisme.

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the redemption of the proletariat

But few people were so shocked and disappointed as Nieuwenhuis when on the outbreak of war in 1914 the workers seemed to abandon all notion of international solidarity. Indefatigable as ever, he worked on. Further events which he lived to witness were the Russian revolutions, the Armistice, and the subsequent wave of revolution which swept over Europe and aroused high hopes in the Netherlands and elsewhere. But he had little faith in the authoritarian communists, and he perceived with great clarity the coarsening effects of the war.

Today, in 1971, we know that Nieuwenhuis has been proved right in many respects. But it is also clear that many of the new lines and forms of anti-authoritarian thought and action now emerging in the Netherlands are not a direct legacy of his brand of anarchism, of his fighting tactics. He remained a Messianic figure to the end. His later description of himself as 'the man who worked for the redemption of the proletariat' fuses the Messianic and the anarchistic sides of his nature into one whole, presenting the redeemer who was willing to help the workers while at the same time insisting that they must also help themselves. In the light of our present knowledge, these two characteristics must nevertheless be regarded as mutually opposed. In our appraisal of Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis it would seem both correct and just to accord pride of place to his anarchism and accordingly to describe him first as an Anarchist and second as a Messiah.

setting up a defense committee, of which, however, neither Nieuwenhuis nor Troelstra was a member. In April, while the bills were being debated in parliament, the committee called a general strike. Revolution was in the air, despite the fact that not all workers had gone out on strike, and troops were sent to Amsterdam. But once parliament had passed the bills the committee unexpectedly called off the strike, to the furious indignation of the workers, thousands of whom were subsequently dismissed from their jobs. Nieuwenhuis accused the SDAP of betrayal. The latter, having embarked on the strike, had suddenly feit itself in danger of foundering on the rocks of anarchism.

After his conversion to anarchism, Nieuwenhuis wrote some of his most notable works: in 1902. a popular three-volume *De geschiedenis van het Socialisme* (History of Socialism) and, in 1910, his memoirs *Van Christen tot Anarchist.* He attached great importance to the emancipation of the spirit and to liberal educational methods. Anti-militarism was a cause especially dear to his heart and it was he who initiated the founding of the International Anti-Militarist Association in 1904 and who edited the Dutch section's paper *De wapens neer* (Down with Arms). The association exerted its greatest influence in the Netherlands. Though pacifist in its aims, it did not preach a doctrine of non-violence but sought to bring about a society in which there is no longer any place for brute force' under such slogans as

Neither Men nor Money for Militarism' and 'Free the Indies from Holland.' Nieuwenhuis' belief that a general strike was the most effective means of stopping war, a view which the social democrats had rejected as a product of cloud-cuckooland, was endorsed at international congresses of free-thinkers. Shortly after the opening of the Peace Palace in The Hague in 1913, he said, 'The Peace Palace is open; war can begin.'

When the students occupied the administrative offices of the University of Amsterdam in May 1969 they had good reason to give the building a new name - Domela Nieuwenhuis University - for Nieuwenhuis, the fiftieth anniversary of whose death was commemorated that year, was one of the most remarkable figures in Dutch social history. He was the first great socialist spokesman, the first socialist to enter parliament, and a prominent figure at international socialist congresses and, later, in the Dutch and the international anarchist movement. His funeral was perhaps the most impressive demonstration in the history of the Dutch labour movement. Along the route the streets were filled with tens upon tens of thousands, workers with their wives and children from Amsterdam and from ad parts of the country. It is estimated that by the time the coffin, which was borne by dockers, reached Central Station (whence the body was taken to the crematorium by train) the procession had swelled to eleven thousand. The station square was a solid black sea of people — with the red banner waving everywhere. There are two memorials to him in Amsterdam: Johan Polet's statue erected in 1931 on the Nassauplein and the Domela Nieuwenhuis Museum, housed in the International Institute for Social History on the Herengracht, with its unparalleled collection of socialist materials. Today, so many years later, it is worth while to look at this man who so profoundly influenced the Dutch workers of his time.

