Huizinga before the Abyss: The von Leers Incident at the University of Leiden, April 1933

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Introduction

The “von Leers incident” at Leiden University in 1933 was a tiny event in a time of dramatic political and social upheaval. It is best considered not as postmodern microhistory but as a traditional exemplary story that encapsulates significant features of a larger historical moment. In particular, it focuses attention on the point of connection between a professional ethic (adherence to the basic requirement of truthfulness without which there can be no scholarship or science) and a broader individual and political morality.

The incident created a stir at the time and is still remembered in Holland. Outside Holland, however, few people now know of Huizinga’s decision, as rector of Leiden University, to refuse the university’s hospitality to a Nazi scholar attending an international conference there, on the grounds that he had published an anti-Semitic pamphlet in which he knowingly presented completely discredited popular legends about Jews as though they were historical fact.

I myself learned of the incident from Huizinga’s correspondence with his Swiss colleague and admirer Werner Kaegi, the translator of several of Huizinga’s works into German and the author of the definitive six-volume biography of Burekhardt. As I began to read the letters that passed between Huizinga and Kaegi, between Huizinga and his colleagues at Leiden and elsewhere in Europe (Henri Sée, Henri Hauser, and Paul Mantoux in France,
Henri Pirenne in Belgium, and Pieter Geyl and Fritz Saxl in London), between Huizinga and the university Board of Governors, between Huizinga and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and between Huizinga and various German colleagues. I was more and more struck by the way the incident seemed to concentrate the most critical moral questions of the scholarly life. I felt that anybody who takes the scholarly or scientific vocation seriously would be interested in the way Huizinga handled himself in this affair, and I resolved to write an account of it.

At that point I learned from a Dutch colleague, J. Th. Leerssen, Director of the Erasmus Institute in Amsterdam, that a full account of the affair had been published in Dutch over a decade ago. I wrote to the author, Willem Otterspeer, who kindly granted me permission to translate his essay. In making the translation, I had the indispensable assistance of a Dutch graduate student in the Department of Romance Languages at Princeton, Reinier Leushuis, to whom the Committee on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Princeton University provided a small stipend.

For the benefit of the English-speaking reader I have added some explanatory notes to those provided by Otterspeer and have expanded others with references to the published correspondence of Huizinga, which appeared after Otterspeer’s essay. I have also written an afterword in which, in the light of the correspondence, I explain more fully the consequences for Huizinga’s own career of the action he took in the von Leers affair. In addition, I speculate on the motives that may have impelled Huizinga to act as he did and, in particular, on the connection between Huizinga’s action and his celebrated ideas about the place of play in civilized life. Was Huizinga’s aim to reaffirm the value of the spirit of play and the need to observe the rules of the game, or did he act out of a “higher” ethical conviction?

Translation

Summary

Johan Huizinga was one of the Netherlands’ greatest historians. However, he was subject to severe criticism during his lifetime and has remained a controversial figure since his death. At first, the criticism concerned his idiosyncratic approach to the study of history; later it enveloped his entire intellectual outlook. Figures as divergent as Menno ter Braak and Jacques de Kadt reproached him for having had no understanding at all of his own time and for having chosen the security and seclusion of the scholarly life at a moment when it was imperative to take an unambiguous position on the
issues of the day. It might even be, the charge runs, that Huizinga sanctioned
the reactionary developments of his own age.

The theme of this essay is the space that a particular intellectual way
of life allows for active engagement with the world. An intellectual is some-
one who observes, guides, warns, or mocks from his or her corner on soci-
ey's outskirts. He or she is an engaged outsider. It was by no means easy to
reconcile such a position with an academic professorship. In the interwar
period especially, high academic posts still enjoyed extraordinary social pre-
stige. The university professor was usually a comfortably unengaged insider,
but developments in the twenties—in particular the erosion of the aca-
demic's elite sphere of influence and social position—often gave him the air
of a Cassandra amid the ruins. It seemed as if there were only two options
for the university professor: either calculated withdrawal and isolation or
adherence to one or another of the various reactionary movements. In Ger-
many, at any rate, a large number of academic intellectuals gave hesitant
approval to the "brown violence." Before Huizinga too, both roads lay open.

The core of this study is the so-called von Leers incident at the Uni-
versity of Leiden in 1933. Huizinga, who was rector of the university in that
year, informed the visiting Nazi historian, Johann von Leers, that he was per-
sona non grata at the university. Although that action subsequently won
public approval, Huizinga stood almost alone when he took it. However
difficult it may have been for him, he did thereby take a stand, and in a man-
ner that did not seem obvious at the time. The fact that we can now com-
prehend historically how he was led to act as he did does not in any way
detract from the freedom and courage of the act.

Huizinga before the abyss
In his review of Huizinga's Cultuurhistorische Verkenningen (Explorations in
Cultural History), the Dutch writer Menno ter Braak—who happens to
have been a younger relative of the historian—noted a shift in Huizinga's
historical outlook. Whereas previously, especially in Herfsttij der Mid-
deleeuwen (The Waning of the Middle Ages), the historian had assigned a
large role to the imagination and to the sensuous evocation of the past in
historiographical work, he now violently attacked what he called histoire
romancée. In ter Braak's view, Huizinga's historiographical position had
become excessively prudent, provisional, and hesitant. He had opted for
what scholarship dictates rather than for what the scholar may dream. The
problem was that Huizinga did indeed fully realize that history does not
provide a direct image of past reality but is the product of the historian's shaping of the past. Nevertheless, according to ter Braak, he stuck stubbornly to the distinction between form and myth, science and imagination.

Here he stands, Huizinga, facing the abyss, and not daring to leap. Here he stands with his safe and prudent distinctions before a void, skirting it all the more fearfully as he hopes to cover it up as quickly as possible beneath the gorgeous fabrications of his ingenious historical mind. . . . Huizinga has chosen—the safe life.\(^4\)

Thus ter Braak in 1930.

The roots of ter Braak's criticism are fairly obvious. It is around this time that Nietzsche has been teaching ter Braak how to live with his own chaos, and ter Braak's criticism echoes the second of the Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen on "The Use and Abuse of History." In this essay, Nietzsche condemned the time in which he lived: in his view, it was drowning in an excess of historical thinking, which relativized everything and made people powerless to act. "We need history for life and action, not as a convenient way to avoid life and action, or to excuse a selfish life and cowardly or base deeds."\(^5\)

Nietzsche's tirade against the historicism of his time is well known, but what many people do not realize is that he did not want history to suffer from the influence of life any more than he wanted life to suffer from the influence of history. When he turned against history as Wissenschaft or science, he was attacking the naive positivistic view that history has an autogenous power to engrave its reality on the passive metal of the historian's mind. Nietzsche accepted neither the conception of the historian as a simple "echo-chamber" nor the naive notion of a single, knowable past. The historian in his view is an artist, and his activity "a fundamental act of ordering," an "esthetic impulse." This "will to form" was for him a kind of action, a step in the direction of the harmony of living, thinking, and willing.

This had also been, more or less, the credo with which Huizinga began his career as a professor at the University of Groningen in 1905. For his inaugural lecture, which he entitled "Het aesthetisch bestanddeel van de geschiedkundige voorstellingen" [The aesthetic element in the conceptualization of history], he had turned to philosophers who had been strongly influenced by Nietzsche, like Dilthey, Simmel, and Spranger. His aim had been to disclose "the factor that historical discovery has in common with art." According to him, that factor came into operation from the very first
moment that “the first historical image is shaped.” Such an “image” is not a logically defined universal; it is rather a conceptual image that condenses an aspect of a past reality which has been identified as an essential element of that reality and that enables us to grasp an otherwise incomprehensible multiplicity. In place of the rigorous definitions of the natural sciences what is of prime importance here is giving an optimally determinate form to individual insights. 6

Directly or indirectly, both ter Braak and Huizinga were influenced by Nietzsche. But there is a clear difference in emphasis which led to Huizinga’s becoming the refined historian everyone knows him as and to ter Braak’s turning away from history altogether. Huizinga was enabled in this way to fuse his personal disposition with science into a totality of life and thought that one might well call a harmony. Ter Braak learned how to find that harmony in the very acceptance of chaos and did so without any reference to sources or authorities. Nietzsche had succeeded in pointing toward a continuum between life and history, but it remained to put the possibility he had indicated into practice. Ter Braak, on the whole, opted for life, Huizinga for history. For Huizinga, the intellectual form of knowledge in our civilization was critical science or scholarship. And so when ter Braak asks him, “How do you know that?” Huizinga replies, “Because for anybody who wants to think, my dear cousin, the whole world testifies to it.” In this reply, which he added to De wetenschap der geschiedenis [The Science of History] five years after the publication of ter Braak’s review, Huizinga expressed the difference between himself and ter Braak clearly:

The deflection from the imagination that has been attributed to me is . . . a fiction. One cannot deflect from the imagination, as long as there are no hard and fast boundaries between knowing and imagining, and there never have been for me. I have imposed greater sobriety—quite deliberately in recent times—on the shaping work of my imagination, out of respect for its power and the high task it is called on to perform. Your image of an abyss, Menno, was ill chosen. My path runs in a different direction from what you think.

And he explained, “I have always lived in a world of clair-obscur. It is not my style to offer sharply defined new formulas for old ones. I have never aspired to be a leader.” 7
At first sight it seems that Huizinga is deliberately cutting the link here between history and public action. But in the meantime history had him acting in a way that had everything to do with his historical science. In 1930 ter Braak reproached him for choosing the safe life. In 1933, as Rector Magnificus of the University of Leiden and Honorary Chairman of the meeting of the International Student Service, which had been organized for that year in Leiden, Huizinga found himself standing once again before the abyss, this time in a more literal sense.

The International Student Service Congress
The International Student Service (ISS) was an offshoot, founded in 1925, of the World Student Christian Federation, a general charitable organization which had been set up five years before. The aim of the Federation was to alleviate the hunger and poverty that had been brought on by the First World War and its aftermath among students as well as the general population. The ISS was a continuation of the earlier organization in a slightly broader sense. An enthusiastic survey of the goals and activities of the ISS by the president of the Leiden Student Association—a student by the name of J. de Bliek—appeared in the Leids Universiteitsblad or LUB [Leiden University magazine] for May–June 1932. De Bliek stressed as the organization's main features acceptance of the principle of neutrality and renunciation of all attempts to exert political influence. “Because of these two principles,” he wrote, “the association is open to all. At the same time they have prevented its activities from being obstructed by the political influences that destroyed the Confédération Internationale des Étudiants, for instance.” The ISS’s activities were threefold: student self-help [in English in text] and social work, cultural cooperation and international relations, and research into the university itself. Within the framework of the second topic small conferences involving limited groups of students and professors had been organized in order to study international problems. Among the excellent results achieved in this area, de Bliek mentioned a Franco-German conference as well as two conferences between Jews and anti-Semites. He looked forward with high hopes to the eleventh congress, due to be held that year (1932) in Brno.

As a member of the Assembly of the ISS, de Bliek had reason to be satisfied. The account of the Brno Congress presented in the Leids Universiteitsblad for 21 October 1932 by the leader of the Dutch delegation, Professor N. van Wijk, a Leiden Slavic scholar, was extremely positive. The discussions had in truth led to no concrete outcome, but the main thing,
after all, was to strive for mutual understanding, and according to van Wijk this was noticeable everywhere. He found it regrettable that the National Socialists had refused to take part in the congress. It had been agreed, however, that a German-French-English conference would be held in the Netherlands the following year. It was set for Leiden, from 7 to 12 April 1933.

On the Dutch side, the organization proceeded without a hitch. The LUB gave wide publicity to the upcoming gathering, Dutch participation was solicited, hosts and lodgings were sought for those coming from out of town. Everything was smooth sailing. The only difficulty came from abroad. The German delegation could not be made up of the persons originally scheduled to participate, the Dutch were told, because these individuals could not afford the cost of the journey to the Netherlands and of the necessary stay in Leiden. At the last moment, moreover, another leader was added to the delegation, a Dr. J. von Leers.9

On the morning of 7 April, Huizinga, who, as noted, was Rector Magnificus for that year and as such Honorary Chairman of the conference, delivered his opening address. In three different languages he said:

Our world today does not seem hospitable to products of thought that are international in character. We note with sadness that the world has become more nationalistic than ever before. Everywhere, around every nation, fences have been erected—political fences, but also, I fear, mental ones.10

The "Deutsche Denkschrift, vorbereitet für die Deutsch-Englisch-Französische Studientagung" [German position paper prepared for the German-English-French study meeting] provided Huizinga with ample evidence of the truth of his observation. The German students, this document noted, were wholeheartedly behind the development, currently under way in Germany, toward "the total politicization of each and every individual and his identification with the whole people. At the same time, in other domains also, the younger generation is acquiring a new vision of life that aspires to totality in everything." The students declared their opposition to the Weimar Constitution, which they denounced as "a mere appendix to the Versailles Treaty." The National Revolution of Adolf Hitler would bring about "the total spiritual unity of the German Empire." "The Anschluss with Austria is already a fait accompli in people's minds, and its political realization is a moral requirement for a people that experiences itself as an indivisible unity." Finally, under the heading "Stellung zu Staat, Volk, Rasse"
[Position with respect to state, people, and race], one could read: “Germany’s youth rejects internationalism and in particular Bolshevism. It sees Bolshevism as a destructive power created not by an alliance of workers but by an alliance between the bestial in man and international Jewry; as the apocalyptic threat of the *Untermensch.*”

The “Memorandum de la délégation française” breathed a totally different spirit, but acknowledged it was the mouthpiece of a small group. “The vast majority of French young people, and of French students in particular, are totally indifferent to political parties.” In the eyes of the French delegation, the intellectual is the guardian of a number of specific values—humanism, culture, individual self-realization. The delegation sees these values as endangered by fascism and National Socialism. Apart from the danger to peace in Europe, it laid special stress on the total subservience that, in the fascist perspective, the state and the nation expect from the individual.

It is almost inconceivable to us that intellectuals—that is thinking people, people who are attached to conditions without which they could not exist, such as independence, disinterestedness, and material well-being—can accept the new doctrines of state and nation and surrender to complete oppression and exploitation.

The only solution to the economic and political problems of the time, according to the French students, was: (1) a new sphere for the operation of international law, with mandatory arbitration; (2) an international parliament with authority and power, in favor of which all states would give up a part of their sovereignty; and (3) a socialist imprint on this international order in order to prevent aggravation of national class conflicts.

That is why the problem of the European order seems not so much an economic problem, as a problem of power, that is to say, a political problem that is being played out within each nation. Fascism, dictatorship, and war, or socialism, democracy, and peace? That is not a schematic representation of the way matters stand. Only if Europe opts for the second and rejects the first, will one be able to speak of a European order.

In the British position paper, which was much less elaborate than the French one, and also more rambling and less far-reaching, the students nevertheless expressed their preference for the existing form of government,
with its guarantees of individual liberty, and publicly rejected racism in general and political developments in Germany in particular.

We are fairly well informed about the course of the conference thanks to two student magazines, the Amsterdam *Propria Cures* and the Leiden *Vinculum Studiosorum*. *Propria Cures* points out right away why there was such a difference between the levels of the different memorandums.

