

Kindled by Catastrophe: Fire Disasters and Cultural Representations of Solidarity in the Late Dutch Republic

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Abstract

Fire disasters were a major threat to eighteenth-century villages and towns. Following such conflagrations, writers, artists, and publishers were eager to represent the disaster in great detail. Printed poems and pamphlets did not only describe the flames' destruction, but also put great emphasis on the solidarity during and after the catastrophe. The risks of looting and social disorder were acknowledged by authors, but received little attention overall. Instead, poets and writers focused on acts of care and charity in four phases of fire disaster management: firefighting, immediate relief, collecting for reconstruction, and remembrance. While the first two phases were characterised by local and regional solidarity, the latter two could encompass – in the imagination of the authors – the whole Dutch nation. Writers appealed to faith and nationhood to convince people to make charitable donations. Afterwards, they celebrated and remembered the generosity of various communities. This article concludes that authors appropriated destroyed lives and buildings to construct identities and solidarity.

Keywords: solidarity, disasters, fires, identity, charity

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In the night of 3 October 1766, the sky above the city of Leiden was lit by flames. Between three and four o'clock in the morning fire broke out in a shop packed with brushes and other wooden products.¹ The fire grew quickly and spread to the adjacent buildings. Within a couple of hours, several houses and shops had burned to the ground. Citizens excavated the bodies of a father and his three children from under the debris. According to an anonymous reporter, the victims were 'entirely unrecognisable'.² The traumatic event also rendered parts of the city unrecognisable, both as a spatial environment and as a community. Normally, the third of October was a festive day on which the citizens of Leiden commemorated the liberation of the town after the famous siege during the Dutch Revolt. However, on that day in 1766, the city mourned its losses.

Two anonymous writers reflected upon the fire disaster. The first published a fifteen-page pamphlet shortly after a town-wide collection had been held, the *Korte beschrijving der ysselyke brand voorgevallen binnen Leyden op den 3. October des Jaers 1766* (Short description of the awful fire that occurred in Leiden on 3 October of the year 1766). The second wrote an extensive commemoration book, which was published a year after the catastrophe as *Afbeeldingen van de Hoogstraat en Vischbrugge te Leyden, met de veranderingen, veroorzaekt door den brand, op den 3. October des jaers 1766* (Images of the Hoogstraat and Visbrug at Leiden, with the changes caused by the fire of 3 October 1766).³ In addition to a description of the fire disaster, this book included nine poems and four large prints. The latter depicted the buildings before, during, and after the fire

1 *Korte beschrijving*, 4-5. Research for this article was funded by nwo (Dutch Research Council) and carried out with a VICI grant for the research project *Dealing with Disasters. The Shaping of Local and National Identities in the Netherlands, 1421-1890* (project no. 277-69-002) under the direction of Lotte Jensen. For more information, see www.dealingwithdisasters.nl. I am grateful for the invaluable advice from Lotte Jensen, Joost Rosendaal, Hanneke van Asperen, Marieke van Egeraat, Fons Meijer, Lilian Nijhuis, Raingard Esser, the anonymous reviewers, and the editors.

2 *Korte beschrijving*, 7.

3 *Korte beschrijving; Afbeeldingen*.



Fig. 1 Noach van der Meer (II), Houses at the Visbrug in Leiden, prior to the fire of 1766, 1767, etching and engraving, 18,1 x 26,1 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

(figs. 1-3).⁴ Both pamphlet and book described the course of the fire meticulously, praising the exemplary behaviour of the inhabitants of Leiden during and after the disaster. The citizens were depicted as displaying both loyalty towards and solidarity with their fellow townspeople.

This article demonstrates that the pamphlet and book published in Leiden fit a wider pattern of publications which discussed the behaviour of victims and neighbours during and in the wake of fire disasters in the late Dutch Republic (c. 1750-1795). Their authors, I argue, emphasised solidarity. Instead of collective frenzy and social collapse, authors described the continuation of social order. Furthermore, in some cases the writers encouraged their readers to show solidarity with the victims of fire disasters.