Anarchism might be defined as an anti-Messianic ideology based on the premise that man has to be liberated from all authority, domination, and prejudice, but not by a redeemer, a party, group, or individual that will show him the way; he must liberate himself, and start from the beginning. Nieuwenhuis can best be described with the paradox Anarchist and Messiah. It is a paradox that can be grasped only by viewing him against the background of his own day and age.

faith in the power of reason

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis was born in Amsterdam on 31 December 1846 as the son of an eminent Lutheran clergyman and professor of theology of Danish descent. He died in the middle-class commuter town of Hilversum on 18 November 1919. If we date the beginning of the twentieth century from the First World War in 1914, his life may be said to have been confined almost entirely to the nineteenth century. He was indeed a typical product of the nineteenth century. The writers he admired were Goethe, Schiller, Heine, the French philosophers, the Dutch moralist poets, and the Dutch rebel Multatuli.[1] His reading ranged from David Friedrich Strauss, the liberal economists, John Stuart Mill, and the German historians to the socialists Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, and Karl Marx, and in later years, to anarchist writers like Peter Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus. The interior of Nieuwenhuis home, his taste, his comportment and behavior - almost superhuman self-control and unfailing self-possession - were all characteristic of the age in which he lived. The personal blows he sustained were equally typical of the nineteenth century: three wives, all of them still young, died in childbirth, and several of his children predeceased him. He had the nineteenth-century social reformer's unbounded faith in the power of reason, of rational argument, in progress, and a better world. His own social status can also best be described in nineteenth-century terms. He grew up in one of the fine houses on Amsterdam's elegant Herengracht and became, thanks largely to his stepmother's fortune, a man of comfortable means.

Following his father's example, Nieuwenhuis entered the ministry in 1879 and was called to The Hague while still a young man - though not, however, as court chaplain as has

[1] See D. H. Lawrence, 'In Defence of Max Havelaar,' in the Winter 1958-59 issue of *Delta.*

of the SDAP. He always found it difficult to work with people with strong personalities, even when they were anarchists closely allied to him in spirit. The most interesting among them moved on to revolutionary syndicalism, productive associations, and more pronounced forms of social anarchism. Others eventually found their way to the SDAP.

So even though that part of the Dutch anarchist movement represented by the true Nieuwenhuis followers grouped around *De Vrije Socialist* was substantial, it was at the same time the least original. Too often his devotees reacted to the slogan 'Do It Yourself' with inaction and a futile search for strength in isolation.

Nieuwenhuis continued, however, to inspire widespread respect and affection through his lack of self-interest and his unswerving adherence to his principles. The esteem in which he was held was given public expression on two occasions, in 1904, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of *Recht voor Allen,* and in 1916 on his seventieth birthday, but it was reflected most clearly in the so-called 'Ten Cents Fund. Nieuwenhuis entire fortune had been swallowed up by the movement and towards the end of his life he was faced with financial difficulties. The danger was effectively averted by the fund, to which thousands contributed ten cents per week to provide for him and his wife in their old age.

Nieuwenhuis found himself in the thick of the fight once more during the 1903 general strike, the most heated social battle ever waged in the Netherlands. Having won a strike in January of that year, the workers concerned returned triumphantly to work, the railwaymen amongst them sporting the red rosé on their engines. The government, headed by Abraham Kuyper, the leader of the Anti-Revolutionary Party who had once held radical social ideas, introduced legislation limiting the right to strike. The bills, the 'strangulation laws' as they were called, aroused a storm of protest, and anarchists, social democrats, and trade unionists joined forces in

pronounced forms of social anarchism

Nieuwenhuis' anarchism arose primarily from his rejection of this new trend in social democracy. But he had long been interested in anarchism and had admired such supporters of its doctrines as the Russian nihilist Kropotkin, Louise Michel, and the Chicago group referred to above. He had been saying for years that the people had to do everything themselves, that only the workers could effect their own liberation, that all reform starts at the lowest levels. As an anarchist he of course placed greater emphasis than before on power and authority as the root of all evil. Though he remained a social anarchist to the end, he adopted an increasingly critical attitude to all forms of organization, and particularly to the organization of anarchists — the latter was the reason for his refusal to be a delegate at the International Anarchist Congress which was held in Amsterdam in 1907.