A *student* meeting! Only the Dutch and the English delegations could truly claim to be composed of students; among the representatives of the other delegations there were all too many people who had graduated a long time before. Even if the conference undoubtedly gained, from a scholarly point of view, from their contribution, it cannot be overlooked that this congress at times gave the impression of being a miniature Geneva, with much hair-splitting and diplomatic maneuvering. In that regard, the differences among the delegations were very considerable. The English — like the Dutch — had included primarily students in their delegation, and they intervened in the discussions as *individuals*, to the extent that when one of them claimed: England takes this view of something, another would immediately stand up and say: England takes a completely opposite view. The French were almost exclusively older people, students who had already graduated — at best there were a few students among them, who would act as spokesmen — and the delegation as a whole was very united, though this did *not* lead to complete centralization, e.g., a situation in which everything that the members of the delegation wanted to say first had to be approved by the leader. The Germans, in contrast, pushed such centralization to an extreme.\(^{13}\)

For that matter, according to a report in *Vinculum*, the Dutch students had decided beforehand, in consultation with the organizers of the conference,

that they intended to express their views also on matters that did not directly relate to the relations among the participating countries. As it turned out, this proved to be a wise insight. By expressing a Dutch point of view, the Dutch students exerted a moderating influence on the debates, which at times provoked much heat and passion, because the topics were of such immediate importance. At the same time, we refrained from interfering in
the discussion of political issues, such as the revision of the peace treaties, the restitution of the Saar, and the Polish corridor.¹⁴

Concerning those specifically political issues, there was in any case a remarkable willingness to come together. Thus Paul Mantoux, the leader of the French delegation, declared that there was a growing trend in France to acknowledge that the treaty of Versailles had been unfair. The Germans won an assurance that, in case the 1935 referendum in the Saar should declare in favor of Germany, France would not raise objections to the reattachment of the Saar to Germany. Mantoux even declared that the French delegation had no paramount objection to the Anschluss. Von Leers, on his side, declared that the Germans were eager to avoid the shedding of Nordisch blood as far as possible and showed willingness to work more toward disarmament, on a basis of Gleichberechtigung (acknowledgment of the equal rights of all the parties).

Sunday, 9 April, was no doubt the most important day of the conference, the day on which the question of the Jews was discussed. Let us turn to the reporter for the student magazine Vinculum.

The leader of the German delegation Dr. v. Leers gave an explanation of the German point of view, which we cannot in truth accept, but which allows us to some extent to understand the German position. We are normally taught that Europe was first populated by hordes of hunters, who were hardly civilized. From the evidence of archeological excavations, such as the standing stones at Stonehenge in England, German teaching would have it that this thesis is incorrect. A people of hunters is not able to create such monuments. Only a farming people can do so. And here we have the famous Nordic race: the tall blond people with blue eyes. These people inhabited England, Northern France, Germany naturally, Scandinavia, and perhaps also several Slavic lands. Now, the earth is populated by superior and nonsuperior races; the Nordic race belongs in the superior category. It built the Acropolis, which the Negroes would not have been capable of doing. The Jews and especially the Eastern Jews are not Nordic, not superior, and therefore also not good. It is recognized in Germany that they have some merits; all in all, nonetheless, they are the cancer of German society. Any one who does not believe such fables—"la conception raciste," as the French call them—as
in general we Dutch do not, will find a plausible explanation for hatred of the Jews in something that Mr. Guillebaud [Claude Guillebaud, a Cambridge economist, head of the English delegation] proposed as a cause of it and that the Germans greeted with approval. After the war, many Jews from Poland came to Germany, set up businesses and thus increased competition. Jewish intellectuals ousted young Germans from all sorts of positions, partly because they are very talented, partly because they are satisfied with less. In art, Jews occupied the leading positions; thus the Germans did not get German art, but Jewish art. The press was to a large extent in the hands of the Jews, who were thus able to exert a strong influence on public opinion. Of approximately three thousand lawyers in Berlin, roughly two thousand are Jewish. In proportion to their numbers, the Jews thus occupy far too many positions in the higher professions. Corruption scandals caused great bitterness among the impoverished German people.  

Although the reporter for Propria Cures took a more critical stand than his colleague from Leiden, for him, too, the congress was an event that should be judged positively. “The benefit to be derived lies in the goal that was set: an honest and sincere exchange of ideas for the purpose of achieving a better understanding of each other’s views.” Vinculum even concluded on a warm note:

Thus the end came. We went our separate ways, having gained a little better understanding both of men and of this world, having established friendships with other young people, and thoroughly convinced “that we had had a good time together.” 

The von Leers incident

It truly must not have been difficult to hush up a scandal in the Netherlands of the thirties. The scandal in which the Leiden Congress of the ISS ended is not reported by either of the two student journalists. Either they were not informed about it, or they observed a general agreement not to report on it in the press. What had happened? Let us move back to 11 April 1933, the day preceding the formal closing of the conference. In the Senate Chamber of the main University Building in Leiden are present the rector, Deans van Itallie, van der Hoeven, and Kristensen, Acting Dean van Blom—all senior
professors at Leiden University—together with the two Clerks of the Senate. The minutes state:

The rector reports that he has been informed that Dr. J. von Leers, leader of the German delegation to the current ISS Congress, is the author of a pamphlet entitled "Forderung der Stunde, Juden 'raust!' [The call of the hour: Out with the Jews!], which was reprinted in March 1933 and in which can be found a passage on the ritual murder of Christian children. The passage in question concludes that this popular belief should be considered an urgent threat from which there is need for protection even today. In the event that the report proves to be true, the committee believes the Senate should make its views known unequivocally and discuss possible further measures. Finally, it was agreed that, through Professor van Wijk, Dr. von Leers should be invited to discuss the matter with the rector in the Senate Chamber, in the presence of the Clerks, at which point he will be asked whether the report is correct. If he denies that it is correct, a protocol to that effect will be drawn up, to be signed by him. If he admits that it is correct, the Senate will communicate its disgust by requesting that he no longer avail himself of the hospitality of the university, and by reserving the right to take further measures.18

Huizinga then had his conversation with von Leers. A moving scribbled note reporting what was said at that meeting, in the hand of van Wijk, who was present at it, has been preserved in the Academic Historical Museum. It is barely legible. The contents correspond perfectly, however, to the minutes of the Senate Executive Committee. These read as follows:

After opening the meeting, the rector gave an account of his conversation with Dr. von Leers. The latter had acknowledged having written the pamphlet but had said he believed he had regarded ritual murder more as an example from history. He was not able to remember the contents exactly since the text in question was a reprint of something he had written earlier. When the incriminated passages were read out, he had admitted the possibility that they might be his own words, with the proviso, however, that the passage might turn out to be a quotation. With that same proviso, the rector had expressed the Senate’s "tiefen
Abscheu und tiefe Verachtung” [deep revulsion and deep contempt—in German in the text], had added that he reserved the right to take further measures, and had requested that Dr. von Leers no longer avail himself of the university’s hospitality.19 Dr. von Leers had noted first that the reproofed opinions were shared by the Reichs Chancellor and other high officials. According to the rector, that was irrelevant to us. Dr. von Leers had then referred to the climate of hatred resulting from the deaths of so many friends and brothers (after the war). The rector had observed that an abyss had opened up between opinion in Western Europe and opinion in Central Europe. Dr. von Leers had responded that he and the members of his delegation had tried to bridge that gap. Thereupon the rector had remarked that having won back among many people the sympathy it had lost during the war, Germany had now lost that sympathy again, and far more besides. Since the conversation seemed likely to become needlessly painful, he had put an end to it, observing that he could no longer shake hands with Dr. von Leers.

After the reading of this report, it was decided that Professor van Wijk should inform the congress organizers of its contents and that further steps (notably the possibility of publishing the whole affair) should be put off until it was clear what the reaction on the German side would be. Measures would be taken to obtain a copy of the pamphlet itself as soon as possible. Thereupon the meeting adjourned.

At first the decision to refrain from publication held firm. The Leidsch Dagblad of Thursday, 13 April, reported only that Huizinga had asked Dr. von Leers no longer to avail himself of the university’s hospitality on account of statements made by him on the Jewish question. “As a result of this request,” the paper reports,

the organizers considered it preferable to bring the conference to a close as early as Tuesday evening, instead of yesterday evening, as originally planned. In this they had the approval of all four delegations. It should be emphasized that the conference itself can be considered a complete success, that the above-mentioned incident in no way adversely affected its positive outcome—the better mutual understanding of viewpoints—and that the chances for
successful collaboration in the future do not seem to have been diminished.

In a letter dated 12 April, however, Huizinga informed the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs of what had transpired the previous day. It was through this letter that the governors of Leiden University were first apprised of the affair. At the governors’ meeting on 21 April the chairman issued a statement concerning the behavior of the Rector Magnificus toward Dr. von Leers, one of the delegates from the German side at the International Student Service Congress, for which the governors released space in the University Building. The person concerned never uttered an untoward word at the conference. The Rector Magnificus, however, found in the past record of Dr. von Leers (the author of a work on the Jewish question) cause for him to take action. The conference had been called, among other things, for the purpose of discussing the racial question. The Board of Governors therefore finds the rector’s attitude unjust.20

It was decided, in addition,

that the Chairman of the Board will invite the Rector Magnificus to discuss his views concerning the disciplinary prerogatives of the rector. It was considered desirable that clear guidelines be established in that matter which would be independent of the personal opinions of successive Rectors.21

In the meantime, Huizinga had found essential support in the person of W. J. M. van Eysinga, who had taught international law at Leiden University from 1912 to 1931 and had been affiliated since then, as a judge, with the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague. On 13 April van Eysinga wrote Huizinga that A. van de Sande Bakhuyzen, LL.D., Mayor of Leiden and Chairman of the Board of Governors of Leiden University, had asked to speak with him that morning.

He [van de Sande Bakhuyzen] had had a visit that same morning from Prof. Lessing, another member of the German delegation, who had talked with him about the way the conference had ended. He deeply regretted how that had happened and was doing
his utmost to keep the affair out of the newspapers... The mayor, who knew nothing more about the affair than what you had told him the day before yesterday at dinner, avoided going into matters deeply, given the nature of the affair, but was told by Herr Lessing that the whole matter could probably be closed without further major consequences if the Rector Magnificus would present his apologies. The mayor was also somewhat taken aback that, whereas the governors had granted hospitality by making space in university buildings available to the congress, the rector had suggested to the leader of the German delegation, Dr. von Leers, that he should no longer avail himself of this hospitality. In response to this I simply observed that it seemed to me that what was at issue was not so much the allocation of rooms in university buildings as the honor of the university.

After van Eysinga had heard out the rest of van de Sande Bakhuyzen's story, he had given his own personal opinion.

On the German side, there has been a double impropriety. Firstly, by their placing an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is very much involved in propaganda, at the head of a student delegation. That is not the framework in which those kinds of meetings are usually held. The propaganda character was, as I have heard from the students, quite obvious, and it would not surprise me that this is closely connected with reports in the German press concerning the extraordinarily favorable impression that the young Hitlerians have made here in student circles. That is the first impropriety: to have completely altered the character of the gathering, which was considered here to be a purely student gathering. The second impropriety committed by the Germans, in my opinion, is to have selected an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who was known to have expressed himself quite recently in such a vile way on the issue of Jewish ritual murder of Christian children. As Netherlands opinion in these matters is well known to them, it was highly incorrect of the Germans to send such a person here. I also intimated that the man had admitted in your presence that he did not believe in those ritual murders, but considered them indispensable in the present difficult circumstances in Germany. For that is what you told me, is it not?
Van Eysinga concluded that an apology by the rector was out of the question; and “that if the German Government found it necessary to pursue this matter, one could rather demand an apology from it for the ill-mannered way in which it had allowed people it knew could only provoke loathing in the Netherlands to enjoy our country’s hospitality.” Van de Sande Bakhuyzen then let it be known that he wanted to read the pamphlet before forming a judgment.

Herr Lessing, he said, had asked him if the rector had read the whole pamphlet, since one ought not to wrench a single passage out of its context. At that point I remarked that there are some passages that are so vile in themselves, that they can hardly be made up for by another part of the text.

At the end of this conversation the Secretary of the Board of Governors entered the room with a copy of the letter Huizinga had sent to the Netherlands Foreign Minister. Van Eysinga finally indicated that his name should not be mentioned in this affair, since he was “no longer officially on the faculty of the university.”

It must have surprised Huizinga that, even after being informed of the authoritative judgment of van Eysinga, the Board of Governors continued to express disapproval of the rector’s action at its meeting of 21 April. In a detailed letter to the governors, dated 28 April, Huizinga returned to the affair. He is of the opinion, he writes, that a clear distinction has to be made between the allocation of university premises and the granting of hospitality by the university. The first has to do with management of material resources, the second, however, is “a concept which has an ethical content and for that reason its practical application falls entirely within the competence of the rector and is in accordance with the nature and the meaning of the latter’s function and dignity, with no requirement of collaboration with the governors or prior approval by them.” Huizinga also covered himself in this letter against a complaint by the German ambassador, which had been received by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and passed along to the governors. He had been assured on good authority—Huizinga must have written here with a feeling of triumph—that from a diplomatic point of view also, it was the Germans who were at fault. “I admit,” he says finally, “that one can have doubts about the expediency of my action. However, a university... has to maintain different standards in questions of honor and dignity than a government.”
On 11 May, Huizinga produced an elaborate letter defining the boundary between the authority of the governors and that of the rector and reiterating that wherever representation of the university as a spiritual body is called for, it is the rector who is the head of the university. "I am aware that this conception of the office is not fully expressed by the letter of the law on higher education," he says.

The law recognizes the Rector Magnificus only as President of the Senate. However, it is a secret to no one, that our academic legislation since 1815 has consistently been characterized by an extraordinary lack of recognition and understanding of the element of tradition that is indissolubly linked to the life of a university. Fortunately that life has not been solely dominated by the letter of the law. The dignity of the office of rector has also been defined by long-established international traditions associated with that title.25

The governors, however, stuck to their opinion that their distinguished Professor [Huizinga] had not acted properly in this matter. They continued to do so even after a thoroughly detailed memorandum concerning the events of 11 April had been sent to them by the Clerk of the Senate. The characterization of von Leers's attitude in this memorandum is noteworthy.

It seemed to the rector and the Clerk of the Senate, that Dr. von Leers's mood could best be described in the following way: when he realized that he had failed to impress his listeners by evoking the name of the Reichs Chancellor, he was overcome by disappointment and apprehension. It was the impression of those present that these feelings were by no means unrelated to a sense of being guilty of the charge. However, he continued to act properly and with decorum.26

With regard to a complaint brought by the German ambassador, the Senate thought the governors might suggest to the minister that "the best answer the Ministry of Foreign Affairs could give would be that government departments have no say in the administration of an autonomous university." In the meantime, von Leers's pamphlet had been found. Through van Italie, Huizinga laid hands on a copy in the possession of Dr. D. Cohen, a professor at the University of Amsterdam, who was also Secretary of the
Comite voor bijzondere Joodsche belangen [Committee for special Jewish interests]. Huizinga could now see with his own eyes what amazing forms anti-Semitism had assumed in Germany. In the chapter “Was haben wir gegen die Juden?” [What do we have against the Jews?], next to the “facts” that their moral standards are incompatible with the German sense of justice and morality, that they play a major role in crime, that they are extremely unreliable as a people, and that they deprive young Germans of opportunities for economic improvement, stands the passage in question.