Scholars within the emerging field of historical disaster research often take a socio-economic approach when investigating the resilience and vulnerability of communities in the past.⁵ More recently, however, historians have paid increasing attention to the culture of disasters, seeking to analyse the narratives, motifs, and religious interpretations that occurred

4 In 1768, a fire broke out in Leiden's shelter for the poor and the orphans. The publisher of the commemorative book of 1766, C. van Hoogeveen, published an eight-page addition to the book that reported on the most recent events. For the sake of brevity, I do not discuss this source: *Beschryving en afbeelding*.

5 Bavel et al., *Disasters and History*; Soens, 'Resilient Societies'; Dyer, 'Recovering'.



Fig. 2 Noach van der Meer (II), Fire at the Visbrug in Leiden, 1767, etching and engraving, 18 x 26,2 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

in representations of floods, fires, and earthquakes.⁶ Various scholars have also emphasised that these sources were devised to evoke pity for victims in their readers.⁷ In this article, I follow a new strand of literature that investigates how representations of disasters appealed to national, local, and religious identities.⁸ My analysis shows that in eighteenth-century representations of fire disasters, social identities and solidarity with victims were connected.

One could explain the emphasis on solidarity by arguing that the sources merely reflected what happened during a disaster. Modern-day sociological disaster research has established that in the majority of catastrophic situations, victims are kind to other victims.⁹ In the direct aftermath of a disaster, mutual aid temporarily crosses the boundaries of class, religion, and ethnicity in a generous 'community of sufferers'.¹⁰ However,

6 Sundberg, 'Claiming'; Esser, 'Ofter Gheen Water'; Rohr, 'Writing'; Allemeyer, 'Profane Hazard'; Vermij, *Thinking*; Hanska, *Strategies*; Behringer, *A Cultural History*, chap. 4; Hardwick and Stephens, 'Acts of God'.

7 Meijer Drees, "'Providential Discourse' Reconsidered", 118; Asperen, 'Catastrophes on Stage', 106; Morgan, 'The Representation'; Cave, 'Bienfaisance'; Duiveman, 'Praying', 549-550.

8 Jensen, 'Floods'; Jensen, 'Disaster upon disaster', 64-69; Asperen, 'Catastrophes on Stage'; Asperen, 'Disaster and Discord'; Meijer, 'Vorst'; Egeraat, 'Seer groot gerught', 48-51.

9 Drury, Cocking, and Reicher, 'Everyone for Themselves?'; Oliver-Smith, 'The Brotherhood'; Barton, *Communities*; Wallace, *Tornado*.

10 Fritz, *Disasters and Mental Health*, 28-30. This does not happen in all situations though: Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*, 205-209.



Fig. 3 Noach van der Meer (II), Rebuilt houses at the Visbrug in Leiden, after the fire of 1766, 1767, etching and engraving, 17,7 cm x 25,7 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

the media representation of disasters does not necessarily reflect social reality.¹¹ Journalists, writers, and artists select and shape the stories they want to tell about human behaviour in catastrophes. In the seventeenth century, for instance, printmakers were eager to depict fictional conflagration scenes that emphasised collective frenzy and disorder.¹²

The literary scholar Isak Winkel Holm has argued that representations of disasters manifest a society's 'social imaginaries': the ways people imagine their life together.¹³ He contends that cultural representations of disasters provide their audiences an 'understanding of the vulnerability or resilience of the social order'.¹⁴ In this article, I seek to expand upon Winkel Holm's work. As I will show, some representations of fire disasters did appeal to Enlightenment-inspired values and an emerging national identity. Authors drew on common discourses and ideas on how people did or should live together. Because of that, their publications show us social imaginaries. Nonetheless, authors did not merely replicate existing discourses, but appropriated them for their own goals and agendas.

11 Tierney, Bevc, and Kuligowski, 'Metaphors Matter'.

12 Packer, 'Rising', 173-174.

13 Holm, 'The Cultural Analysis', 21-23. Inspired by Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23-25.

14 Holm, 'The Cultural Analysis', 22.

Representations of disasters had to shape the actions, identities, and solidarity of individuals and groups.