Anarchist propaganda along the lines advocated by Nieuwenhuis was in many respects revolutionary social democracy carried a few steps further. But what had been new and positive in the early eighties had become a habit, almost a rut, by the end of the nineties. Most of the workers who had belonged to the old League had followed Nieuwenhuis and not the SDAP — which in the early years of its existence was an army consisting almost entirely of generals - but this was largely out of personal respect for him, for the Messiah. The struggle between Nieuwenhuis and the SDAP was a bitter one from the very first moment and neither side was over-scrupulous in its choice of weapons. It was this conflict which caused the failure of a campaign to secure the release of the Hoogerhuis brothers, three Dutch workers who had been wrongly convicted in a case which has been compared with the Dreyfus affair. Nieuwenhuis often treated his opponents as though they were nothing more than job-hunters and careerists. Personal factors had played a role in the founding

been stated in various English historical studies. (The Dutch royal family is in any case not Lutheran; its members belong to the much larger Reformed Church.) In 1870, no longer believing in God or in the church as an open tribune, he left the ministry, convinced of the truth of the parable 'And no man putteth new wine into old bottles.' But he remained a preacher for the rest of his life, and was ever-mindful of the figure of Christ, 'the man of conviction' as he was wont to call him, whose life had been devoted to the dissemination of his beliefs.

He himself was wholly committed to everything he believed in; consistency was one of his most conspicuous qualities. *Helen en Hah/en* (Wholes and Halves) is the title of a pamphlet published while he was still a clergyman. He always detested irresolution and ambiguity, and his judgement of 'halves' and those whom he regarded as such was often severe to the point of harshness. Relativity and gentleness were in fact foreign to his nature, quite certainly as far as his writings were concerned.

exploited and deprived of their rights

Parallel to Nieuwenhuis' progression in the direction of atheism, though initially separate from it, was that towards the new cause, socialism, which was to determine the further course of his life. During his years in the church he had concerned himself, like other young radical intellectuals of the day, with the problem of peace, with universal suffrage, and with 'the social question.' But he was the only one to carry his opinions to their logical conclusion, and the first number of his periodical, *Recht voor Allen* (Justice for AH), was published on 1 March 1879. As he himself later expressed it, he was 'flung into the labor movement.' He and his publication became together the focal point of the first widespread socialist

movement in the Netherlands, the Social Democratie League (Sociaal-Democratische Bond, SDB).

Socialism reached the Netherlands long after it had become a force to be reckoned with in neighboring countries, a delay attributable to the long preceding period of economie and cultural stagnation. Industry and modern capitalism got off to an uncertain start. The country was underdeveloped, and a large part of the population lived in conditions of abject poverty. The Dutch working class had the name of being heavy geneverdrinkers, undernourished, of a poor physique, and quite ignorant — almost the worst educated of all the European nations, slow and inert like their canals.

Though in the eighties the Netherlands moved closer to the living standards obtaining in other European countries, the social miseries afflicting the bulk of the population were in no way alleviated. The workers continued to be exploited and deprived of their rights. Most of them endured their lot in passive resignation, and in a spirit of humble servility feit indebted to the capitalists who 'gave them work.' It was these workers whom Nieuwenhuis now attempted to arouse from their apathy, to draw into the struggle for socialism. At first he spoke to small gatherings, sometimes to empty halls. But he persevered and within a few years was addressing audiences of thousands. Henriëtte Roland Holst (1869-1952), the Netherlands leading socialist poet, later characterized his activities with the words, Your art found the word that shattered the numbness of despair.' leuwenhuis indeed became the Messiah of the Dutch proletariat. In the northern rural ts, where his influence was perhaps strongest, he was referred to literally as ^{our} re eemer. His incredible capacity for work, his resilience, and his total commitment were

acter. Moreover, he thought the leaders were placing too great a distance between themselves and the rank and file, making decisions on their behalf without first ascertaining their views, and that a new caste was being created which treated dissidents at the congresses, namely, the anarchists, in much the same way as the traditional ruling classes treated the socialists.