The subject of Jewish ritual murders of innocent non-Jewish children is especially troubling. Among the people we find it constantly asserted that children are secretly abducted by Jews, that their veins are opened with the same kind of incision used in the slaughter of cattle according to Jewish religious custom, and that the blood of the wretched bleeding body is used for dark purposes.

This was anything but a pure piece of past history. At the very time von Leers was writing, the warning to mothers to protect their children against Jews—“Mütter, sorgt dafür dass die jüdische Gefahr für Euere arme Kinder aus dem Lande kommt” [Mothers, see to it that the Jewish menace to your poor children is removed from our land]—was being taken seriously.

The incident becomes public
As soon as von Leers was back in Germany, he broke the silence. As early as 16 April, according to a report in the daily Vooruit of 18 April 1933, he delivered a speech in which he brought up the conflict with Huizinga. “This had been caused,” he declared, “by an anti-Semitic passage in an election pamphlet intended for purely domestic use, and had been stoked by slanderous Jewish provocateurs, of whom there might be as many as 2000 in Amsterdam.”

Finally, von Leers published his version of the incident in the June edition of the Schwarzburg, a journal for educators. He described the composition of the delegations—in most cases inaccurately—as well as the agenda of the congress. Then he went on as follows:

It was to be expected that from the outset the revolution in Germany would be at the center of attention. At first a strongly anti-German mood prevailed, thanks to the efforts of the Greuel-
hetze [hatemongering campaign], but each day my colleagues and I were able to obtain a firmer foothold at the conference and to win more and more acceptance for a better understanding of Germany's position. We succeeded so well that the completely nonideological Prof. Guillebaud gave an excellent account of the Jewish question in Germany, in which he spoke with admiration of the high ideals of the national revolution. We even managed to obtain from the French a much better understanding of the true spirit of the new Germany, even if they were not cured of their pathetic longing for "security." In any case a spirit of friendly rapprochement arose, which grew warmer with each passing day.

Von Leers then outlined his meeting with the rector:

Without the least consideration of what was at the heart of the matter [the ritual murder of children (O)], Prof. Huizinga expressed his indignation and contempt to me and declared that the University of Leiden could no longer offer me its hospitality. Among other things, he asserted that between West and Central Europe there was now a gap that could no longer be bridged. After this insult, which displayed a strong anti-German disposition, the German delegation came immediately to the conclusion that it had become impossible for it to stay in Leiden any longer. At the session planned for that evening a purely factual account of the case was presented in a few words (in accordance with an agreement reached by the leader of the Dutch delegation, Judge Baak, the other delegation leaders, and myself). After that I rose, thanked our Dutch hosts, declared that it had been made impossible for the German delegation to take any further part in the session, and proposed that the conference be declared closed. At the same time I invited the members of the other delegations to hold the next conference in Germany. This proposal was greeted with loud applause, and the session was brought to a close. The chief delegate of the students' union of Leiden, de Blieck, immediately climbed onto a table and declared in a short speech that, if something similar were to happen to a Dutch delegation, it would act in the same way and and would also leave immediately. The leader of the Dutch delegation, Baak, asked de Blieck to stop speaking. The other delegations openly expressed their indigna-
tion that the rector's attitude had led to the disruption and premature ending of the conference. It also creates an intolerable precedent, since it can now be made practically impossible for any radical political leader of any country to participate in international congresses.  

This translated version of von Leers's article was published in the 29 June issue of the Amsterdam daily De Telegraaf, accompanied by another account of the affair by the Clerk of the Senate, N. J. Krom. That very day, 19 June, Goedemans, the editor-in-chief of De Telegraaf, had sent Huizinga a copy of the article. With the help of Krom, Huizinga immediately drafted a memorandum outlining the known version of the conflict, which corresponded with the minutes. Their view of the way the conflict had developed deviated significantly from that of von Leers. Huizinga denied having said that the gap between Western and Central Europe had become unbridgeable. Furthermore, Huizinga and Krom stated that

the behavior of the student de Blieck, after the closure of the session, which was based on incomplete knowledge of the facts and was immediately afterward regretted by de Blieck himself, can be explained by disappointment at the premature breaking up of the conference. No one on this side has questioned that the German delegation may have acted correctly in siding with their leader without looking into and evaluating the facts of the case. The comments made to the rector by Prof. Guillebaud of Cambridge . . . and Prof. Mantoux late in the evening of 11 April and in the morning of 12 April, when Professor Mantoux visited the rector for the express purpose of communicating his views, were in flat contradiction with Dr. v. L.'s presentation of the mood at the close of the conference. We reserve the right to come back to this point.

And that is what they did. As early as 21 June, Huizinga wrote to the leaders of the three delegations, enclosing a translation of the von Leers article and requesting his correspondents to provide him with an expression of opinion that he could quote, if needed, in a published response to von Leers. None of the three cast the slightest doubt on the fact that they considered Huizinga's version the correct one. Mantoux said that the conference had broken off, in order not to prejudice a possible future meeting of simi-
lar delegations. Each, according to his own conviction, was of the opinion that Huizinga had acted rightly, but they had all three refrained from speaking out for the sake of the continuation of the ISS. If de Bliexck had not been interrupted by Baak, however, if it had come to a debate, then the text that was the cause of the dispute would have had to be read aloud and their approval of Huizinga would have had to be expressed. This had not been necessary. On the course of the conference itself Mantoux wrote:

In spite of the undeniable skill with which von Leers attempted to give us what he called a “healthier idea of the new Germany” and in spite of the sincere wish of the French students to do their best to understand without prejudice the point of view of German young people in a period of material and moral unrest, our objections to the sophistries of National Socialism and the brutality of its methods remained unaltered in the course of the discussion. Thanks to the politeness of the exchanges good relationships among the members of the groups were maintained, but the clash of ideas was never eliminated.30

Guillebaud, on his side, had this to say about the role attributed to him by von Leers:

In the first place, although I stated in a speech that there was in my eyes a real Jewish problem in Germany, I stressed as emphatically as possible that the methods being used in Germany were alienating the sympathies of the best minds in my own country and in other countries. According to von Leers, I also spoke approvingly of the “high ideals” of the National Revolution by pointing to the fact that that movement has captured the imagination of large groups of German young people and possesses an idealism of its own, but I did not use the term “high ideals” in this context.31

The letter from J. C. Baak, the leader of the Dutch delegation, is probably the most interesting of the replies Huizinga received. “It is definitely not true,” he wrote,

that an anti-German mood prevailed at the beginning of the conference, and even less true that that mood was the result of a Greuelbetze. . . . It is correct however, that the Germans’ calm
manner and their very clever defense of their positions made a good impression. As far as my own experience allows me to judge, it cannot have been the case that the Germans reached the decision to leave immediately after the incident. For right after the announcement was made about the incident, two German delegates turned to me and asked me in the name of the delegation to save the situation, if it was still possible to do so. As you know, I then took on that thankless task. . . . It is absolutely untrue that von Leers’s proposal [to organize the next conference in Germany (O)] provoked thunderous applause. It is also absolutely untrue that the other delegations made their indignation known publicly. It is appropriate at this point, however, to deplore once again the behavior of de Blieck. As a result of what he did, something we have always tried to avoid has now become possible, namely, that a foreigner could succeed in playing one Dutchman . . . off against another. When a proposal to have the conference publicly deplore your action was brought before the organizers of the congress a few hours earlier, I fought tooth and nail against it, precisely because I considered it not right that a Dutchman . . . should make common cause with foreigners to condemn the act of a fellow countryman. And indeed nothing came of that proposal. . . . What vexes me most is that von Leers, who was the first to propose to me that the Dutch and the German press should not publish anything regarding the incident, has also been the first to violate the agreement we reached. . . . Now more about his slanderous statement itself [i.e., the deliberate insinuation of a falsehood concerning ritual murders by Jews in the pamphlet]. On the morning of 12 April, when I sounded out von Leers, at the request of Prof. van Wijk, about what exactly might be true in the “rumor,” he acknowledged having written the pamphlet in spring 1932: “Ach, verstehen Sie, Herr Back, damals standen die Wahlen vor der Tür und galt es noch Stimmung gegen die Juden zu machen” [Come, Herr Back, you must understand that the elections were imminent and it was important to excite feelings against the Jews]. In my opinion, one can already implicitly read in this an acknowledgment of calumny [i.e., that he had presented something as true knowing full well that it was not]. He went on as follows: “Übrigens glaube ich auch, dass so etwas [ritual murder] denkbar ist. Die Assassini in Nord Persien bilden doch das
klassische Beispiel dafür. *Dass der Ritualmord der Juden auch heute noch existiere, kommt überhaupt für mich nicht in Frage* 

[Besides, I also think such a thing is entirely conceivable. The classic example is still the Assassins of Northern Persia. *There is absolutely no question as far as I am concerned of Jewish ritual murder still being practiced today*.] The italicized words prove (1) that von Leers knew that Jews (nowadays) do not practice ritual murder; (2) that he nevertheless deliberately represented ritual murder as something current, because what is more current than the warning to present-day mothers: “Mothers, see to your children”?32

The letters from the three delegation leaders, parts of which were published in *De Telegraaf* of 7 July 1933, provided enough information for readers of those days—and provide enough information for readers of the present day—to arrive at the most plausible possible reconstruction of the course of events in the von Leers incident.

**The aftermath**

For Huizinga personally the incident had an unpleasant little sequel of a scholarly nature. At the very time the incident took place an article of Huizinga’s entitled “Burgund, eine Krise des Romanisch-Germanischen Verhältnisses” [Burgundy: A crisis in Romanic-Germanic relations] was published in the *Historische Zeitschrift* (*HZ* 148 [1933]: 1–28). At the end of the article, the editors added a note apologizing for publishing it: The article of Professor Huizinga had already been typeset when the editors were notified of his action as rector of Leiden University. If the editors had known of it earlier, they assure their readers, they would not have accepted the article!

But now, Huizinga no longer stood alone. Henri Sée and Werner Kaegi offered their services. Henri Hauser wrote a fiery letter to *Le Temps* on “La science historique et l’hitlérisme” (19.7 [1933]). The most engaging and revealing protest came, however, from the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl, who was then teaching at the University of London. As soon as he read the editorial comment at the end of the *Historische Zeitschrift* article, he wrote the editors (the letter is dated 8 June) that, as they had “unter den vulgärsten Wahn des Tages gebeugt und damit das Vertrauen an den wissenschaftlichen Charakter der Zeitschrift erschüttert” [given in to the most vulgar passions
of the day and thus undermined confidence in the scholarly character of their journal], he no longer wished to have any association with the *Historische Zeitschrift*. By return of post he received an answer from the review editor, Walter Kienast. The latter was of the opinion that Geyl simply needed more information in order to reach a better understanding of the affair. From his own government, Kienast had heard that a Jewish refugee from Berlin, by the name of Goldschmitt, had brought the anti-Semitic passages in the writings of von Leers to Huizinga’s attention. Huizinga had immediately summoned von Leers to Huizinga’s study. Huizinga had immediately summoned von Leers to and had told him that Germany had fallen into barbarism and that he, von Leers, was no longer to avail himself of the hospitality of the university. The episode was being taken very seriously in official quarters, and the comment at the end of the article was the very least that the editors could do. Geyl sent a copy of this letter to Huizinga.33

Up to that moment, Huizinga had not intended to ask the review for an explanation or indeed to take any action whatsoever. He attributed the editorial addendum to the pressures scholars and scientists in general were currently subject to in Germany. That the editors of the *Historische Zeitschrift* had not themselves seen through the official account seemed highly implausible to him.35 Kienast’s letter to Geyl opened his eyes.

In a letter to Kienast of 19 June, Huizinga expressed his astonishment. In case the editors were interested in being better informed about what had transpired, he, Huizinga, stood ready to inform them. In the present letter, he would limit himself to pointing out that the word *barbarism* had never been spoken. He could, if he wanted, add that it was not a Jewish refugee who had given him the information about von Leers, but the Dutch daily newspaper, *Vooruit*, which, on 10 April during the ISS Congress, had presented an outline sketch of von Leers and his literary productions.36

On 27 June, Huizinga received an answer, this time from the chief editors, Meinecke and Brackmann themselves. They expressed their regret but did not change their position: “In a matter involving our national honor and dignity there could be no question, to our way of thinking, that the account of affairs we received from official sources was definitive.”37

With this the von Leers incident ended, and one may well ask where the significance of a conflict such as this lies. It will not be found in what ter Braak once described as the “advantage” of National Socialism, namely that it makes all positions very clear. In *Van Oude en Nieuwe Christenen* [Of Old and New Christians] ter Braak wrote, “National Socialism has put all positions in sharper focus... In face of it, for the first time we have a clear
image of what is before us." But it is not in von Leers's lies that the interest and significance of his case is to be found. Rather it is in his half-lies.

**Evaluation**

One cannot deny that von Leers had some reason to be astonished at suddenly being denied the hospitality of the university. The Denkschrift of the German delegation had expressed his opinions clearly enough. At the conference itself he had repeatedly asserted his fascist convictions, including the inferiority of Negroes and Jews. Yet the governors described him as having uttered "not a single untoward word." And while Guillebaud did indeed back off [from von Leers's interpretation of what he had said], his remark about there being too many Jews in prominent positions in Germany had shown rather much "good understanding." The students themselves had had "a good time together." Huizinga had put a spoke in the wheels, and from top to bottom, from the students to the governors and all the way up to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, people found his action hard to understand. The reaction of these people to the visit of the fascist von Leers recalls an episode recounted by Eduard Spranger: In 1932, Spranger relates, when Theodor Litt wanted to condemn the street disturbances by National Socialist students, he, Spranger, said he could not go along with it, because he "considered the national movement among the students still genuine at the core, only undisciplined in its form." Spranger's reaction was typical of German academics.

The German academic world was going through a difficult time in this period. In the nineteenth century the social status and the social respect enjoyed by the German scholar had been unmatched anywhere in Europe. The representatives of the "learned estate" were associated with the Imperial Court, and they considered themselves a spiritual nobility, the intellectual legislators of the people. Human life, in their eyes, was a continuous process of education, and in that process the university was the essential institution, the monastery of knowledge, the fortress defending the Holy Grail of scientific and scholarly striving. The university did not furnish practical knowledge, but took care of the formation of the whole personality. No one faculty formed the core of it, but the Artes did, the old philosophical faculty, the general liberal arts prelude to any specialized training [propaedeuse] of the Middle Ages. In all those views, the German academics showed that they had not moved with the times. With massification and industrialization, their standing declined, and slowly but surely the univer-
sity was transformed into a collection of specialisms. The German professors reacted like a trapped elite. Nothing was as it had been anymore, nothing was any good anymore. They fulminated against a positivist mentality that was death to the spirit, against the bad taste of democracy. They loudly bewailed the subjugation of the university, the crisis of all Western civilization. In their frustration it was extremely difficult for them to keep their distance from the more popular reaction represented by fascism. They were no fascists, says Fritz Ringer in his fascinating study of the German professoriate, but they had a hard time maintaining a clear distinction between their own ideals and the redescription of fascist objectives in their idiom.40

All this holds, in reduced measure, for the Dutch academics as well. Fascist opinions at the Dutch universities in the thirties were exceptional, but the very same frustrations that haunted the German universities could also be found here. One could cite the example of the classicist B. J. H. Ovink and the damage he caused by his ex cathedra pronouncements as rector of Utrecht in 1928. Firstly, Ovink expressed dissatisfaction at the overvaluation of the natural sciences and of scientific technique. He did not wish to denigrate the achievements of the sciences, he said, but not many people would give an unequivocal answer to the question, “Has the enormous progress we have made in understanding and mastering the natural world really made mankind better or happier?” Against the goals and methods of the natural sciences he held up those of the classical gymnasium: the privilege of “living in spiritual community with Homer, Plato, Sophocles, Virgil, Horace, and Tacitus during the most beautiful years of youth, under the guidance of teachers specially prepared for their task; of delighting in unparalleled beauty, mastery of form, clarity of logic; of understanding something of what it means to follow an austere life-style.” But Ovink had no faith in the future. In his eyes, the life had gone out of the gymnasium and the university was becoming an institution of mass education.