Throughout this article, the term ‘solidarity’ refers to acts of aid among those who identify with one another, especially in the situation of catastrophe.¹⁵ Identification is a crucial element of solidarity: it means a person is willing to distribute time, energy, and resources with those in need because of a perceived shared identity.¹⁶ In the sources, authors describe and address multiple identifications, including spatial proximity, religion, nation, or specific inter-urban connections. These identifications can be conceptualised as concentric circles stretching out from an individual, enveloping other people for whom the individual is drawn to care on the basis of some commonality.¹⁷ Social scientists still debate to what degree identity informs an individual’s ability to carry out acts of altruism. People are at least far more willing to share with those with whom they have certain aspects in common.¹⁸ Similar patterns have been observed for the early modern period, and charitable organisations appealed to group identities to evoke generosity among potential benefactors at the time.¹⁹

This article analyses representations of specific types of solidarity that emerged during and in the wake of a fire disaster. It is based on an analysis of printed texts in various genres: poems, pamphlets, printed sermons, newspaper reports, and a commemoration book. There is no indication that the proceeds of any of the publications themselves were collected for charity purposes, as would become common practice in the nineteenth century.²⁰ This article does not address another important communal way of dealing with conflagrations that happened *before* such an event took place: fire prevention.²¹ The large number of eighteenth-century fire ordinances indicates that city officials and citizens did everything in their power to reduce risks.²² However, fire prevention was hardly discussed by the authors of pamphlets and other printed texts about conflagrations.

The focus of this article is on the representations of fires in the late Dutch Republic, more specifically the fires in Strijen (1759), Leiden (1766 and 1776), Hilversum (1766), Heukelum (1772), Kolhorn (1788), Amstelveen (1792), and Broek op Langedijk (1793). These fires all elicited a printed publication, and sometimes more, as in the case of Leiden and Hilversum. Most of the fire disasters discussed in this article occurred in the western part of the Dutch Republic. It is likely that there are more printed sources on conflagrations from this region because it was more densely populated and therefore experienced fire disasters more frequently. Yet it is remarkable that there seem to be no printed publications

15 For this definition and its theoretical underpinning, see Duiveman, ‘Praying’, 547.

16 This premise is based on the Social Identity Theory in psychology. For more on this theory and its explanatory power with regard to charitable donations, see Chapman, Masser, and Louis, ‘Identity Motives’.

17 Inspired by Nussbaum, ‘Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism’, 9.

18 Chapman, Masser, and Louis, ‘Identity Motives’; Werther, ‘Help Yourself’, 11–12.

19 Heerma van Voss and Leeuwen, ‘Charity’, 188; Boersma, *Noodhulp zonder natiestaat*, 289–291.

20 Mathijssen, *De gemaskerde eeuw*, 222–226.

21 For fire prevention measures, see Langenhuyzen, ‘Zekerheid’, 203–207. Janna Coomans has recently received a grant from the Dutch Research Council (NWO) to investigate fire prevention in early modern Dutch cities.

22 Based on a search query in the Short Title Catalogue Netherlands (STCN) with the words ‘brand’, ‘brandt’, ‘vuur’, and ‘vyer’.

on major conflagrations in the eastern provinces, such as the fire that burned down more than seventy buildings in the town of Enschede in 1750, or the fire that destroyed nearly the entire village of Beilen in Drenthe five years later.²³ The absence of publications on these disasters may have to do with the economics of publishing. In the province of Holland, there were more readers and more publishers. Demand and supply were high for pamphlets and other printed material on fire disasters that occurred in the region. This article first discusses the risks of fire disasters in the Dutch Republic and the threat of social disorder. Subsequent sections will analyse the representations of four phases of fire disaster management: firefighting, immediate relief, reconstruction, and remembrance. I argue that in their depictions of all these phases, writers and poets emphasised solidarity over disorder.

Fire Disasters and Social Disorder

In a 1772 issue of the spectatorial periodical *Naamlooziana* on the fire of the city theatre in Amsterdam, two fictional characters discussed the threat of conflagrations for town dwellers. The character named 'A' argued that floods were far worse than urban fires, because they inundated large sections of land and were inescapable. Fires, on the contrary, burned down 'only one building, or a series of houses, or – in the worst case – a considerable section of a village or city'.²⁴ Character 'B' argued that the urban fire should still be regarded as 'one of the worst catastrophes' that 'often devours in a few hours the labour and the sweat of many years'.²⁵ The suddenness and unpredictability of conflagrations were elements that, according to B, qualified them as belonging to a particularly dangerous category of catastrophes. One of the reasons why fire was such a dreaded natural phenomenon was its omnipresence in early modern life. Fire was indispensable for light, heating, cooking, and industry. The smallest of accidents could set off a disastrous chain reaction. Fires spread quickly through the tightly built neighbourhoods, especially during dry summers.²⁶ B continued: 'In all countries, one has the bitterest marks, the striking memories of [fires], and this Republic has not been free from them either.'²⁷ What followed was a lengthy discussion of all the major fires that had struck the city of Amsterdam, stretching back more than three centuries.²⁸

