

the underground camera

The Last Year
of the War
Amsterdam
1944–1945

René Kok
Erik Somers

W BOOKS

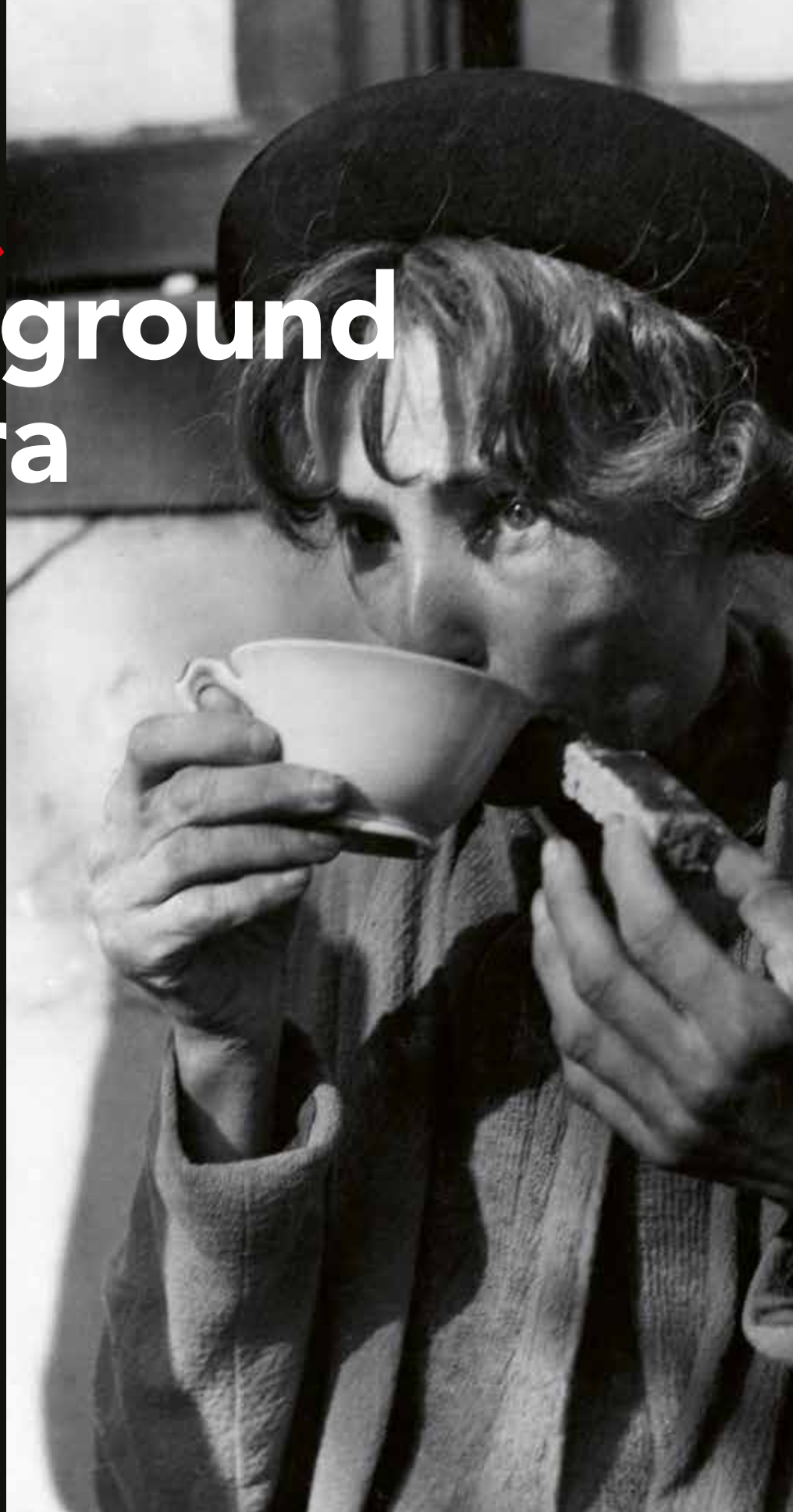




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Dam Square. May 7, 1945 A group of German soldiers in the small *Stützpunkt* on the square. Krijn Taconis took this picture standing near NUSS, an art supplies store on Paleisstraat. The area between Nieuwezijds Voorburgwal and Kalverstraat was a restricted zone, cordoned off with barbed wire barriers. Diagonally in front of Taconis, another photographer, possibly Carel Blazer, was also taking pictures. Blazer's own photographs confirm that he was shooting pictures at the same location that day.