As a result of the constantly increasing influx of students from a wide range of different sources there has been a remarkable decline in the spiritual and intellectual quality of its graduates. In the ranks of our lawyers, doctors, teachers, clergymen there are more and more individuals without any outward or inward culture, individuals whose manners are bad, whose language is crude, whose outlook on life is crass, whose professional vocation is nonexistent, and who often avow with cynical candor that for
them the pursuit of science or scholarship is only a means of obtaining a comfortable and favorable position in society.

Ovink was dismayed not only by careerism, but by specialization. "If specialization... continues to increase as it has been doing, we may one day witness the founding of a Mennonite Professional School for Hairdressers!" Most of all he was distressed by the devaluation of the position of professor. At one time the high honor associated with the title of professor had been an important motivating force. But that motivating force was now sadly diminished.

What kind of an honor is it that can be obtained so easily and that more and more has to be shared with half the country! If the stipend of those holding professorial chairs was still more or less adequate and commensurate with the high spiritual tasks they are called upon to perform, we would still see many cases where an individual accepts a professorial appointment, even at the cost of financial sacrifice. He would gladly do so in order to be able to devote all his time to study and to the glorious task of forming and intellectually influencing the young people of our universities, who are destined to assume the cultural leadership of our nation. But the stipend attached to professorial chairs is now absolutely insufficient.41

The professorial syndrome, as Ovink articulates it here, may well be sufficient to explain why many academics were willing to consider the views expressed by von Leers a legitimate subject of academic debate. As for the students, it is enough to point to their political naivete, which their teachers had taken care not to disturb. In Virtus, Concordia, Fides—the chief organ of the "Corps" [the main student fraternity]—for 27 May 1926, H. B. Wiardi Beckman called on his fellow students to take a greater interest in politics, social justice, and the danger of war. He was overwhelmed by an avalanche of letters to the editor, either disputing his account of what politics is, or arguing in favor of political ignorance. Fraternity politics is admissible, but as far as any other kind goes, the best principle is: the cobbler should stick to his last. The reference to the general political indifference of French students in the memorandum of the French delegation at the ISS Congress applies equally to Dutch students. In a report on the Twelfth Con-
gress of the ISS, held at Ettal, near Oberammergau, in 1934, the LeidsecheUniversiteitsblad announced as “a known fact” — as if nothing had happened the previous year — “that ‘real politics’ is in general foreign to the Dutch student.” At this conference fascism was once again an important subject of discussions, and here, too, the repeated attacks on the Germans were made, as before, “with full acknowledgment of the positive elements of the German revolution.”

And Huizinga? Was Huizinga one of the earliest fighters against fascism in the Netherlands? He has indeed been so portrayed on account of the von Leers incident. The question whether Huizinga was a fighter against fascism was asked early on by the essayist de Kadt (at that time still a socialist). In a 1935 review of Huizinga’s Nederland’s Geestesmerk [The Characteristics of Dutch Culture] (1934) and In de schaduwen van morgen [In the Shadow of Tomorrow] (1935), de Kadt wrote: “We have proposed the criterion of ‘ally in the fight against fascism.’ But does it apply to Huizinga? And will his writings prepare minds to resist fascism?” Here de Kadt referred to In de schaduwen van morgen, and he was pessimistic:

Fascism is an active, dynamic force. It can only be subdued by another force: more civilized, more noble, more decent — but a force nonetheless. Against fascism we have to be able to propose a grand ideal, one which will provide inspiration and incite to action. Culture can only be saved if it inspires men to act. Fascists are men of action and animals at the same time. For Huizinga and those like him the chief defect of fascism lies in its powerful activism, in what he calls its “cult of life.” If it were somewhat more calm and peaceful, if it did not move with such speed, it might be possible to sympathize with it. Colijn and General Snijders of the National Revival movement are still acceptable, but Mussert oversteps the limits of dignity, formality, and good taste [deefigheid in Dutch]. However, it is not the dynamism of fascism that is objectionable. What is objectionable is the reactionary ideas fascism serves, and those are the ideas of Colijn-Snijders and Huizinga.

The fighter against fascism in the eyes of one is the client of fascism in the eyes of another. As often happens, it will turn out that historical understanding is a question of skillful tacking.

Huizinga was a professor in the mold of his German colleagues as
Ringer has described them. In his notion of academic scholarship there was no room for positivism, which he considered “throughly outdated.” In contrast, he favored the individualizing view of history, which would later be celebrated in Meinecke’s classic Die Entstehung des Historismus of 1936. Like his German colleagues Huizinga did not want to explain neutrally from a distance but to “künstlerisch ahnen” [intuit artistically]. Scholarly work was based first and foremost on powers of combination, vision, and intuition. It was, above all, a form of ascetic. The university, for him, was essentially the institution that it had been in the Middle Ages: “an autonomous cultural organism of a thoroughly unique kind. . . . In addition, a spiritual organism of incomparable prestige.” Among the specific failures of the university of his own time Huizinga singled out “its lack of autonomy and independence and the absence of a mediating agency capable of binding all those connected with the university into a single body.” The self-assurance with which he confronted the governors in the von Leers incident stemmed from his personal conviction that the university had to be independent and that it could do without the “sound-dampening . . . authority” of the governors. In 1932 he had even attempted to form the mediating agency he believed was needed by setting up a kind of interdepartmental working group. His optimistic recommendation of it in the Leidsch Universiteits Blad is revealing: “For the new Facultas artium as a broad base of university-wide studies, the future seems completely open.”

Huizinga’s political and social views fit well with all this. He was what we would now call a conservative liberal, and in his version of that position, it expressed the values of a petit-bourgeois elite. It was the political counterpart of his position in academic matters. The word liberal for him is “connected with the system of the seven artes liberales. . . . Established as a unified system, those liberal arts became the foundation on which almost the whole structure of the sciences and university education was constructed in the Middle Ages.” Politically, Huizinga must have felt comfortable with the group of civil servants who determined the political climate of the twenties in Holland and who, in the conviction that they were serving the public interest, refused membership in any political party. One of Huizinga’s few political acts was to join the recommendations committee of the so-called Onafhankelijken [Independents], also called Kunstenaarspartij [Artists’ Party] in 1922. J. W. Mulder characterizes the party and its program as follows:

It had turned against democracy and universal suffrage on the grounds that these would lead to fragmentation and confusion.
and it wanted above all to serve the public interest through the moral and intellectual education of our people. That task had to fall not to professional politicians, but to outstanding individuals, to whom culture took precedence over economics.52

Finally, the fundamental unity of Huizinga’s life and thought comes through in his identification of the “almost pure cultural ideal” of knighthood with the modern gentleman: “As a form of life the ideal of knighthood has had an extraordinarily powerful and persistent influence. All higher forms of civic life in modern times are in fact founded on the imitation of aristocratic forms of life.”53 Between the boy who experienced his first historical sensation at the sight of “a beautiful Count Edzard, clad from head to foot in gleaming armor,”54 at the masked student procession in Groningen in 1879, and the bourgeois liberal historian of culture in the 1930s lie fifty years and remarkably little development.

Huizinga cherished the highest ideals, but in spite of all his efforts the thirties brought only their progressive degradation. He was forced to witness an increasing abandonment of the ideal of pure knowledge and saw the university becoming relentlessly more and more an institution that prepared its students for specific careers. Liberalism was being crushed between the Christian parties and socialism. The culture of Western Europe, as he perceived it, had drifted into crisis.

The spirit has begun to rot. The word, the basis of the exchange of ideas, is losing more and more of its value and dignity as civilization advances. It is disseminated with ever greater facility in ever more massive quantity. Indifference to truth increases in direct proportion to growing disrespect for the printed or spoken word. As an irrationalist cast of mind gains ground, the scope for distorting meaning expands until it covers an immense territory.55

Why not then, after all, make a clean sweep of it? Why not, like so many of his German colleagues, acknowledge that while fascism may be “undisciplined in its form, it is still genuine at the core.” I think it was a matter of style. I would not say: dignity, formality, and good taste [destijheid] driven into a corner, as de Kadt did. That would come too close to identifying good manners with elitism and “exploitation.” What I have in mind is something more like the formal discipline and austere lifestyle that Ovink spoke of, a quality that for Huizinga embraced both medieval chivalry and
bourgeois civility. The history of civil behavior, as understood by the Dutch burgher class, has yet to be written, but if that were ever to happen, it would be a mistake to attend only to what is hypocritical about it. The salutary effect of civility in the learning process can be demonstrated by the example of an undergraduate account of Hitler’s loss of charisma in the *Leidse Studentenalmanak* of 1934:

Finally, the knockout blow was delivered by someone who regularly wears a bowler hat and could thus declare with assurance that Hitler was not a gentleman, because he had a pasted down forelock. Although none of us understood very well what being a gentleman had to do with it and maybe the speaker himself knew no better than we, we were nonetheless totally convinced that this was adequate evidence of the ineptitude of the leader of the Volk, and we were satisfied that he would not be the man of the day for long.

Under the general denominator of good taste, the remarkable unity of Huizinga’s view of the world becomes clear. The decline of culture, in whatever field he observed it, in scholarship, the university, or politics, was for him a decline of good taste. The practitioners of *histoire romancée* had neither the grace to “resign themselves to not knowing, nor the good taste to leave some things unsaid.” From that point it was but one step to the central core of the cultural crisis: “the conflict between knowing and being, between intelligence and existence”:

[To pragmatists], truth is what has essential validity for those professing it. Something is true, when and in so far as it is valid for a particular time. A crude mind could easily think: something is valid, therefore it is true.

As for politics, Huizinga concluded that until 1870 the democratic game had been played with dignity and seriousness:

Customs such as systematic obstruction, banging on desks, or throwing inkpots at people were not yet in vogue. . . . The majority, by far, of the representatives of the people came from a certain elite, which could equally well be based on wealth, birth, or intellect. Their upbringing ensured that they brought good manners to the job. They were accustomed to behaving decently and even
with some formality. In addition, the press was slower and less
virulent than now; in general, it still had a worthy commitment to
informing the public. In a way, it is the admixture of an aristoc-
kratic element that makes democracy viable, since without this
quality it is in constant danger of running aground on the incivil-
ity of the masses.60

For Huizinga, the difference between extreme forms of democracy—say, a
democracy with proportional representation—and fascism was not radical.
And precisely because good taste begins to diminish “in everything that is
both parliamentarism and fascism,” he was against both. It was Nietzsche’s
utopian unity of living, thinking, and willing that led Huizinga to evict von
Leers from Leiden University. That von Leers continued to use good man-
ners throughout was worthy of comment, but it was of no avail. To
Huizinga, good taste meant more than merely good manners. It made him
an opponent of fascism.

Yet not in the way that de Kadt had in mind. And not, assuredly, as
ter Braak would have wished. Early in 1934, when du Perron61 was trying to
organize resistance to “every form of collectivist dictatorship”—his efforts
resulted in the establishment of the Comité van waakzaamheid [Committee
of vigilance]62—he suggested to ter Braak that the latter should talk to
Huizinga, since the two were, after all, related. Ter Braak agreed. On 18 Feb-
uary, however, he wrote du Perron:

I have seldom miscalculated as badly as I did yesterday! Cousin
Huizinga received me with great kindness, but was extremely
unwilling to get involved.63 It turned out that he was for more
restrictions on freedom of the press, more order, more tranquillity,
etc., etc. We even got into a serious fight, but of course I could
not convince him. With every one of his professorial instincts,
this man holds fast to the fundamental bourgeois conception of
“spirit” as a little fund of culture for the Leiden academic class. I
am convinced that by the time I left he saw me as a revolutionary
and a danger to the State.

Ter Braak added, “I am more convinced than ever that I was absolutely right
in my article on Huizinga before the Abyss.”64

I cannot agree with ter Braak. On the other hand, it was hard for
him to have much sympathy with Huizinga’s fundamental conception of
"spirit." Except for a few outward appearances, ter Braak had turned his back on everything bourgeois and on scholarship. At the same time, however dismissive of democracy he might be as a system or an attitude toward life, he saw it as "the sine qua non of any and all culture." He had developed into virtually the opposite of Huizinga. Even in the fight against fascism, the two never came together.65

Huizinga was not someone who liked to take sides; he was not the kind that takes to the streets. His professorial ethics would have allowed him to reach a compromise with von Leers. Equally, his view of history left him room simply to turn away from the present. "The study of history," he declared in an unpublished speech delivered "under the heavy weight of absolute sorrow" at the opening of classes on 17 September 1940,

> can never be anything other than the study of a piece of history. We are free to take up the subject matter wherever we please. Fortunately it is not our task to seek for the guiding thread in the bewildering development that the contemporary world is caught up in, as in a net. We are free to turn our eyes from the hideous spectacle that now, for the second time, occupies the stage of this unhappiest of all centuries. We may instead look for history in places where she lies complete and fully matured before us, as mirror and testimony — testimony to the imperfection of this world and its endless struggles, certainly, but also to the endless striving for order and justice, for freedom and humanity.66

In 1933, however, Huizinga did not turn away. It must have been difficult for him, even in the Senate Chamber of his own university, to act against von Leers. His friend, the theologian Dr. G. J. Heering, had reiterated several times that Huizinga in particular, with his enormous reputation, should speak out in some way against what was happening in Germany. On 11 April 1933 the time had come. For the honor of the university, which he saw as the concrete embodiment of so many of his ideals, Huizinga took the step. That same night he wrote a note to Heering with the words "alea iacta est."67 Huizinga had not crossed a Rubicon, but he had put aside much of what had held him back from speaking; he had not shrunk from the abyss.
Afterword

Huizinga's correspondence, which has now been published in Holland, makes it clear that the scholar paid a price for the stand he took in the von Leers affair. He incurred the openly expressed displeasure of the university's governing board, as Otterspeer has shown. He created a diplomatic incident that was not welcomed by the Netherlands Foreign Ministry, since it threatened to upset its long-standing policy of careful neutrality toward its powerful neighbor to the east. In addition, however, he created serious difficulties for himself as a scholar and writer with his chief reading public, for German reprisals against him were not limited to the offensive note at the end of his article in the *Historische Zeitschrift*.

These difficulties and Huizinga's efforts to deal with them occupy a good deal of the copious correspondence, which continued unbroken until Huizinga's death in 1945, with his younger colleague and longtime admirer, the Basel historian Werner Kaegi. A prolific scholar in his own right with a keen interest in questions of historiography, Kaegi had translated Huizinga's *Erasmus* into German (Basel: Schwabe, 1928), along with many articles and essays. In tribute to his Dutch friend, he edited and translated two large posthumous collections of his essays: *Parerga* (Amsterdam: Pantheon; Basel: Burg-Verlag, 1945) and *Mein Weg zur Geschichte: Letzte Reden und Skizzen* (Basel: Schwabe, 1947).