Early modern conflagrations did not just destroy buildings, but also put considerable pressure on the social fabric of urban societies.²⁹ Mutual acts of kindness, care, and trust

23 Buisman, *Duizend jaar*, vi, 111; *Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant*, 26 May 1750. See also Boersma, *Noodhulp zonder natiestaat*, chap. 8.

24 Ockers, *De naamlooziana*, 116: 'maar een enkel Gebouw, of eene reeks Huizen of op het hoogst genomen een goed gedeelte van een Dorp of Stad'. I am grateful to Hanneke van Asperen for drawing my attention to this source.

25 Ockers, *De naamlooziana*, 116: 'niet zelden in eenige weinige uren, den arbeid en het zweet veeler jaaren, in eenen verteerd'.

26 Garrioch, 'Towards a Fire History', 4-6; Zwierlein, *Der gezähmte Prometheus*, 109.

27 Ockers, *De naamlooziana*, 116: 'In alle Landen heeft men er de bitterste merktékenen, de treffendste herineringen van, en deeze Republyk heeft er zo min vry van geweest als eenige andere.'

28 Ockers, *De naamlooziana*, 117-120.

29 Friedrichs, *The Early Modern City*, 277.

underpinned the social lives of cities and villages. Lacking a centralised, national welfare system, poor relief and the care for the elderly and the sick was organised by neighbours, churches, and semi-public charitable institutions.³⁰ Public services such as policing and firefighting were also performed by citizens and inhabitants, under the supervision or with the assistance of public officials.³¹ Neighbours assisted in each other's rites of passage like childbirth, death, and marriage.³² The scenario in which the social fabric crumbled alongside the fabric of the burning buildings would be deeply worrying.

The greatest danger was that the social ties threatened by such conflagrations were simultaneously the mechanism through which villagers and townspeople also had to cope with fire disasters. Blazes could only be contained if neighbours worked together during an outbreak. To survive the aftermath, victims depended on the generosity of friends, family, and the community for their sustenance and the reconstruction of their house – fire insurance was relatively rare in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic.³³ Conflagrations thus tested the very foundations on which society was built.

While the fear of a collapse of the social order following a fire must have been very real, few sources mention anti-social behaviour. Looting was a concern of some authors. In a sermon preached two weeks after the fire of Kolhorn in 1788, the Reformed local minister Joan Michaël Posthumus condemned the 'monsters' who were 'inhumane enough, to steal and rob a large part of your [the victims'] salvaged goods'.³⁴ Similar remarks can be found in a sermon by the Reformed minister Hermanus van Reverhorst. After a fire destroyed a large part of the village of Strijen in 1759, Van Reverhorst preached to the affected congregation. In his printed exhortation, he also discussed the topic of looting. 'As usually happens in these types of events, there will also have been sinful people, [...] THIEVES, who have robbed their neighbours' possessions', he claimed.³⁵ Van Reverhorst urged these sinners to return these ill-gotten gains to their rightful owners. His use of the phrase 'as usually happens' suggests that such behaviour was not uncommon, and perhaps even expected following such disasters.

The minister in Strijen argued that God would punish those who stole.³⁶ Local authorities, however, did not only rely on the prospect of divine punishment providing a suitable deterrence. Just like the minister, city governments expected the worst of some of their inhabitants. After a small fire in Leiden in 1776, furniture and other goods saved from the wrath of the conflagration were temporarily stored in a church. The church was then closed up and kept locked, even through to the following Sunday, with one pamphlet claiming this was a precaution to prevent thieves from stealing the stored goods.³⁷ This

30 Heerma van Voss and Leeuwen, 'Charity', 176-177.

31 Prak, 'Burghers into Citizens', 406.

32 Bogaers, 'Geleund'; Roodenburg, 'Naar een etnografie', 239.

33 Gales and Van Gerwen, *Sporen*, 61-65; Langenhuyzen, 'Zekerheid', 215-220.

34 Posthumus, *Twee boet-predikaatzien*, 15, 31.

35 Reverhorst, *Stryen door het vyer verteert*, 29: 'Maar, gelyk het, by zulk eene gelegenheid, doorgaans toe gaat, zullen er ook wel zondige menschen geweest zyn, die godloosheid bedreven hebben, DIEVEN, die het goed van hunnen naasten ontroven.'