Slowly and steadily Nieuwenhuis grew closer to anarchism. Finally, in 1897, he left the Social Democratie League (which in 1894 had become the Socialist League), resigned his editorship of *Recht voor Allen,* and embarked the following year on the production of a new periodical, *De Vrije Socialist* (The Free Socialist). His decision had in fact been taken earlier, in 1894, when twelve social democrats, 'the twelve apostles,' led by Pieter Jelles Troelstra, (1860-1930) broke away from the League, which had meanwhile adopted an anti-parliamentary line, to found a new party, the Social Democratie Workers Party (Sociaal Democratische Arbeiders Partij, SDAP). This new party followed the example set by the German counterpart and was rewarded in 1897 with its first successes at the polls.

The transitional period of the nineties saw the publication of Nieuwenhuis' most important theoretical work, a collection of articles culled from periodicals; the original volume *Le socialisme en danger* was printed in Brussels in 1894, an English version *Socialism in Danger* in 1897; in Germany only excerpts appeared. In it he sounded a warning against the danger of socialism degenerating into a bourgeois movement and a dogmatic state socialism divorced from all free socialist ideals. In this connection he pointed to the similarity between social democracy and early Christianity, which lost all touch with its origins once it had become the established religion. Nieuwenhuis foresaw the emergence of a new elite and warned against the predominance of one party and one party line in international socialism.

hundred thousand copies were printed), and for a short time *Recht voor Allen* became a daily paper.

When Nieuwenhuis lost his seat in the 1891 elections, the Social Democratie League was faced with the problem of what its next step should be. Great expectations had been aroused, but little had emerged in the way of concrete results. The same dilemma was concurrently being experienced in other parts of Europe as well. Nieuwenhuis was practically the only one of the top socialist leaders to reject parliamentary politics as a road to reform; he remained true to his revolutionary principles and became a convinced anti-parliamentarian.

a dogmatic state socialism

Nieuwenhuis' international contacts were legion. He had corresponded with Karl Marx and had published a popular, abbreviated edition of *Das Kapital* in Dutch. He was personally acquainted with Friedrich Engels and the German, French, English, and Belgian party leaders - Wilhelm Liebknecht, August Bebel, William Morris, the aged Victor Considérant, and many others. He played a prominent role at the first four congresses of the Second International (1889-1896, Paris, Brussels, Zurich, and London), where he came into conflict with the German party and in fact with the entire social-democratic world. The immediate issue was the means of preventing war. Nieuwenhuis proposed in Brussels in 1891 that the workers should respond to the outbreak of war by proclaiming a general strike. The majority, however, voted in favor of a resolution attributing war to capitalism and stating that strengthening the party would be the best means of restraining the warmongering of governments. Nieuwenhuis found this too simple, too much like half measures. On other points, too - for instance, the German party's proposal that May Day be celebrated on the nearest Sunday - he detected what by his standards was lack of char-

campaign for universal suffrage

contributory factors; but it was above all his personal manner, the way he spoke, his self-control, and his physical appearance - with his long hair and bearded face he was a Christ-like figure - which won him a personal veneration unprecedented in the Netherlands. His manner was modest, he never ranted like a demagogue. He remained a gentleman, but a gentleman who regarded and treated the downtrodden workers as his equals in all things. In this way - and this probably accounts for much of the reverence in which he was held - he gave them for the first time a feeling that they were human beings, instilling into them a sense of dignity and self-respect, and lending purpose and direction to their lives. For him, socialism was first and foremost a matter of justice rather than of economic or historic necessity. Socialism was not something to be merely applauded: one was a socialist. His own life exemplified this attitude in that it was entirely devoted to his beliefs. He fought alcoholism by joining the ranks of the teetotalers and was, in addition, both a vegetarian and a non-smoker. Here, too, his influence on the Dutch labor movement' was still in evidence long after his death.