In 1933 Huizinga turned to Kaegi to help him deal with the consequences to his own scholarly career of his action at the ISS Congress. In the face of von Leers's published accounts of the affair, in which the sympathies of all the delegations were represented as having been with the Germans and Huizinga was made to appear as an anti-German spokesman for Jewish interests, Huizinga sought to have an accurate version of the episode made available to the German reading public. As early as 23 April 1933, he had written Kaegi of his concern that "this affair not damage my relations with my many German friends." Kaegi offered to write a straightforward account for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, to which he was a frequent contributor and for which he had in fact just completed an essay on Huizinga's work. He was sure the paper would publish it. Huizinga accepted the offer gratefully and sent Kaegi a copy of a statement he had already prepared for private distribution among his German friends, underlining in red the parts he felt it was essential to include. By early May, Kaegi had submitted a brief text to the *Neue Zürcher*, but two weeks later it had still not appeared—for political reasons, no doubt, Kaegi speculated, even though, he added, he had
been careful to write in a completely matter-of-fact style. Even in Switzerland, publication was not, apparently, the simple matter he had thought it would be. The *Neue Zürcher*, he wrote Huizinga apologetically, is “unbearably cautious.” In the end the paper, which had a sizeable readership in Germany as well as Switzerland, prudently chose to publish a statement by von Leers along with the statement representing Huizinga’s position.

If Huizinga had a hard time getting his version of events over to the Germans, even through Swiss channels, he did not find it any easier to get his scholarly work published in German. Previously, all his work had appeared almost immediately in German translation. *Hersfitt der MIDdeleeuwen* (*The Waning of the Middle Ages* [Haarlem, 1919]) had appeared in German with the Drei Masken Verlag in Munich in 1924; *Erasmus*, in Kaegi’s translation, the same year. A collection of his essays, again translated by Kaegi, had appeared as *Wege der Kulturgeschichte*, also with the Drei Masken Verlag, in 1930. A short monograph entitled *Holländische Kultur des siebzehnten Jahrhunderts: ihre sozialen Grundlagen und nationale Eigenart* had been published by Eugen Diederichs of Jena, whose firm was a celebrated stable of writers on the right, early in 1933, and Diederichs had solicited further books from him. But when the German translation of his latest book, *In den schaduwen van morgen: Een diagnose van het geestelijk lijden van onze tijd* (*In the Shadow of Tomorrow: A Diagnosis of the Spiritual Distemper of Our Time*), completed in the space of only a few months by Kaegi, was sent to Diederichs in mid-1935, there was trouble. Huizinga had expected as much, as well he might, given the book’s consistent implicit and, frequently enough, explicit criticism of fascist ideas and regimes and the “shirt-and-arm heroism of today.” He had promised it to Diederichs, he told Kaegi, “but I am almost certain that the latter would not now be able to publish it, and so I shall have to turn to a Swiss publisher.” Kaegi responded immediately, with the same confidence he had shown in the matter of the *Neue Zürcher* statement, “If Germany fails, Schwabe [the publisher of *Erasmus*] or another Swiss publisher will leap into the breach.” The Swiss firm of Callway-Verlag had asked him, he added encouragingly, whether Huizinga might not have a major book that they could publish.

Over the next few months the correspondence of Kaegi and Huizinga shows the latter trying to get not simply the best possible author’s deal but the widest possible distribution for his book—which meant trying very hard to secure a German publisher and turning to the Swiss only as a last resort—while at the same time refusing to make the changes the German publishers required of him in order for publication in Germany to be
possible. This combination of eagerness to continue working with publishers in Nazi Germany in order to obtain a hearing there and adamant refusal to modify or soften his message seems somehow characteristic of Huizinga's position at this time. He kept stalling on a contract with the Swiss in the hope that something could be arranged with Diederichs. Not until it had become crystal clear that that was not to be, did he finally turn to the Swiss, only to discover that the Swiss were not as free as Kaegi had thought. While the younger of the two brothers who ran the Schwabe firm in Basel favored publication of *Im Schatten von Morgen*, the older brother was opposed. As publishers of the *Medizinische Wochenschrift*, in which criticism of Nazi ideas on race and biology had been expressed, the Schwabe firm had already run afoul of the Germans, who had refused to send a delegation to a medical conference in Montreux as a result. Karl Schwabe explained to Kaegi that, as the company was dependent on the German market for sales of most books on its list, it had no choice but to maintain good relations with the German authorities. He simply could not accept "ein so gewagtes Buch" and suggested that Kaegi and Huizinga approach a Swiss publisher with a smaller stake in the German market. Kaegi was taken aback.

I am a bit shocked by Schwabe's decision. It is lamentable that a Swiss publisher no longer dares print a book, which . . . he considers good and whose publication would be in the public interest. But the times are dreadful. . . . It makes no sense even to make inquiries of the Callway firm. All our larger Swiss publishers are in the same situation as Schwabe.

In the end it was a relatively small press in Bern that published the German translation of *In den schaduwen van morgen*. Huizinga predicted that the book would be banned in Germany. In fact, Kaegi reported that he had heard sales of it were quite brisk, but Huizinga's name now began to appear on the Gestapo's *Liste des schädlichen und unerwünschten Schrifttums*.

Even though it did not directly address political issues, Huizinga's next work, the now classic *Homo ludens*, encountered similar difficulties, which the author tried to deal with in similar ways. Again he enlisted Kaegi in his efforts to find an appropriate publisher. In June 1938 he wrote Kaegi that he had finally finished a book on which he had been working for some time. As before, he had promised it to Diederichs, who had expressed interest in it two years earlier when it was still in the planning stage, but he expected little from Germany and would demand all kinds of guarantees. If
an agreement could not be reached, he asked, which Swiss publishers would Kaegi suggest he approach? He felt no commitment to either Gotthelf (who had published *Im Schatten von Morgen*) or Schwabe (who had published *Erasmus*). Nor, however, was he willing to consider an “Emigrantenpresse.” Because of a contractual arrangement made at an earlier stage, he had had to allow the Bermann-Fischer Verlag, formerly of Berlin and Vienna, and now in Stockholm, to publish a lecture on “Der Mensch und die Kultur” [Man and culture], which he had been scheduled to give in Vienna but had in the end been prevented from giving. But he was “not particularly inclined toward émigré presses.”\(^{79}\) Kaegi dutifully came up with a list of Swiss publishers, but Huizinga wanted to see first whether he could not work something out with Diederichs, since the latter appeared to want to publish the book. He was not sanguine. “Though it is quite unpolitical, it contains a number of passages that might prove unpleasant.”\(^{80}\)

Huizinga had guessed right. Having read through the manuscript, Eugen Diederichs was eager to publish, but “would I agree in principle to cuts on pp. 295 ff.?”—that is, in the last part of the final chapter, the section on “puerilism” (defined by Huizinga himself as “that blend of adolescence and barbarity which has been rampant all over the world for the last two or three decades”).\(^{81}\) “Still more remarkable,” Huizinga added.

had I really signed a letter of support sent to Benes? The authorities had indicated to him [Diederichs] that this might be an obstacle. My answer: there is no question of cuts and my signing the letter requires no apology, therefore I regret that nothing can come of the plan to have the book published by your firm.\(^{82}\)

Diederichs apparently tried to get permission for the passages on “puerilism” but did not succeed. At this point Huizinga told Kaegi he intended to approach the Swiss publishers he had suggested: Schwabe first—but the Schwabes would have to move faster and pay royalties more promptly than in the past, and if they could not promise to do so, then he would turn to Atlantis or Niehaus.

Switzerland, however, once again proved to have less of a free hand than its political neutrality might have led one to believe. He had received a remarkable answer from Atlantis, Huizinga told Kaegi, in which he was asked to agree either to make revisions to the final chapter and to a few other passages, which would make the book more acceptable to the German reader, but still acceptable to himself and to the Swiss reader, or to authorize
two separate editions: one for Switzerland, with the last chapter intact, and one for Germany, in which the full final chapter would be replaced by a short résumé. As neither option was acceptable, he had been on the verge of giving up all thought of a German edition, when his wife reminded him that it was by way of their German translations that his books reached readers in the Scandinavian countries, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, etc. So he had finally begun to reconsider an option that he had hitherto been unwilling to entertain seriously.

Through my Vienna lecture on “Der Mensch und die Kultur”—which was never delivered—I came quite by accident into contact with the Bermann-Fischer Verlag, now transferred to Stockholm, but legally continuing the business of the former Berlin house of Fischer-Verlag. This firm would probably be able to see that the book was distributed in those countries where German is read though not spoken, and it would probably accept an uncut text. Still, it is basically an émigré publishing house, and that has its disadvantages.

(These included no doubt, besides more limited distribution, exclusion from the German market itself and the virtual certainty of being labeled and thereby deprived of the authority of the neutral scholar writing in simple good faith.) “What,” he asked Kaegi, “would you recommend in the circumstances?” Kaegi’s answer, which has not been preserved, must have been sent promptly, for a few days later, Huizinga thanks him for it and announces his decision to abandon any attempt at a German edition. “It is infinitely sad,” he comments, “that one can no longer be published in the German language area.” In the end, Huizinga did publish a German language edition of Homo ludens—with the newly founded Amsterdam publisher Pantheon-Akademische Verlaganstalt, which specialized in German language books but was not a Jewish émigré firm.

Huizinga’s decision to expel von Leers from Leiden thus had serious consequences for him as a scholar. Had he not taken such a public stand, it is possible that the passages the German authorities objected to—in Homo ludens at least—would not have attracted attention. Moreover, despite his obvious desire to maintain his place as a writer and scholar in Germany, he stood his ground when under pressure to cut or moderate offending passages. Like Otterspeer, I would like to understand what underlay Huizinga’s original decision in the von Leers affair as well as the stand he took subse-
quently, even though I am convinced that all action of this kind remains to some degree undecipherable.

Huizinga and Kaegi were both shocked by the violence and oppressiveness of the Nazi regime, and Huizinga, in particular, spoke out about it, especially in *In den schaduwen van morgen*. Both tried to help Jewish colleagues who had been dismissed from their positions or who were trying to get out of Germany. In 1940, Huizinga stood with other professors at Leiden who refused to accede to German demands that their Jewish colleagues be dismissed. During the occupation of Holland, as is well known, the seventy-year-old historian was imprisoned for a while in a German camp, where he gave a memorable talk to the inmates on the liberation of Leiden from Spanish tyranny. Huizinga remained unshakable in his commitment to the freedom and respect of persons. This does not mean, as Otterspeer has indicated, that he was a committed democrat. He had serious misgivings about democracy and the cultural effects of the “democratisation of society”; he had even been capable in his youth, as many otherwise thoroughly liberal people of the time were, of what would now be construed as mildly anti-Semitic remarks; and, according to one of the editors of his correspondence, he continued throughout his life to think of Jews as “other” even while completely rejecting racist explanations and racist ideologies in all forms. Similarly, though he was much lauded at the time for speaking up for “science” and “truth”—the head of the French delegation, the eminent historian Paul Mantoux, for instance, praised him for having exposed the “falsifications de l’histoire” on which Nazi propaganda was based and deplored “le silence de toute la science historique allemande” in the matter of the Nazis’ use of materials whose inauthenticity has been “scientifiquement . . . démontrée”—Huizinga was not a proponent of “scientific” history. Quite the contrary. He despised positivism and championed a more imaginative, creative view of historiography. As early as 1905, as Otterspeer reminds us, the young, newly appointed professor of history at the University of Groningen had taken as the subject of his inaugural lecture “The Aesthetic Component in the Conceptualization of History” [Het aesthetische bestanddeel van geschiedkundige voorstellingen]. “Les dernières années m’ont rendu de plus en plus incapable de goûter ces ouvrages ultrascientifiques et illisibles qui abondent dans notre science,” he told the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne in 1917.

Otterspeer suggests that it was far more a kind of honor code, a standard of good taste or even perhaps “good form,” as the English say, than a scientific respect for truth or a Kantian commitment to an ethical impera-
tive that Huizinga saw being breached by von Leers’s book and subsequent behavior. When Julian Huxley, the distinguished British zoologist and biologist, attacked von Leers’s book, History on a Racial Basis, in 1936, the tone was indeed different from that adopted by Huizinga in the von Leers incident.\textsuperscript{92} The basic opposition for Huxley was between scientific knowledge and “scientific rubbish,” between the conscientious respect for evidence and reasoning of the competent scientist and the propagandist’s utter disregard of them. In Huizinga’s conversation with von Leers, however, there is no substantive discussion of the issue of the alleged ritual murders, no consideration of evidence or of von Leers’s reasoning and competence as a historian. Such a discussion never even gets under way. Nor is any universal moral principle explicitly evoked. As a failure to respect the integrity of all persons irrespective of race, religion, and nationality, anti-Semitism is not in itself made an issue.

Von Leers’s transgression seems rather to be that of nonprofessional conduct—not playing by the basic rules of the scholarly or academic game. For Huizinga evidently assumed that, as an educated man, von Leers knew that the popular stories about ritual murders of Christian children by Jews were unfounded and had been shown to be so by historical scholarship. In other words, von Leers had cynically sought to manipulate public opinion by presenting palpably false statements in the guise of historically valid ones. He had only played at playing the scholarly game; in fact, he had shown no respect for any partner nor observed any rules. Huizinga’s reading of von Leers’s behavior seems to me to have been quite close to the interpretation of the National Socialist political machine offered a few years later in The Revolution of Nihilism by Hermann Rauschning, the repentant former Party member, who having won election as a National Socialist candidate to the presidency of the Senate in Danzig in 1933, resigned the position in the following year and fled Germany altogether in 1936. Rauschning—whose book would appear in Dutch with a foreword by ter Braak—emphasized the utter cynicism of the Party leadership and its deliberate use of crude but effective ideas in which it did not itself believe, to pursue purely political aims, with the result that it became impossible to distinguish in Party discourse between “what is make-believe and what is reality . . . what is deceit or delusion and what is genuine.” It would be a great mistake, Rauschning explains,

\textit{to suppose that so cunning an individual as the German Minister of Propaganda is not perfectly well aware that the atrocity propa-}
ganda against the Jews, including the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” is preposterous nonsense, that he does not see through the racial swindle just as clearly as those compatriots of his whom it has driven out of their country. It would be foolish to imagine that any member of the elite truly and sincerely believes in the bases of the “philosophy.” They have been deliberately concocted for their demagogic effectiveness and for the furtherance of the party’s political aims.\textsuperscript{93}

In the light of von Leers’s similarly calculated disregard of all rules, one can understand why in one of the narrative accounts of the incident, it is carefully pointed out that the rector shook von Leers’s hand at the beginning of their conversation, before the allegations about what was in the pamphlet had been acknowledged by von Leers to be true, but did not do so at the end of it, after von Leers admitted that he had indeed written the passages in question. At the beginning, the two men—the Nazi leader of the German delegation to a student conference at the University of Leiden and the deeply liberal (but not unreservedly democratic) rector of the university—are assumed to be players, albeit adversarial players, in a common game. Like pugilists or tennis players, the two academics shake hands before the encounter. But the conversation reveals that the Nazi does not observe or respect the rules of academic scholarship, of debate, or even of conflict, since debate and conflict suppose an adversary whom one recognizes and with whom one engages, not simply an obstacle to be removed. For that reason there could be no handshake at the end of their conversation, as Huizinga took care to point out to von Leers.