36 Reverhorst, *Stryen door het vyer verteert*, 30.

37 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 12.

was not the first time that such measures had been taken. A decade previously, members of the Leiden council reacted to a similar fire by ordering militia members to guard the ruins for three days in anticipation of looting.³⁸ Nonetheless, these references to looting or the perceived risk thereof are negligible in comparison to the elaborate depictions of bravery and generosity that pervade the post-conflagration publications. Anti-social behaviour is only mentioned in passing.

Another aspect made conspicuous by its absence from fire disaster representations is the search for the person responsible for the outbreak. Following the fire in Heukelum, a small town in Gelre, one anonymous author criticised the tendency of people to search for an individual who could be held responsible for the disaster.³⁹ In his sermon, minister Van Reverhorst noted that the incautious wife of a carpenter was commonly blamed for the conflagration in Strijen, but he reminded his congregation that they themselves were responsible: the real reason for the catastrophe was their collective sinfulness.⁴⁰ In the case of the 1776 fire in Leiden, a writer argued that knowing who had accidentally started the fire would only 'make general feelings increasingly bitter'.⁴¹ Authors seemed to have been concerned about the disharmony that the search for a scapegoat could evoke in communities.

In literary depictions of eighteenth-century floods, writers and poets imagined the suffering of the victims while drawing from clichés.⁴² In comparison, the texts on fire disasters seem to be more factual. There are no reasons to seriously doubt the truth in the authors' descriptions. However, it is clear that these writers were highly selective when representing the behaviour of victims and neighbours in their poems, pamphlets, and sermons. Instead of looting and blame, they wrote about solidarity.

Firefighting

Before the emergence of professional fire brigades, responsibility for firefighting was shared by the inhabitants of early modern cities and villages.⁴³ While the inventions of Jan and Nicolaas van der Heyden considerably improved firefighting technology and fire hoses gradually replaced buckets in the seventeenth century, the act of extinguishing a fire was still very labour-intensive.⁴⁴ Elaborate ordinances stipulated the procedures by which citizens had to gather and work together when confronted with a fire. In Leiden, citizens on duty were fined when they did not show up following the trumpet calls that announced a fire emergency.⁴⁵ If there were not enough people to man the hoses, the designated fire hose master was allowed to 'pressure' bystanders to assist in the firefighting.⁴⁶

38 *Afbeeldingen*, 20-21.

39 *Omstandige brieven*, 8-9.

40 Reverhorst, *Stryen door het vyer verteert*, 24, 31.

41 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 7: 'om de gemoederen meer en meer verbitterd te maaken'.

42 Jensen, 'Dichtende verslaggevers'.

43 Allemeyer, 'Profane Hazard', 152-153; Frank, 'Der rote Hahn', 242-244; Roberts, 'Agencies', 15.

44 On the improvement of firefighting technology, see Kubetsky, 'Jan van der Heyden'; Wildeboer, 'De ontwikkeling'.

45 *Generale brand-keure*, 44-45.

46 *Generale brand-keure*, 46.

In a pamphlet describing the 1776 Leiden fire, however, there was no reference to these ordinances, possible fines, or pressure to engage. On the contrary, the anonymous author emphasised how the citizens executed 'their duty [...] diligently and industriously'.⁴⁷ The author was eager to stress that the people who helped fighting the fire did not do so because they were legally obliged, but rather because they were morally compelled. In Holland, the writer asserted, there was not one city in which 'the care, the helpfulness, and the compassion' for one another was more present than in 'my Leiden', especially 'in times of confusion and threat'.⁴⁸ It was an observation 'which this incident could prove again' to be true, he or she concluded. As such, the incident was appropriated by the author to tell a larger story about the city of Leiden and its citizenry: their exemplary behaviour defined the community in a manner that stretched far beyond that unfortunate day in 1776.