The growth of the Social Democratie League and *Recht voor Allen* was tempestuous - the paper was sold on the streets and taken round from house to house - with Nieuwenhuis at the centre of this period of agitation and turmoil. The campaign for universal suffrage was accompanied by large-scale demonstrations and meetings. The tension ran so high that on one occasion, fearing that demonstrators gathered outside the parliament building would break in, the authorities packed the public gallery of the Second Chamber with girls hastily recruited from orphanages.

The socialism of the League was both revolutionary and all-encompassing. It entered the lists against capitalism, the churches, the army, the monarchy, the drinking dens, and

class justice. The Dutch government became anxious. The legal recognition normally accorded organized groups was withheld from the SDB, socialists were dismissed from their jobs, and the press attacked them vehemently. Meetings wöre broken up by the police, sometimes by force. In 1886 the socialists were blamed for the 'eel riots' in the Jordaan, a working-class district of Amsterdam, in which twenty-six people were killed and more than one hundred wounded. In whole Amsterdam, the centre of their movement, the workers could find no hall in which to hold their meetings.

The struggle culminated in a sharp antagonism between Red and Orange, between Domela Nieuwenhuis and William III, who was known as King Gorilla on account of his unsavory personal life. In 1886 Nieuwenhuis was arrested on a charge of treason after writing that the king 'does not pay much attention to his job.' In 1887 he was given a sentence of one year, which he served in the Utrecht jail. His detention, which entailed wearing ordinary prison clothes and having his beard and hair shaved off, transformed him into a martyr in the eyes of his followers. Nieuwenhuis undoubtedly had a certain craving for ostentatious martyrdom, for making the supreme sacrifice. The trial of the eight anarchists, the Chicago Martyrs, and the subsequent wrongful execution of five of them in 1887, made a deep and abiding impression on him. Their comportment certainly influenced his final choice in favor of anarchism. In his memoirs, *Van Christen tot Anarchist,* 1910 (From Christian to Anarchist), he referred to the death before a Barcelona firing-squad in 1909 of Francisco Ferrer Guardia, a man whom he admired and who was congenial to him in spirit — Ferrer was the founder of the Escuela Moderna, a school devoted to anti-religious and anarchistic doctrine. Nieuwenhuis wrote: 'But far from pitying him, we should be inclined to envy him, because he has been found worthy of the high honor of a martyr's death in the cause of freedom.'

To return to Nieuwenhuis' own imprisonment, there were also non-socialists who considered his sentence unjust and a campaign was undertaken with the aim of securing his release. Seven months later, on 31 August 1887, the birthday of Princess Wilhelmina, the later queen, he was set free. Meanwhile, the witch-hunt against the socialists was reaching new heights with the so-called 'Orange Furies'; on occasions such as the king's birthday socialists were attacked by mobs who stormed their houses and offices and smashed everything within reach, while the police stood by or even lent a helping hand. Outbursts of this kind were to remain a recurrent feature of the Dutch labor movement for many years to come. Nieuwenhuis himself narrowly escaped such an attack in Rotterdam shortly after his release from prison and again, later, in 1898.

In 1888 the Frisian electoral district Schoterland sent Nieuwenhuis to the Second Chamber of the States General. He took his new task seriously and refrained from revolutionary speeches, which he realized would be quite fruitless in such surroundings. He did, however, put forward constructive and practical proposals, all of which are now, in 1971, taken for granted as a normal part of national life. In addition to improved social conditions, an eight-hour working day, and a system of social security to be run by the workers themselves, he also advocated the draining of the Zuyder Zee, the independence of the colonies, the establishment of a national bank and a central statistical office. The proposals and the bill against the truck system which he submitted were either greeted with scorn and derision or totally ignored. Right from the beginning, starting from the very day he took his seat, he was cold-shouldered by the Chamber - only the Anti-Revolutionary Minister Keuchenius took the trouble to welcome him. Nieuwenhuis found his parliamentary period highly frustrating. His numerous speeches were issued as pamphlets and distributed by the thousand (in one case a