Krijn Taconis, National Archives of Canada



Emmaplein. Spring 1945 Sentry at a German *Stützpunkt* in Amsterdam-Zuid, a southern district of the capital. Foreground: the shadow of Charles Breijer operating the Zeiss Ikonflex camera hidden in his bicycle bag. Charles Breijer, NIOD

Introduction

In the spring of 1945, a photographer covertly takes a snapshot of a German sentry at the *Stützpunkt* (fortified military position) on Emmaplein, near Amsterdam's Vondelpark. In this final year of the war, the Nazi occupiers had imposed a ban on all photography, tightening an earlier prohibition on documenting anything military, such as locations, equipment and vehicles. In this shot, photographer Charles Breijer's shadow inadvertently reveals his methods; he has leaned his bicycle against a lamppost and is rummaging in his bicycle bag which has two cut-out openings, one for the viewfinder and another for the camera lens. It takes him a while to adjust the focus, align the lens with the hole, and take the shot. Although the guard occasionally glances in Breijer's direction, he does not grow suspicious.¹

The resulting image captures the core mission of the photographers' collective that came to be known as The Underground Camera: to document the final year of the war. The collective was established by Tonny van Renterghem and Fritz Kahlenberg. Van Renterghem was a resistance leader; he was the Amsterdam-Zuid district chief of staff of the *Binnenlandse Strijdkrachten* [Domestic Armed Forces, a government-sanctioned union of resistance groups, hereafter referred to by its acronym, BS]. Fritz Kahlenberg was a German-Jewish cinematographer-in-hiding. In September 1944, they started approaching Amsterdam photographers who were known to be opposed to the Nazis and asked them to document life in the occupied city for posterity. Over

the next several months, the photographers captured images of the German occupiers, of resistance activities, and of daily life. As the war neared its end, their focus shifted to photographing the dire conditions of the Hunger Winter of 1944/45. The aim was to smuggle photos to London, where they would be used to impress upon the Allies the urgent need for famine relief.

During the war, the group operated under neutral names like 'Nederland Archief' and 'Centraal Beeldarchief' [Central Photo Archive] to avoid association with illegal activities. Just weeks after the liberation, in June 1945, a selection of their work—including the iconic image Breijer took from his bicycle bag—was displayed at an exhibition in Amsterdam bilingually titled *De Ondergedoken Camera / The Underground Camera*. This brought national fame to the collective, which subsequently adopted the name of the exhibition.²

The group's core consisted of young photographers who would achieve individual renown after the war, such as Emmy Andriess, Cas Oorthuys, Carel Blazer, Marius Meijboom, Ad Windig, Hans Sibbelee, and Krijn Taconis. These men, along with the others in the group, left behind an impressive collection of photographs now held in various archives.³ Their photos became increasingly well-known as they appeared in more and more publications, including the widely sold photobook *Amsterdam tijdens de hongervinter*



36 Michelangelostraat. Date unknown Tonny van Renterghem in his attic hideaway in Amsterdam, with a revolver within reach on the table. Fritz Kahlenberg, who lived in the room next door, unexpectedly opened the door and took this snapshot. Fritz Kahlenberg, NIOD

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the underground camera

36 Michelangelostraat in the district of Amsterdam-Zuid is one of a row of walk-ups built in the Amsterdam School/New Objectivity architectural style typical of this neighborhood. The buildings feature an exterior staircase leading to a landing that provides access to three apartments, each of which originally had spacious attic rooms. During the occupation, No. 36 became a hub of illegal activity and a safe haven for people in hiding. Fritz Kahlenberg and Tonny van Renterghem, the driving forces behind The Underground Camera, were among those who took shelter here. Kahlenberg even referred to the address as the initiative's headquarters.

The central figure managing operations at 36 Michelangelostraat was the young Claude Joseph (Bob) Uriot, born in 1917. At the beginning of the war, Uriot still lived with his parents on nearby Titiaanstraat. When the Nazis began rounding up Jews and sending them to Camp Westerbork in the summer of 1942, his parents took in Jewish people and hid them from the Germans. This inspired Bob to organize more hiding places elsewhere, and so he slowly began to expand his illegal activities. Although he had good connections in the highest circles of the resistance, he never formally joined a resistance group.