A small detail—the attitude of both Kaegi and Huizinga to Kaegi’s German graduate student, Christoph Steding—is revealing in this respect. Kaegi was clearly quite taken by Steding, even though the young man was a confirmed Nazi and a member of the Party. He probably suggested to him that he go on from Basel to study with Huizinga in Leiden. He even consulted him on the von Leers incident. Steding apparently agreed that if Huizinga’s account of what occurred was correct, von Leers was an embarrassment. “The Third Reich is not dependent on such individuals,” he reportedly told Kaegi.\textsuperscript{94} Subsequently, however, he heard the story von Leers was telling in Berlin about what had transpired at the ISS Congress: that Huizinga had insulted Germany and that all the other delegations had sided with the German delegation. Huizinga suggested to Kaegi that he direct the young man to the Secretary of the ISS in Geneva if he wanted an accurate
version of the events. In the meantime, he assured Kaegi, he was expecting Herr Steding in Leiden “with pleasurable anticipation,” adding in a later letter that he “genuinely hopes Herr Dr. Steding will in fact look me up. I would really like to be able to talk with a decent [anstândig] representative of the system.” The problem with most Nazis, in short, was that they were not anstândig—not genuine partners in a discussion in which both parties seek truth and understanding, but interested only in eliminating every obstacle to the pure exercise of power.

There is something pathetic about the way the two older scholars persist in trying to cast the young Steding as a member of the scholarly community, as an anstândig Nazi, to whom it might be possible to talk. Steding himself exposed the illusoriness of their optimism a few years later with the publication in Hamburg, just before the war, of Das Reich und die Krankheit der europäischen Kultur [The Reich and the Sickness of European Culture]. The anstândig Nazi’s contribution to historical scholarship turned out to be a 750-page, half-learned, half-crazy diatribe against the two Germanic trading countries, one at the head and one at the mouth of the Rhine, whose inveterate commitment to neutrality, the author alleged, made them the most pernicious of all obstacles to the unification of the entire German Volk in a single, powerful, national state. Their vaunted “neutrality” amounted to no more, Steding charged, than a preference for “talk” and for endlessly putting off decisive action. Steding’s attack on “neutrality,” directed with special venom at “die stolze Basilea,” was an obvious repudiation, full of anger and resentment, of his two cultivated humanist teachers and clearly aligned him with his German mentor, Carl Schmitt. It is probably not coincidental that Huizinga had vigorously taken issue with Schmitt’s notion of “das Eintreten des Ernstfalles” [the irruption of seriousness] as the moment of passage from formal gamelike relations (exemplified by the League of Nations and traditional diplomacy or traditional warfare) to the stark, uncompromising struggle to destroy the foe, both in In the Shadow of Tomorrow (chapter 12, “Life and Battle”) and in that final chapter of Homo ludens which the Nazi censorship had adamantly refused to countenance.

Is it possible to account for Huizinga’s behavior in terms of his own ideas about game-playing? The importance of play—and in particular of “fair play”—for Huizinga is assuredly beyond any doubt. For the twentieth-century Dutchman, play has something of the character that human law had for Pascal, the seventeenth-century French Jansenist, with his conviction that we live in a fallen world and no longer have an immediate understanding of divine justice. It creates a kind of order where there would otherwise be
anarchy, and it contains and even elevates violence. “Play,” we read in the first chapter of *Homo ludens*, “is something added to the natural process and spread out over it, like a flowering, an ornament, a garment. . . . It creates order, is order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection.” Many of the arrangements that make human existence tolerable and give it dignity are related to the play principle. “The maintenance of international law,” for instance, “has, at all stages, depended very largely on principles lying outside the strict domain of law, such as honour, decency, and good form.” In general, “civilization cannot exist in the absence of a certain play-element, for civilization presupposes limitation and mastery of the self.” Huizinga freely acknowledges the essential relation of play to aesthetics. “Play lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil.” Nevertheless, it has an important element of ethical value in virtue of “the element of tension” in it, its testing of the player’s “‘fairness’; because, despite his ardent desire to win, the player must still stick to the rules of the game”96—in other words, he must learn to exercise “limitation and mastery of the self.” Understandably, in Huizinga’s book, the cheat and the hypocrite are somewhat more tolerable from the point of view of the players than the “spoilsport” or apostate. For the hypocrite does not openly challenge the rules of the game.97 One recalls La Rochefoucauld’s celebrated maxim about hypocrisy as the tribute that vice pays to virtue.

Still, it does not seem to me that von Leers was condemned by Huizinga simply because he was a spoilsport, someone who does not play the game according to the rules and in fact sets out deliberately to undermine it.

Huizinga certainly believed—and deeply deplored—that in the modern world the play element had lost ground in every domain, even that of designated play. “More and more the sad conclusion forces itself upon us that the play-element in culture has been on the wane ever since the eighteenth century when it was in full flower. Civilization today is no longer played, and even where it still seems to play it is false play.”98 And nowhere is this more so than in politics and international relations. Nowadays, states of the highest cultural pretensions withdraw from the comity of nations and shamelessly announce that “pacta non sunt servanda.” By so doing they break the play-rules inherent in any system of international law. . . . In contemporary politics . . . the code of honour is flouted, the rules of the game are set aside,
international law is broken, and all the ancient associations of war with ritual and religion are gone.\textsuperscript{99}

But in the end, maintaining a clear consciousness of the distinction between play and "serious activity" is even more important to Huizinga than the play element itself.

Huizinga considered boundaries valuable and did not like them to be deliberately blurred. Indeed, "civilization," as he saw it, was in large measure based on respect for boundaries. Racism, for example, resulted from dignifying irrational feelings with the justification proper to science. "A vast and murky twilight seems to have spread over numberless minds," he wrote in \textit{In the Shadow of Tomorrow}.

All the delimitations between the logical, the aesthetic, and the emotive functions are purposely ignored. Sentiment is allowed to play a part in forming judgment regardless of the object of judgment and in direct negation of the claims of the critical intellect.

In this way "a popular doctrine which for a long time and until recently had never been able to pass the tests necessary to gain admittance to the domain of critically verified knowledge" receives vindication. A "civilized person," in contrast, would "consider it his duty"—if it were true that "there are instinctive racial aversions" and that they are "biologically determined"—"to render himself account of the animal quality of this reaction and to control it as much as possible instead of fostering it and priding himself on it."\textsuperscript{100} Similarly, in the matter of the writing of history, even while professing his own impatience with positivistic historical science, he reaffirmed his "respect pour la solidité et l'érudition pénible,"\textsuperscript{101} and in highlighting the role of imagination and inventiveness, he continued to insist that history is not poetry or fiction. "Measure, restraint, a certain skeptical reserve," he declared, "are essential attributes of the historian," who must resist the pressure of the public and the press for "vies romancées," in the style of Emil Ludwik.\textsuperscript{102} "We have long since outgrown the belief in a tyrannically consistent rationalism," he explained in 1935.

We realize that not everything can be measured by reason, \ldots A richer and deeper understanding than the solely rational has given greater meaning to our knowledge. But where the wise man, through freer and ampler judgment, finds a deeper sense in things and life, the fool finds in this freedom only licence for greater nonsense.\textsuperscript{103}
The most important of all distinctions or boundaries is that between “play” and “serious activity” and it must be upheld with vigilance.

The most fundamental character of true play, whether it be a cult, a performance, a contest, or a festivity, is that at a certain moment it is over. . . . The players take off their masks, the performance has ended. And here the evil of our time shows itself. For nowadays play in many cases never ends and is thus not true play.104

Civilization cannot exist without a certain play element, writes Huizinga, but civilization also “presupposes the ability not to confuse its own tendencies with the ultimate and highest goal, . . . to understand that it is enclosed within certain bounds freely accepted.”105

The spoilsports who destroy play are not necessarily morally reprehensible: they are “apostates, heretics, innovators, prophets, conscientious objectors, etc.”106 And it may be necessary at times, Huizinga points out in a discussion of heroism, for people to go “out of bounds.” For

in this world things must go out of bounds from time to time. . . . No one can desire that the world continue to muddle along in every respect in the groove into which imperfect laws and even more imperfect behavior have pushed it. . . . The thing that counts is who intervenes, how and in the name of what.107

Going out of bounds, being a spoilsport may, in other words, be the “right” thing to do on occasion. The point is, however, that by stepping out of the rules of the game, by entering the space of “serious activity,” the player enters the realm of a “higher” ethics than that represented by “fair play.” He attacks the game in the name of a law higher than the rules of the game, higher than “civilization” itself. The arena of play is bounded, in other words, by a realm of ethics, situated above and beyond it. Von Leers’s going “out of bounds,” in contrast, had taken him into a realm situated below that of the game: a realm of pure power and violence unmitigated even by the relative constraint of civilized play. He had betrayed and undermined the game, had “played” it playing, for the sake of no higher principle, no principle at all, nothing but the elimination of all obstacles to the untrammeled exercise of power. Huizinga’s opposition to Carl Schmitt is fully understandable at this point. For Schmitt, the Ernstfall marks the end of play—that is, of formal discussion and negotiation, the diplomatic game—and the beginning of the absolute friend-foe situation, the situation of pure violence.
For Huizinga also, “seriousness” marks the end of play, but it defines the passage from the realm of rule-governed play to the higher realm of ethical choice.\textsuperscript{108}

In a world in which there remained “hardly any trace of the old play-attitude,”\textsuperscript{109} von Leers had attacked what to Huizinga was one of the few remaining arenas of genuine play—the university. In Huizinga’s eyes, the university, the community of scholars and scientists, represented a rare and precious refugium, where “play” was and always had been far more disinterested than in the world of politics. “True play,” in Huizinga’s own words, “knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration.”\textsuperscript{110} The rules of the university are purer than those of the world of politics, politics is always dangerously close to uncontrolled violence, at no time closer than in the twentieth century. “In matters of honor and dignity a university has to judge by other criteria than those of governments—and what university more than that of Leiden!”\textsuperscript{111} Huizinga’s view of the University of Leiden recalls, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, Burckhardt’s view of the University of Basel at a time when the world seemed to him to be spiraling into the abyss:

I view every question that arises in its relation to the University of Basel and always ask only: Is this or that beneficial to the university or not. If I never do the university harm or contribute to harming it in any way, I will be content enough \textit{in globo} with my external life.\textsuperscript{112}

Huizinga’s loyalty to the University of Leiden, however, turned out to require courage of action rather than Burckhardtian withdrawal and stoic resignation.

By stopping the play, it seems to me, Huizinga reaffirmed the distinction between play and “serious activity” and himself crossed into the sphere of the latter. In his rectorial address on handing over the rectorship of Leiden to his successor in September 1933, he took up some of the language of earlier statements to the Board of Governors and the editors of the \textit{Historische Zeitschrift}. Here, however, he asserted not only the special character of the university, but the need in certain circumstances to step outside of the arena defined by its own rules and engage in “serious activity” in order to defend it:

If it is to remain free and true to its vocation, a university must define what its obligations are and where its honor lies according
to its own criteria, and it will sometimes find that it must intervene actively simply to defend the hallowed spiritual ground on which it stands.113

Notes

The translation is of Willem Otterspeer, *Huizinga voor de afgrond: Het incident Von Leers aan de Leidse Universiteit in 1933* (Utrecht: HES, 1984). Notes to the translation of Otterspeer’s essay (notes 2–67) that are marked [O], or are left unmarked, are by Otterspeer. Additional notes and additions to Otterspeer’s original notes are marked [G]. All bracketed material in the text, unless designated as “O,” is editorial. Otterspeer’s title is taken from that of an essay on Huizinga by Menno ter Braak in *Man tegen Man* (1931).

Willem Otterspeer (b. 1950) studied history and philosophy at the University of Utrecht (1970–76). He is currently professor of history and curator of the Academisch Historisch Museum of the University of Leiden, and is the author of *Leiden Oriental Connections* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), and, more recently, of an acclaimed study of the influential Dutch philosopher G. J. P. J. Bolland (1854–1922), *Bolland: een biografie* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 1995). Bolland’s philosophy was a mixture of Hegelianism and mysticism, with obvious strains of elitism, antisocialism, and anti-Semitism.

1 The von Leers incident is also recounted briefly in Anton van der Lem, *Johan Huizinga: Leven en werk in beelden en documenten* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1993), 228–30 (reference supplied by Dr. Willem Otterspeer).

2 Menno ter Braak (1902–1940), son of a pastor, was a prominent Dutch writer and cultural critic in the 1930s. He was literary editor of the newspaper *Het Vaderland* and chief critic and essayist for the weekly *De Vrije Bladen*, with which he was associated from its founding in 1924. In 1932, in collaboration with his friend C. E. du Perron, he launched the monthly *Forum*, which lasted until 1936. Strongly influenced by Nietzsche, he struggled constantly to free himself and his readers from the constraints of traditional social and religious values. Much of his work is a brilliant and mordant critique of the “hypocrisy” of philosophical idealism. An early critic and opponent of the totalitarian regimes of the thirties in Europe and in particular of National Socialism, he took his own life in May 1940, as the German army marched into the Netherlands. [G]

3 An important left-wing publicist and essayist in Holland in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Jacques de Kadt (1897–1988) was active in politics, first in the Social Democratic Party, then in the more radical Independent Socialist Party (Onafhankelijke socialistische partij), which he helped found in 1929. In 1940, on the invasion of Holland, he fled to England and then to the Netherlands East Indies. He returned to Holland after the war. De Kadt was associated with ter Braak and du Perron in the fight against fascism. [G]


7 Ibid., 7:167, 171–72 [O]. The Burckhardian flavor of that remark is striking [G].

Each delegation of students was led by a teacher—Paul Mantoux for the French, Claude Guillebaud (a Cambridge economist) for the English. The anomaly was that von Leers was not a university teacher but an author of National Socialist books and an employee of the Ministry of Propaganda. [G]

9 Johann von Leers was born on 25 January 1902 in Viethlubbe, near Gadebusch, in Mecklenburg. He studied law in Kiel, Rostock, and Berlin. Thanks to his extensive knowledge of foreign languages—he spoke Japanese, among other languages—he obtained a post at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 1929 on he was on the editorial staff of *Angriff* and other National Socialist reviews. He was also in charge of the Foreign Section of the *Hochschule für Politik* and served on the board of directors of the Verein für das Deutsche im Ausland. Until the end of the Second World War he was a member of the racial problems section at the Ministry of Propaganda. In 1936 he was named professor of legal, economic, and political history at the University of Jena. [. . .] After the war, from 1950 until 1955, von Leers lived in Argentina, where he was a regular contributor to the neo-Nazi review, *Der Weg*, in Buenos Aires. In 1955 he moved to Egypt, converted to Islam, and is said to have taught German at a school in Cairo under the name of Amin Omar von Leers. He denied allegations that he worked for Nasser’s anti-Semitic propaganda machine. He died in Cairo in spring 1965. [O]


10 Academisch Historisch Museum, Dossier Huizinga, no. 4769.

11 A duplicated copy of the *Deutsche Denkschrift* is in the Dossier Huizinga at the Academisch Historisch Museum.

12 Ibid.

13 *Propria Cures* 44, no. 28 (3 May 1933): 361.