The pamphlet consisted of a report on the events in prose and three poems, two of which praised specific groups that helped to fight the fire: the city council and students. That students assisted in the firefighting is notable, as they made up a mere two percent of the total population of Leiden and constituted a distinctive subculture within the city walls.⁴⁹ Their lifestyles and predominantly elite backgrounds contrasted with the lives of the local craftsmen and merchants.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, the written ode to the students worked to integrate the group within the story of the solidary urban community. The students' voluntary help, the writer contended, showed their noble character and loyalty to the city.⁵¹ It is likely that the author had some relation to the academic community in Leiden. Regardless of the author's personal reasons, the pamphlet and poems highlighted the unity and resilience of the urban community. Working together, the inhabitants of Leiden could extinguish the fire relatively quickly. 'Besides Divine Providence', the author wrote, it was thanks to the 'tireless wakefulness, unremitting diligence, meticulous labour, and loyal care of the citizens' that 'the furious flame was extinguished within four hours'.⁵² It was, the author contended, the solidarity shown by the Leiden's inhabitants that spared the city from a far grimmer fate.

The possible results of a lack of solidarity could be seen in the villages of Heukelum, Kolhorn, and Amstelveen, which were struck by fire disasters in 1772, 1788, and 1792, respectively. The fire of Kolhorn was depicted in two published sermons, while the fire of Heukelum was described in great detail by two pamphlets.⁵³ The writer Lieve van Ollefen discussed the fire in Amstelveen at length in an issue of the popular topographical book series *De Nederlandsche stad- en dorpsbeschrijver* (The Dutch town and village descriptor,

47 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 9: 'hun plicht [...] naarstig en vlytig behartigen'.

48 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 9: 'de zorg, de behulpzaamheid en het mededoogen', 'in tyden van verlegenheid en gevaar'.

49 Zoeteman, *De studentenpopulatie*, 349.

50 Zoeteman, *De studentenpopulatie*, 291.

51 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 20.

52 *Korte en zakelyke beschryving*, 11: 'Men heeft naast de Goddelyke Voorzienigheid het aan de onvermoeide wakkerheid, noeste vlyt, onverveelende arbeid en getrouwe zorg der Burgeren te danken, dat de woedende vlam binnen de tyd van vier uren gefluit was.' For the notion of providence in early modern interpretations of fire disasters, see Buisman, *Tussen vroomheid*, I, chap. 4; Roberts, 'Agencies'; Frank, 'Der rote Hahn', 255, 237; Allemeyer, 'Profane Hazard'; Zwierlein, *Der gezähmte Prometheus*, 120-135; Lange, 'Die Katastrophe', 26-29.

53 Posthumus and Van der Horst, *Twee boet-predikaatzien; Omstandige brieve; Nadere brieve*.

1791-1811). His description of the fire was distributed quickly after the disaster, and the text would later on be incorporated in volume three of his book series. Unlike the fire at Leiden, the efforts of the inhabitants of Heukelum, Kolhorn, and Amstelveen were insufficient to prevent disasters. The villagers had to rely on manpower and equipment from outside.

When the fire devoured buildings in Amstelveen, Van Ollefen writes, ‘the grim sound of the alarm clock’ at night could be heard in nearby villages and towns.⁵⁴ The inhabitants of the neighbouring village of Ouderkerk aan de Amstel rushed to Amstelveen to help with the firefighting. The villagers from Overtoom even drove two horse-drawn fire engines towards the disaster site. It did not make any difference, because they arrived too late. Nonetheless, Van Ollefen praised their diligence.⁵⁵ Large parts of the village burned down, but this, the author emphasised, was despite the solidarity from the neighbouring villages.

In the preface of a book with two sermons on the fire in Kolhorn, minister Posthumus included a report from a friend who experienced the conflagration. ‘We cannot overstate the diligence of the neighbouring villages’, wrote his informant, ‘who arrived as soon as possible with their firehoses and men [...], who made the most tireless attempts, even putting their lives in danger to stop the advancing flames, or to assist the unfortunate residents in saving and salvaging their goods in this terrible fire.’⁵⁶ The fishing village of Kolhorn lacked men to hold the firehoses, the author claimed, because many villagers were at sea.⁵⁷ The solidarity from outside was therefore more than welcome. Unfortunately, it could not prevent the destruction of twenty-five houses, a school, and two churches.