In 1943, Uriot was able to rent one of the attic rooms at 36 Michelangelostraat from the Viruly family, who lived on the fourth floor. The head of

the host family was Adriaan Viruly, who would later become a famous KLM pilot. Two years before Uriot moved in, Adriaan had fled to England and joined the British RAF. He would not return until after the war. His wife, Dina “Dicky” Maria Tobia Viruly-van Hattum, who remained behind with their three teenage children, did not hesitate to offer her attic space to people who needed to go into hiding.⁴⁹

In the attic, Bob Uriot encountered a familiar face: Tonny van Renterghem, who had lived in the same neighborhood as him and now occupied the adjacent attic room. Van Renterghem was the first person the Viruly family had given shelter to. From the beginning of the war, he had been active in the Ordedienst resistance group, primarily doing espionage. Due to the risk of being caught—Van Renterghem had already narrowly avoided arrest on one occasion—he left his parental home on nearby Gabriël Metsustraat and went underground.⁵⁰

In late November 1943, Uriot moved downstairs when he rented the newly vacant, spacious apartment on the second floor. The following summer, Ingeborg Wallheimer, a young Jewish filmmaker Uriot knew thanks to her espionage work, asked him to let her fiancé Fritz Kahlenberg hide in one of his apartment's attic rooms. Kahlenberg urgently needed to leave his temporary hiding place at the time. Uriot consented. Shortly after the war, Ingeborg and Fritz would get married.



Sloterweg. Early 1945 Men are taken away for forced labor and are compelled to bring their bikes and scant belongings with them. Several women accompany their husbands to say goodbye.

On January 5, 1945, the occupier ordered all men aged 16 to 40 to report for labor duty. Men were rounded up—particularly in the major Dutch cities—to help build German lines of defense in the central and eastern Netherlands. Lieuwe Faber, a medical doctor from Sloten, photographed rounded-up men as they passed by. Faber was an acquaintance of Fritz Kahlenberg's and had sheltered him several times in 1941 and 1942 when Kahlenberg decided to spend the night elsewhere than Michelangelostraat for fear of discovery.¹⁶⁰

L.A. Faber, NIOD



Dam Square. Early April 1945 **Bicycle raid in front of the Royal Palace.**

Several bicycle raids took place that month. The confiscated bicycles were to be used by freshly deployed German units in the city. Ad Windig took the photo from across the square. "German soldiers with rifles herded people together and directed them to where they had to hand over their bicycles. I took the photo from Peek & Cloppenburg [a clothing store at No. 20 Dam Square]. From there, you had an excellent view."⁶¹ Ad Windig, MAI

were frequently made from cigarette butts collected in the streets. Cas Oorthuys and Ad Windig blended into the crowd to discreetly photograph the small-scale black market trade. Hunger blurred moral boundaries, and food transports had to be protected from theft and looting. Bakery carts became the targets of desperate housewives and received police protection.

Ad Windig gained work experience during the early years of the war working for Emmy Andriess and Carel Blazer. In late 1944, Fritz Kahlenberg invited him to join The Underground Camera. In the months prior, Windig and his young colleague Krijn Taconis had already begun photographing the worsening situation in the capital. They had no specific aim in mind, however. “It all just went into a box,” Windig later said.¹⁷⁴ This changed when Kahlenberg visited his studio in the Prinsenhofsteeg, he recalled. “And then suddenly, like a bolt from