14 *Vinculum Studiosorum* 6, no. 8 (15 April 1933): 123.
Ibid.

Propria Cures, 362.

Vinculum Studiosorum, 125 (in English in the text).

University Library, Leiden, Archives of the Senate, Minutes of meetings, 1933 [O]. A fuller account is provided in J. Huizinga, Briefwisseling, ed. Leon Hanssen, W. E. Krul, and Anton van der Lem, 3 vols. (Utrecht and Antwerp: Veen/Tjeenk Willink, 1989–91), 2:433–34 (letter 995, 12 April 1933, note 6). This published text appears to be the “thoroughly detailed memorandum concerning the events of April 11,” which Otterspeer says was sent to the governors by the Clerk of the Senate. See note 24 below. See also Huizinga’s account of the events in a memorandum to the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the text of which follows the minutes quite closely, Briefwisseling, 2:432 (letter 995); and a useful summary of the whole incident which Huizinga wrote for Fritz Saxl of the Warburg Institute (by then transferred to London) two years later, Briefwisseling, 3:100–101 (letter 1170, 31 October 1935). Translations of these three accounts are provided in the Appendix [G].

Von Leers in fact repeated the charges of ritual murder a decade later in Die Verbrechernatur der Juden, 122–23. He also claimed that the assassination of President Lincoln was part of a Jewish plot! (p. 125). [G]

This opinion was expressed openly by the governors in a letter to Huizinga of 6 June 1933 (Huizinga, Briefwisseling, 2:460 [letter 1024]). [G]

Archives of the Board of Governors, Minutes of Meetings, 1933 [O]. See Huizinga, Briefwisseling, 2:445 (letter 1005, 28 April 1933) for the text of a letter sent to the rector by the governors, outlining the points made at the meeting and adding that they were further offended by the manner in which they were informed of the affair (i.e., through a memorandum sent by Huizinga to the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and forwarded to them by the Ministry) [G].

See Appendix for text of this letter.


Archives of the Board of Governors, KA 1933, no. 57 [O]. This letter now published in Briefwisseling, 2:450–52 (letter 1012, 11 May 1933) [G].

Ibid., no. 58 (16 May 1933) [O]. This appears to be the text published in Briefwisseling, 2:433–34 (letter 995, note 6) [G].

The text of von Leers’s article in Die Schwarzburg: Hochschulinasfrage 15.6 (1933): 190–91, has been reprinted in Briefwisseling, 2:470–71 (letter 1037, note 4, June 1933). [G]

The title of the article in the Telegraaf was “Het incident met Dr. von Leers—Wat is er in Leiden gebeurd” [The von Leers incident—What happened in Leiden]. See Briefwisseling, 2:470 (letter 1037, note 3, June 1933). [G]

Briefwisseling, 2:469–70 (letter 1037, June 1933, to Paul Mantoux). [G]

Dossier Huizinga [O]. Paul Mantoux’s letter in Briefwisseling, 2:474–75 (letter 1040, 26 June 1933) [G].
A short extract from Geyl's letter to Keina and a long extract from Keina's reply in Briefwisseling, 2:468-69 (letter 1035, 19 June 1933, note 2). The reference to the Jewish refugee Goldschmitt is not found in von Leers's account of the affair. Von Leers had accused a Jewish bookseller in Leiden by the name of Ginsburg as well as various members of the Jewish community in Amsterdam of having approached Huizinga (Briefwisseling, 2:470-71, letter 1037, note 4, text of von Leers's article in Die Schwarzbürg). [G]


Huizinga first heard of the note appended to his article in the Historische Zeitschrift from his Swiss colleague Werner Kaegi, copies of the latest issue having not yet arrived in Leiden (Kaegi to Huizinga, 26 April 1933, in Briefwisseling, 2:442 [letter 1003]; and Huizinga to Kaegi, 28 April 1933, 2:444-45 [letter 1004]). He had at first treated the matter with some humor ("wohl eine Art Anthemese," he wrote Kaegi) and with sympathy for what he took to be the difficult situation the editors found themselves in (Huizinga to Kaegi, 3 May 1933, Briefwisseling, 2:446 [letter 1006]; also letter from Henri Sée to Huizinga, 15 June 1933, 2:464-65 [letter 1031], in which Sée regards Huizinga's view that the editors of the Historische Zeitschrift were under pressure as "fort plausible" and considers that "ce serait, pour la rédaction de la revue, une circonstance atténuante," but also "une nouvelle manifestation de la terrible tyrannie qui pèse sur l'Allemagne"). Huizinga had already had occasion to observe the effect of the new order in Germany on scholars. In March 1933, he had received a letter from Hajo Holborn (who emigrated to the U.S. a year later and became professor of German history at Yale), informing him that he had made an alteration to the text of a lecture by Huizinga on the mediating role of the Netherlands ("Die Mittlerstellung der Niederlande") that he was seeing through the press with Teubner Verlag. "In the sentence... it was my old friend, the Leiden astronomer de Sitter, who first brought (Einstein's person and work) to the attention of his English friends, thus significantly contributing to the reestablishment of scientific relations between the two great peoples."

With his most recent pronouncements on the political situation Professor Einstein has not only given his enemies an excuse to attack the seriousness of his commitment to Germany but has also made it difficult for his friends and admirers in Germany to speak up for him. I thought I might assume that in the context of your lecture the specific reference to Einstein was not so important that it was worth putting the general impact of your lecture at risk because of it." Briefwisseling, 2:427 (letter 990, 25 March 1933). [G]

Ibid., 2:468 (letter 1035, 19 June 1933). [G]

Ibid., 2:476 (letter 1041, 27 June 1933). Meinecke maintained after the war that he had been pressured into adding the note. The authorities, he claimed, had told the editors that in view of the seriousness of the von Leers incident the Huizinga article — based on a lecture given in Berlin the previous January — could not appear. He had gone ahead with the printing nevertheless, but to avoid further harassment by the Party had agreed to print an explanation, which he believed most readers would inter-


39 Among Huizinga's own German friends and correspondents, Walther Koehler in Heidelberg defended the regime: “In normal conditions I should have become rector here but I withdrew unconditionally on account of my poor hearing. In these disturbing times that would simply not have done. That is not to say that things are not far less disturbing here than might appear to foreigners to be the case. There is no question of a warlike atmosphere. But I am glad that we finally have a government of national unity. Now we must wait and see what it will accomplish. If Germany achieves what Italy has achieved under Mussolini, we can only be happy” (Briefwisseling, 2:429 [letter 992, 26 March 1933]). [G]

40 The Decline of the German Mandarins, 438.

41 Jaarboek der Rijks-Universiteit te Utrecht, 1927–1928, 205–32.

42 Leidse Universiteitsblad 3.3 (20 October 1933): 1–2.

43 P. J. Idenburg, De Leidse Universiteit, 1928–1946: Vereniging en Verzet (The Hague: Leiden University Press, 1978), 61–69 [O]. From the beginning Huizinga's gesture won him the support and gratitude of the enemies of National Socialism. Sylvain Levy, the French Sanskrit scholar, wrote that he had read in the newspapers about "l'acte si noble que vous avez accompli à la réunion universitaire de Leyde," "Dans les heures tristes que nous vivons," he added, expressing no doubt his feelings as a Jew, "la sympathie des belles âmes est le plus puissant réconfort; il empêche de désespérer de l'humanité" (Briefwisseling, 2:439 [letter 999, 21 April 1933]). From French historians came two letters of support. "Je sais combien vous avez dû faire preuve d'énergie à la conférence de l'Entr'aide universitaire" (Henri Hauser, ibid. [letter 1000, 22 April 1933]); "Toutes les personnes qui rêveront la liberté de la pensée doivent être de coeur avec vous" (Henri Sée, 2:459 [letter 1023, 5 June 1933]). The great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne wrote of "votre belle attitude à l'égard de la brutalité hitlérienne." "L'Historische Zeitschrift vous a exclu honoris causa," he added, referring to the note appended to Huizinga's article as a result of the von Leers incident (ibid., 2:492 [letter 1064, 30 November 1933]) [G].

44 Hendrik Colijn (1869–1944) came from a strict Calvinist peasant background in North-Holland, served in the Dutch East Indies, and became active in the orthodox Protestant Anti-Revolutionary Party. Appointed Minister of War in 1911, he left government office to serve as a Director of Royal Dutch Shell (1914–22). In 1920 he was elected Chairman of the ARP. Impressed by the economic development of non-European countries during World War I, he foresaw a bleak, irreversible economic future of decreasing prosperity for Europe and viewed the statesman's task as that of teaching society how to come to terms with a permanently reduced standard of living. While he objected, with the liberals, to state regulation and to the “totalitarian”
aspects of corporatism, he remained deeply pessimistic about all human endeavor and far more ready than any liberal to resort to drastic measures in times of crisis. In the 1920s and 1930s he gave many speeches on these themes (collected in *Voor het Gemeenbest* [Utrecht: W. de Haan, 1938]; and *Geen vergeefs woord* [Kampen: Kok, 1951]).

C. J. Snijders (1852–1939) was Commander-in-Chief of the Netherlands army and navy during World War I. He proposed joining the German side late in the war.

A. A. Mussert (1894–1946) was a graduate of Delft Technical College. He was the founder of the Dutch Nazi Party in the early 1930s (the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging had 1,000 members in 1933, and 52,000 in 1936—more than the Communists). According to the historian E. H. Kossmann, “Mussert was a man who inspired confidence: an excellent civil servant attached to the department of Public Works in the province of Utrecht who had won fame as organizer of the National Committee against the treaty with Belgium in 1925. . . . His attitude was sufficiently firm and his programme sufficiently vague to attract the kind of people who thought that only the most grandiose measures could cope with the economic and political crisis which parliamentary democracy seemed unable to do anything about. . . . However, . . . , the party’s leaders . . . became increasingly anti-Semitic and the earlier concept of the absolute Hegelian state was replaced by revolutionary doctrines. . . . From being an extreme right-wing nationalist party within the Dutch political framework, the NSB became a revolutionary movement outside the Dutch tradition. The established parties and the Churches quickly closed ranks.” E. H. Kossmann, *The Low Countries, 1780–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 582, 626–27. [G]


Ibid., 8:28.

Ibid., 8:34.

Ibid., 8:35.

Ibid., 7:604.


J. W. Mulder, *Klaar in crisis en besetting* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1978), 35. In Switzerland, Huijinga’s friend and translator, Werner Kaegi, seems to have had similar hesitations about modern democratic regimes. Though he often deplores developments in Germany in his letters to Huijinga, in particular the hardships encountered by German Jewish scholars, and is convinced that, in contrast with Germany, the imposition of a fascist political regime would threaten the continued existence of the state in both Holland and Switzerland, Kaegi nevertheless “had to acknowledge a relative justification in certain growing movements that parallel those in Germany” (*Briefwisseling*, 2:447 [letter 1008, 7 May 1933]). [G]

Ibid., 4:422–23.

Ibid., 1:12 [O]. On this episode in Huijinga’s youth, see Kurt Koster, *Johan Huijinga*, 10 [G].

In light of Huizinga’s reflections on “civility” in the course of a discussion in which he contrasts the terms civilization and civility, I have translated the Dutch burgerlijkheid as “bourgeois civility.” See Wenn die Waffen schweigen (Geschonden wereld) (Amsterdam: Pantheon, 1945), 21–22. [G]

Huizinga, VW, 7:159.

The passage is from In den schaduwen van morgen. I have used the text of the English translation In the Shadow of Tomorrow (New York: Norton, 1936), 100–102, restoring the original opening phrase about pragmatism without which it might be thought that the view was Huizinga’s own. In fact, Huizinga was extremely critical of Lebensphilosophe in all its forms and of what he called “the ‘disavowal of the intellectual principle” (the title of the chapter of In the Shadow of Tomorrow where this passage occurs) [G].

Huizinga, VW, 7:536.

Charles Edgar du Perron (1899–1940), born in Djakarta (Dutch East Indies), was a notable Dutch writer of the 1920s and 1930s. He lived for a time in Paris, where he was friendly with the critic Pascal Pia and the writers André Gide and Valéry Larbaud. The author of many volumes of poetry and essays and of several novels, he was an outspoken critic of colonialism and Dutch bourgeois stuffiness, parochialism, and hypocritical high-mindedness. He founded and edited the review Forum with ter Braak (1932–35). [G]


The Dutch expression here is picturesque: “maar wenschte zich niet aan koude water te branden” (lit. “but did not want to get burned in cold water”). The idea appears to be that Huizinga was so cautious and conservative that a perfectly straightforward political movement in defense of democracy appeared to him in his imagination as something wildly revolutionary that one ought not to get involved in. [G]


Cf. ter Braak to du Perron, 27 February 1938: “I am in no way in agreement with your opinion of Huizinga’s latest book. The Wetenschap der geschiedenis (Science of History) is the most miserably botched piece of work he has ever produced; full of ludicrous evasions and methodical tricks, total word fetichism, the gibberish of a schoolmaster. The Cultuurhistorische Verkenningen (Explorations in Cultural History) are a masterpiece in comparison. It seems to me incontrovertible (and when the man is dead, I hope to write it once again) that since the Herfstitj (Waning of the Middle Ages) H. has consistently regressed. Erasmus is still a very respectable work of history, but far paler, more impersonal, and more long drawn out than Herfstitj. But I promised myself that I would write no more about H. . . . as long as he is still alive. In Huizinga voor den Afgrond everything can be found that I had to say about him. That I placed too high a value on the ‘vie romantique’ in that piece is my mistake, and I acknowledge it fully, but that was an error of perspective, for which Huizinga’s.
conservatism was not a little to blame" (Briefweisseling, ed. H. van Galen Last, 4:259 [letter 1060]). [G]

66 Academisch Historisch Museum. Archives of the University during the Occupation, 1940–45, 1.

67 Oral communication of Dr. H. J. Heering.

68 Huizinga, Briefweisseling, 2:440 (letter 1001, Huizinga to Kaegi, 23 April 1933).

69 Ibid., 2:442–43 (letter 1003, Kaegi to Huizinga, 26 April 1933).

70 Ibid., 2:444–45 (letter 1004, Huizinga to Kaegi, 28 April 1933).

71 Ibid., 2:454 (letter 1015, Kaegi to Huizinga, 17 May 1933).

72 Ibid., 2:457–58, 462–63 (letters 1020 and 1029, Kaegi to Huizinga, 26 May and 13 June 1933).

73 In the Shadow of Tomorrow (New York: Norton, 1936). The critique of fascism runs through the entire book. It is particularly open on 140–41 ("Injustice, cruelty, restraint of conscience, oppression, falsity, dishonour, deceit, violation of law and equity—But look how they have cleaned up the cities and what wonderful roads they have built"); 153–55 (on the subordination and exploitation of religion under fascism); 159–69 (the chapter on "the shirt-and-arm heroism of today"); 170–82 (the chapter on "puerilism").

74 Briefweisseling, 3:76–78 (letters 1145 and 1146, 11 and 13 July 1935).

75 Ibid., 3:91–93 (letters 1159 and 1160, 6 and 8 September 1935).

76 Ibid., 3:107, 111 (letters 1181 and 1185, 5 and 18 January 1936).

77 Kurt Koster, Johan Huizinga, 59.


231–32. Huizinga had already defined what he meant by "puerilism" at length in the chapter that bears that title (chapter 16) in In the Shadow of Tomorrow, 170–82.