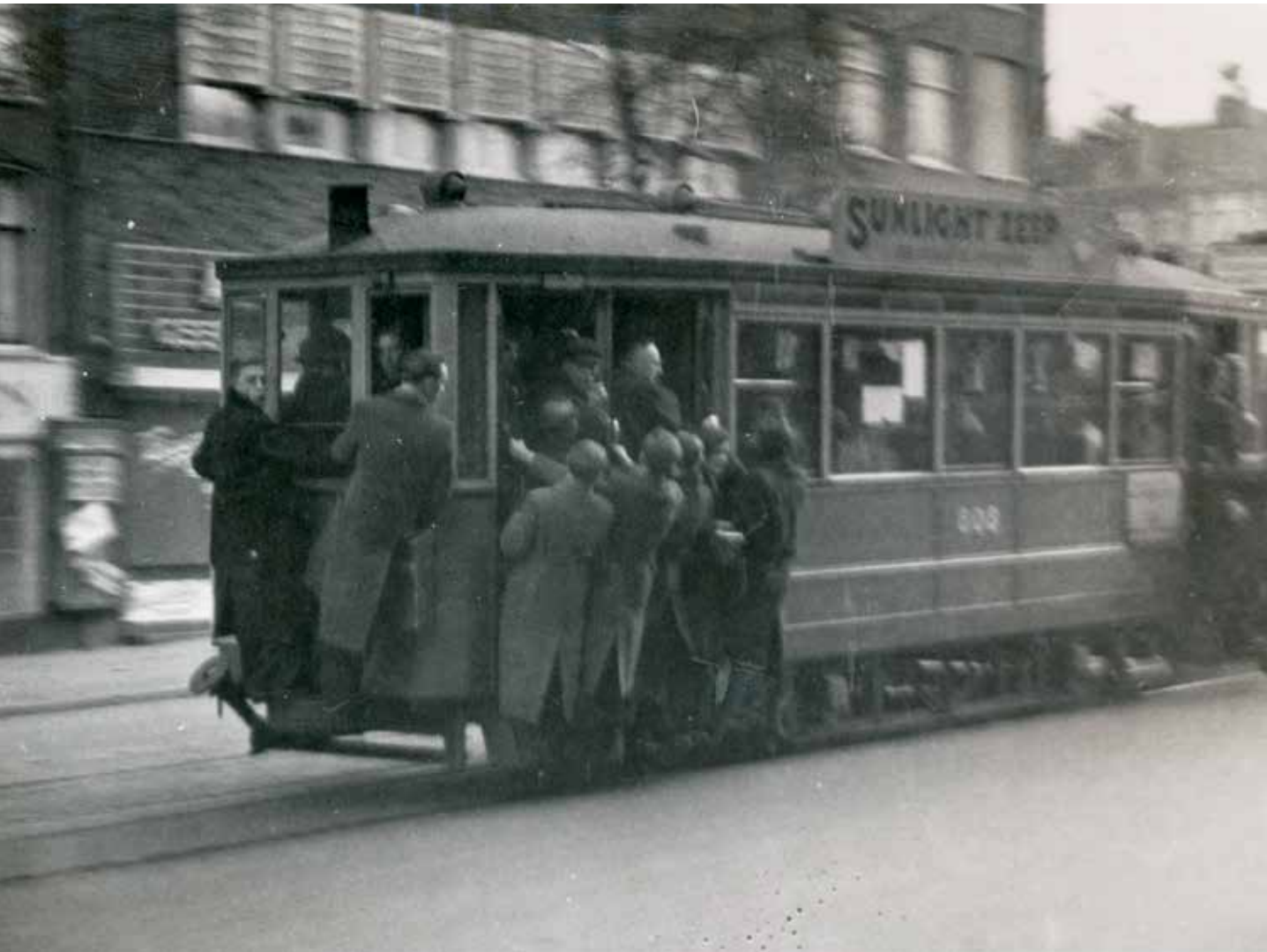
the blue, there was ‘Joop,’ the leader of our group ... Although not a photographer himself, he understood the challenges of our craft. He secured materials for us, reviewed our work with a knowledgeable eye, ensured we didn’t duplicate subjects, and fully informed us about the resistance and [impressed upon us] the importance of our work for the future.”¹⁷⁵

Windig carried out assignments from Kahlenberg and often ventured out with his Rolleiflex camera tucked under his coat. “On the days without specific assignments, you went out into the streets and photographed whatever you saw—things you might otherwise overlook.”¹⁷⁶ After the war, he was adamant that working for The Underground Camera had not been heroic. “No! It was simply a matter of doing what needed to be done. You saw something, and you felt it needed to be captured.”¹⁷⁷



Location and date unknown

People line up to buy fish. For a 1993 exhibition of his wartime photos, Charles Breijer described this photo as follows: “Suddenly the fishmonger had some fish to sell. A line of customers formed immediately, as fish was extremely scarce. Fishing vessels were only allowed to operate near the shore, and only under German navy escort. To serve customers quickly, this shopkeeper put the barrel of herring on the pavement out front.”¹⁷⁸
Charles Breijer, NIOD



Rozengracht. Fall 1944 **Overcrowded tram near Marnixstraat.** In September 1944, trams were the only form of public transportation in Amsterdam. The last three bus lines, which had been running on wood gas generators, were no longer able to leave the GVB depot. Trams became dangerously overcrowded, as this picture shows. With the introduction of "gasless hours," trams could only operate during rush hour. On October 9, 1944, public transportation came to a complete halt.
Ms. Meyer, NIOD



Location and date unknown A man carries wooden beams from a demolished building. Not everyone appreciated being photographed, especially not while engaged in illegal activity, which was widely regarded as immoral to boot. Cas Oorthuys, NFM

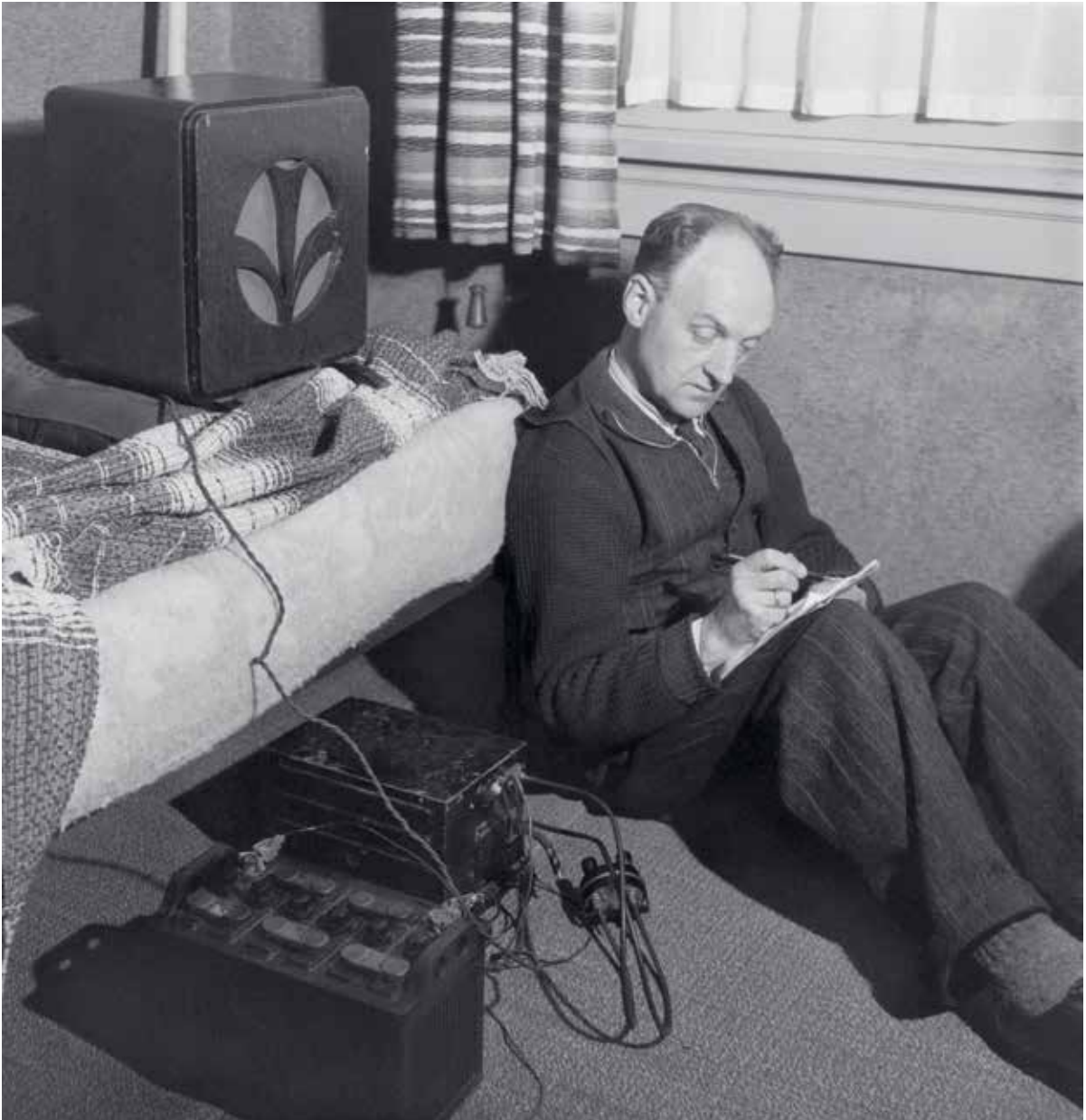


Weesperstraat, between Nieuwe Achtergracht and Nieuwe Prinsengracht. Date unknown **The sign reading “Joodsche Straat” [Jewish Street] placed here in 1941 has been removed. Most of Amsterdam’s Jews have been deported. A small number have gone into hiding. Cas Oorthuys, NFM**