82 Briefweisseling, 3:265 (letter 1371, 15 December 1938). The letter to Benes, expressing support for him in his resistance to German expansionism, was signed in November 1938 by over 8,000 Netherlands citizens, of whom Huizinga was presumably one.


84 Ibid., 3:277 (letter 1381, 1 February 1939).

85 Though founded in 1938 by a Hungarian publisher and bookseller, Koloman Kollar, Pantheon Press was not an "Emigrantenverlag." In fact, it continued to operate throughout the German occupation of the Netherlands.

86 Kaegi several times expressed his sympathy with Jewish colleagues who had been "abgesetzt." He writes with genuine distress of a visit to Ernst Cassirer, then in Lucerne (ibid., 2:443 [letter 1003, 26 April 1933]); went to considerable lengths to obtain at least Swiss residency rights for his friend Werner Weisbach, a history professor in Berlin (ibid.; also 3:165–66 [letter 1247, 3 February 1937]); and asked Huizinga if he could do something to help a Dr. Josef Prijs, a Dutch-born scholar who had been naturalized German, to recover his Dutch citizenship (letter 1247). A letter from the French historian Henri Hauser to Huizinga of 22 April 1933 indicates that Huizinga had asked Hauser to help a refugee scholar (ibid., 2:439 [letter 1000]).

88 See the essay on "The Mechanization of Community Life" from Mensch en menigte in Amerika: vier essays over moderne beschavinggeschiedenis (1918), in Johan Huizinga, America: A Dutch Historian's Vision from Afar and Near, trans. Herbert H. Rowen (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 104–7; also In the Shadow of Tomorrow, 148–49, on the dangers of "democratization"; and Wenn die Waffen schweigen, 94–98, where Huizinga regrets that modern societies which looked back to antiquity for inspiration did not pick up the notion of "isonomia" (equal application of the laws) rather than that of "demokratia."

89 The second number of the important monthly De Gids to appear after Huizinga joined the editorial board in 1916 contained a fragment of Emanuel Querido’s enormous "roman fleuve" about Jewish life in the poorer quarters of Amsterdam, with the indication "To be continued." On receiving his copy, Huizinga immediately wrote the journal’s secretary, the historian Herman Colenbrander, a close friend, proposing a change in editorial policy. "De Santeljano’s is horrible. It drips with a randy, greasy, Jewishness. This is precisely the sort of completely outdated literature that in my opinion we should avoid like hell" (Briefwisseling, 1:184 [letter of 2 February 1916]). Of course, the essential thing here is Huizinga’s rejection of old-fashioned literary realism. Still, the reference to "greasy Jewishness" is gratuitous at best. Such remarks were rare, however. (I am indebted to Wessel Krul, one of the editors of Huizinga’s Briefwisseling, for directing me to this passage, as well as for other information about Huizinga’s attitude toward Jews in an e-mail communication of 24 May 1996.) Huizinga’s contempt for racist theories and his rejection of modern anti-Semitism were total and unequivocal: see In the Shadow of Tomorrow, 83–91; Wenn die Waffen schweigen, 102–4.

90 Briefwisseling, 2:479 (letter 1046, Mantoux to Huizinga, 22 July 1933).

91 Ibid., 1:208 (23 October 1917).

92 "In this little book . . . an Ariadne-thread . . . leads through all the intricate labyrinth of the human record. The thread is ‘race’. . . . There is one and only one good race; it is that which [the author] variously describes as Aryan, ‘Nordic’, or ‘German’. . . . "But the ‘German race’ is only one half of the story. The presence of evil has also to be explained. This again is not difficult, for there is upon earth one and only one thoroughly bad race. It is the ‘Jewish race.’ And the second half of his book is devoted to explaining that all the ills to which civilisation is heir came through the Jewish race. The cleavage between Germans and Jews has existed from the beginning, for the Germans (or Nordics or Aryans) have always been tillers of the soil (though [the author] does not tell how he has ascertained this) and the Jews have always been nomads (though he omits the Scripture record of more than a thousand years of settled peasant life). It is well known that all peasants are good and useful members of society and that all pastoral and nomadic peoples are bad and harmful . . . . Dr. von Leers, with great consistency, devotes the second half of his booklet to the detestable qualities of the ‘Jewish race’ and the misdeeds and evils which they have inflicted upon humanity . . . .

Since Dr. von Leers has chosen to write in a manner which suggests that he is highly accomplished in the literature and technique of ethnology and that he has a
firsthand knowledge of physical anthropology, it is natural that we should examine his credentials to see to what extent he has studied the subjects of which he treats.

"Dr. von Leers is 34 years of age and took a degree in law..." [There follows an account of his career, his violent anti-Semitism, his role in the Division of Foreign Policy and Foreign Relations of the German Institute for Politics, and a brief account of his writings. Huxley also refers to an occasion, misdated 1931, when "at a meeting of the International Student Service at Leyden, the rector of the university asked him to leave the precincts of the university for having raised the charge of ritual murder against the Jews." Huxley concludes as follows:]

"(Von Leers's) book is but a type of many that are appearing to-day in Germany. They not only tell history falsely, but they undermine the historic sense of those who are fed exclusively on such intellectual diet." *History on a Racial Basis: by Johann von Leers*, foreword by Julian S. Huxley (London: Friends of Europe Publications no. 42, 1936), 3-6.

93 Hermann Rauschning, *The Revolution of Nihilism*, trans. E. W. Dickes (New York: Alliance Book Corporation—Longmans, Green, 1939 [orig. Ger., 1938]), xii, 53. The entire first chapter of Rauschning's book (3-58) is pertinent to the issue of von Leers's pamphlet. See Franz Neumann, *Bebemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1942); "German racism has never given serious consideration to the findings of [its] own anthropologists. If it is necessary to win over the Near East, Jews will not be Semites, and the name of Semites will be reserved for a friendly nation of Arabs" (p. 106).

94 *Briefwisselung*, 2:447 (letter 1008, 7 May 1933).

95 Ibid., 2:449, 455-56 (letters 1010 and 1017, Huizinga to Kaegi, 10 and 21 May 1933).

96 *Homo ludens*, 29, 235, 238, 25, 29, respectively. As early as 1918 Huizinga had related the "play element" closely to political life in his observations on politics in America in an essay in *De Gids* for July and August 1918; see *America: A Dutch Historian's Vision*, 53-54.

97 *Homo ludens*, 30.

98 Ibid., 233.

99 Ibid., 237.

100 *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, 82, 86, 87-88.


103 *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, 83, 89.

104 Ibid., 177.

105 *Homo ludens*, 238.

106 Ibid., 30.

107 *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, 167.

108 "It is the moral content of an action that makes it serious. When the combat has an ethical value it ceases to play. The way out of this vexing dilemma is closed only to those who deny the objective value and validity of ethical standards" (*Homo ludens*, 237-38). There follows a critique of Carl Schmitt's idea of the *Ernstfall*. Schmitt's
"point of view is that of the aggressor who is not bound by ethical considerations."
But it is "only through an ethos that transcends the friend-foe relationship and recognizes a higher goal than the gratification of the self, the group, or the nation," that a political society "will pass beyond the 'play' of war to true seriousness."


110 Ibid., 238.

111 *Briefwisseling*, 2:450 (letter 1011, Huizinga to the Board of Governors of Leiden University in response to their criticism of his action in the von Leers affair, 11 May 1933); see also 2:476 (letter 1042, Huizinga to the editors of the *Historische Zeitschrift*, 30 June 1933): "In matters concerning its honor and dignity, a university, the very essence of which is freedom, has other standards to apply than those that govern the relations of states."


113 *Jaarboek der rijksuniversiteit te Leiden 1933*, quoted in *Briefwisseling*, 2:488 (letter 1058, note 2, italics added).

**Appendix**

**Letter from Huizinga to the Netherlands Minister of Foreign Affairs, 12 April 1933**

(*Briefwisseling*, 2:432, letter 995, originally in Dutch)

Your Excellency:

In the name of the Executive Committee of the Academic Senate of the University of Leiden, I have the honor to inform you of the following events.

From the 7th to the 12th of this month a conference of English, German, and French delegates of the International Student Service was held here in the University Building for the purpose of discussing questions relative to the attitudes of students toward the state and society. The meeting was opened by the Rector Magnificus in his capacity as honorary president of the conference.

Yesterday it came to the notice of the Executive Committee of the Senate that the leader of the German delegation, Dr. J. von Leers, was alleged to be the author of a pamphlet entitled "Forderung der Stunde: Juden ‘raus,'" printed in March 1933, in which there is a passage about the so-called "ritual murder" of Christian children, and in which the conclusion contains an unequivocal encouragement to the reader to take this old popular belief seriously as an urgent danger even today and to take appropriate precautions against it.

The Executive Committee of the Senate considered it was its duty, for the honor of the university, to ascertain whether the sentences under discussion had indeed been published by Dr. von Leers and the latter was asked to so inform the rector and the Clerk of the Senate. With one insignificant reservation, Dr. von Leers fully acknowledged that he had written the aforementioned pamphlet. Thereupon, with the reservation already made by Dr. von Leers, the rector expressed to him the deep revulsion and contempt of the Academic Senate for such utterances, and asked him not to avail himself any further of the hospitality the university had extended to him.

Dr. von Leers followed this suggestion, which has led to the German delegation's declar-
ing that it can no longer take part in the conference, with the result that the latter broke up shortly before the planned conclusion.

We have recorded the conversation between the rector and Dr. von Leers in a protocol which can be communicated to Your Excellency should you so desire. Professor van Wijk is ready to provide without hesitation any desired information about anything concerning the conference itself.

The Rector Magnificus

Protocol drawn up by the Senate Executive Committee

(Briefwisseling, 2:433–34, letter 995, note 6, originally in Dutch)

On 11 April 1933 at five p.m., at the request of the rector, Dr. von Leers appeared before the latter and the Clerk of the Senate. The rector shook hands with him, introduced him to the clerk, invited him to be seated, and spoke approximately as follows:

"We have to report to the Senate concerning a piece of information which we received recently and according to which you are said to be the author of a pamphlet entitled 'Forderung der Stunde: Juden "raus."' This pamphlet is said to have appeared in March 1933 and to contain a passage in which the so-called ritual murder of Christian children is presented as a generally accepted fact and a still present danger. The pamphlet is said to close with the words 'Mütter, sorgt dafür dass die jüdische Gefahr für Eure armen Kinder aus dem Lande kommt!'" Dr. von Leers acknowledges having written the pamphlet, but states that it is in fact an earlier piece of writing. He admits that it was reprinted in March 1933. He admits the probability that the passage in question contains his own words and is not a quotation. When it is established, with that slight reservation, that Dr. von Leers is responsible for the statements in question, the rector communicates to him the deep revulsion and contempt of the Senate for such statements, in accordance with the plan of action determined in advance with the Executive Committee for that eventuality, and with the aforementioned reservation. He explains that the Senate reserves the right to take further measures and asks him no longer to avail himself of the hospitality extended to him by the university.

Dr. von Leers was visibly disconcerted by what he had been told. He first observed: "Is the rector aware that these opinions are shared by the Reichs Chancellor and many high-placed persons in Germany?" The rector answered that that had no bearing on the matter here. Dr. von Leers then invoked the enduring atmosphere of hatred that had been brought on by the events following the war, the loss of hundreds of friends and brothers, in the troubled conditions of the times. The rector remarked that even that did not in any way excuse him, adding in the further course of the discussion, as Dr. von Leers continued to justify his statements: "Surely you have a conscience?"

Dr. von Leers did everything possible to get the rector to withdraw what he had said—among other things, by insisting that he and his colleagues place particular value on understanding with the Netherlands—whereupon the rector noted that he must have observed in the last few days what a deep gulf now separates Western Europe and Germany. "We are doing our utmost to bridge it," says Dr. von Leers. In this connection, the rector also points out to him how all the sympathy Germany had regained among many people in the last ten years had been lost again because of the events of the past weeks.
Finally, the rector declared that it seemed pointless, and painful, for both parties to continue the conversation. He concluded with the following words: "I am very sorry that I cannot shake hands with you as we say good-bye. You may leave now." Whereupon Dr. von Leers left.

The whole conversation was conducted on the rector's side in a tone of deep indignation, sorrowful regret, and reproach; there was no anger or unfriendliness. It seemed to the rector and the clerk that Dr. v. L.'s mood can best be described as follows: as soon as he noticed that his attempt to make an impression by referring to the Reichs Chancellor had been unsuccessful, he was overcome by apprehension and disappointment. Our sense was that feelings of guilt had much to do with this. He maintained proper decorum throughout.

Letter from Huizinga to Fritz Saxl at the Warburg Institute, 31 October 1935

(Briefwisseling, 3:100, letter 1170, originally in German)

Dear Herr Saxl:

I long ago got rid of my file on the von Leers incident, and I do not recall if a complete account of it exists anywhere. So the simplest thing would be for me to recount the episode to you briefly.

1933, 7–12 April. A French-German-English Congress of the International Student Service is taking place on the premises of the university through the mediation of the Dutch section. On the 7th the congress is welcomed by the rector of the university. The leader of the German delegation is Dr. von Leers.

11 April. The rector receives the following information from one of the members of the Senate Executive Committee: Dr. v. L. is the author of a pamphlet in which, among other things, German mothers are warned to protect their children from the threat of ritual murder. The rector convokes the members of the Senate Committee, who agree with him that the author of such remarks does not belong in the University of Leiden.

The rector has Dr. v. L. invited to appear before him, and receives him in the presence of the Clerk of the Senate (the rector designate) in the Senate chamber. Dr. v. L. admits that he wrote the words in question. The entire conversation takes place in an atmosphere of decorum. Dr. v. L. behaves correctly, and seems dismayed when the rector informs him of his judgment of what he wrote. He excuses himself only by referring to the prevalent party hatred in Germany.

At the end of the conversation, as the representatives of the Senate had agreed beforehand, the rector explains that he cannot shake hands with Dr. v. L. as they take their leave of each other and asks him no longer to avail himself of the university's hospitality. This occurs in the afternoon between 5:00 and 5:30.

That evening, the German delegation declares its solidarity with its leader, and announces that for that reason it can no longer take part in meetings in the university. The conference thus breaks up a day earlier than planned. The delegations meanwhile undertake to maintain silence, as far as possible, about the case.

As early as 12 or 13 April the Netherlands government receives from the German ambassador in The Hague a request that it intervene against the rector on account of the incident. After consulting with the university Board of Governors, the Netherlands government
responded that it is not appropriate for the government to interfere with the freedom of the university in this matter. These last facts were, of course, made known to me only in confidence.

A few weeks later the first number of volume 148 of the *Historische Zeitschrift* appears, with the comment on p. 228.

I hope the above provides you with enough information.

I have not yet received the schedule of lectures. I take it the Cassirer Festschrift will soon appear.

I would be delighted sooner or later to renew my connections with the Warburg Institute.

With best wishes.

Your devoted

J. Huizinga

**Note**

1 It is quite clear from the pamphlet itself, a copy of which we have just now received, and in which the passage in question appears on pp. 18–19, that there is no question of the 'incriminated words' being a quotation.