Corner of Albert Cuypstraat and Eerste van der Helststraat. Early 1945 A crowd watches intently as Allied planes fly over Amsterdam on their way to bomb military targets and cities in Germany. Note that most of the spectators are older men. From January 1, 1945, men aged sixteen to forty had to report for forced labor, to build German defensive lines in the central and eastern parts of the Netherlands. Those who failed to do so risked arrest. Charles Breijer, NIOD



Hoofddorpweg. Winter 1944-1945 Stenographer Wim Stemmer listens to English radio at home. The radio was powered by a battery; the electricity grid was no longer operational. Stemmer transcribed the war news he heard for the illegal newspaper *De ACCU: Nederlandse Berichten van de B.B.C.* The paper was published from October 1944 to May 11, 1945, with a circulation of 1,000 to 4,000 copies, printed on Reiman's printing press on Elandsgracht. Charles Breijer, NFM

Location and date unknown A contact sheet of Breijer's photos. They show resistance members listening to the BBC and Radio Oranje, working for the underground press, and (bottom row) gathering and drying the "air newspaper" titled *De Vliegende Hollander* [The Flying Dutchman] which was dropped by the British RAF. Charles Breijer, NFM

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Location and date unknown **A man sits, exhausted, on the sidewalk. By February 1945, the famine was at its absolute worst.**
Cas Oorthuys, NFM

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the hunger winter

In January 1945, the situation in the western part of the Netherlands worsened by the day. A long and severe frost set in. Fuel became scarcer and more expensive than ever while the supply of food ground to a halt. Public life came to a halt. Hunger descended into outright starvation. Large numbers of city dwellers went to the countryside in search of food.

Cas Oorthuys and Charles Breijer independently documented scenes along the Hemweg, on the outskirts of Amsterdam. They took pictures of women transporting bags and sacks of food on bicycles without tires, or in baby strollers. Other Underground Camera photographers captured images of Amsterdam residents collapsing in the street from exhaustion. As people were driven to despair, social norms and values eroded. The temptation to steal food and firewood became ever harder to resist. For the poorest, who could not even afford rationed foods, begging was often the only option. Children dressed in tattered clothing and with little more than scraps of shoes on their feet roamed the streets carrying a small cooking pot and a spoon. They searched for leftovers from soup kitchens or made their way to distribution points in schools where supplementary meals were provided.

Photographs of the dire situation in Amsterdam were smuggled out of Amsterdam to the liberated south of the country, and from there, on to London. Particularly the harrowing photos of starving and dying babies taken by D. de Boer Jr. were meant to spur the Dutch government-in-exile into action to relieve the emergency in the capital and other western cities. Fritz Kahlenberg commented on

this: “They were absolutely necessary to show the government in London how dire the situation was, and how high the death toll. Initially, the Allies didn’t believe it. Only when they received photos through underground channels were they convinced that something had to be done. That led to the food drops. Shortly after the liberation, I met Gerard Rutten, Queen Wilhelmina’s aide-de-camp—who I’d known since before the war—and he told me it was our photos that convinced the Allies of the desperate situation in Amsterdam.”²⁰⁶

The photographs were transferred to microfilm and cleverly hidden in places like the battery compartment of a flashlight. It was Carla Gosschalk, a young woman who maintained courier services to the liberated south, who was entrusted with getting the Underground Camera photos to London. Another person who was involved in this effort was Antoine Heijmans, who worked for the GDN intelligence network (see Chapter 2) and who had worked with Carla Gosschalk on other resistance missions.²⁰⁷ It is unclear how many Underground Camera photos ultimately reached the Dutch government in London, but it must have been dozens. Journalist A. den Doolaard of Radio Oranje probably based his detailed reports about the Amsterdam Zuiderkerk being used as an emergency morgue on shocking photos secretly taken by Cas Oorthuys in February 1945.²⁰⁸

Renowned photographer Emmy Andriessse played a vital role in documenting the Hunger Winter. As a Jew, she had been prohibited from practicing her profession following the Journalists Decree of May 1941. In 1943, she went into hiding. She later received

colophon

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About the authors

René Kok and Erik Somers are historians who have published extensively on the history of World War II and the history of photography. In addition, they have organized various exhibitions and designed many museum displays. Both are employed as researchers at NIOD.

Exhibition

Publication of this book coincides with *The Underground Camera*, an exhibition at Foam Amsterdam from May 1 to September 1, 2025. The exhibition was designed by Hripsimé Visser, former photography curator at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam; Claartje van Dijk, curator at Foam; and exhibition designer Jeroen de Vries, in collaboration with NIOD.

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May, 1945. Illegal photography

Charles Breijer, NFM

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