More successful was the regional emergency response during the fire disaster in Heukelum. The inhabitants from Leerdam, Asperen, and Beesd brought their fire engines to the burning city, an anonymous writer reported, and ‘at night even one from Gorinchem arrived’ – quite a journey, given that Gorinchem and Heukelum are approximately ten kilometres apart.⁵⁸ The fire engines and the manpower that were pulled from various locations prevented the worst from happening. ‘Besides God, it is due to the loyalty and diligence of the working people, [...] that not the whole city has been transformed into a ruin’, asserted the anonymous writer.⁵⁹ He stressed that regional solidarity had extinguished the fire. The author in particular praised the efforts of the glass blowers from Leerdam, a town famous for its glass industry. As fire experts, glass blowers were ‘used to what was for us the unbearable heat of the fire’, the writer claimed.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the craftsmen could prevent the fire from taking a straw roof of a smith’s workshop. This roof

54 Ollefen, *Naauwkeurig verslag*, 2.

55 Ollefen, *Naauwkeurig verslag*, 2-3.

56 Posthumus, *Twee boet-predikaatzien*, x: Wy kunnen niet genoeg erkennen den yver van onze nabuurige Dorpen, die zo spoedigh als mogelyk was, met hunne Brandspuiten en Manschappen toevloeden [...] die de overmoedste poogingen, zelfs met levensgevaar, aanwendeden, om den voortgang der vlammen te stuiten, of de ongelukkige Ingezetenen bystand the bieden in het redden en bergen van hunne Goederen in deze schrikkelijken Brand.’

57 Posthumus, *Twee boet-predikaatzien*, ix.

58 *Omstandige brief*, 7-8.

59 *Omstandige brief*, 7-8: ‘Naast God moet het aan de getrouheid en yver van de arbeidende lieden, [...] dank geweeten worden, dat niet de geheele Stad in eenen puinhoop verkeerd is geworden.’

60 *Omstandige brief*, 8: ‘die in hunne blaazery eenen voor ons ondraaglyken vuur-gloed gewoon’.

could have fuelled the fire considerably. The help of experts from outside the town of Heukelum was thus presented as a crucial factor in the relatively favourable outcome.

In the depictions of the firefighting in Leiden, Amstelveen, Kolhorn, and Heukelum, the authors stressed the local and regional solidarity during this phase of emergency management. In Leiden, urban solidarity limited the blaze of 1776 to just one building. In Amstelveen, Kolhorn, and Heukelum, inhabitants of neighbouring villages and towns rushed to aid the affected villagers, with varying degrees of success. In the representations, manifestations of local and regional solidarity were built on the identification of proximity. Aid efforts during the firefighting phase could of course only be organised in walking distance. Authors emphasised that people in the proximity of the affected area were driven by a sense of responsibility.

Immediate relief

The victims' need for help did not end when the fire was extinguished. The now homeless inhabitants of towns and villages had to be lodged and fed. Here, too, regional solidarity was key. Minister Van Reverhorst described how the congregations in two neighbouring villages – Klaaswaal and Oud-Beijerland – were moved to tears by the fate of the people in Strijen.⁶¹ They immediately loaded carts with bread, butter, cheese, and other foodstuffs and brought these to the destroyed village. Help did not only come from outside a village. During the conflagration of Broek op Langedijk in 1793, the flames devoured a third of the houses. The poet and local resident Dirk Keyzer wrote that the inhabitants, moved by their 'pitiful civic heart', lodged their homeless neighbours.⁶² Van Reverhorst and Keyzer in essence depicted two circles of solidarity: local and regional.

These two circles of solidarity also intersected in the representations of one of the most devastating fire disasters of the eighteenth century. On 25 June 1766, a blaze destroyed a large part of the village of Hilversum. In a letter published in the periodical *De Filosooph*, a correspondent reported on the tragedy in great detail. The letter was obviously written for publication, since it ends with a call for donations. While the name of the correspondent is not mentioned, it is likely that the letter was written by the editor of *De Filosooph*, Cornelis van Engelen.⁶³ The author implies that he is from Amsterdam, but this probably has more to do with his target audience. At the time of the fire, Van Engelen lived on an estate next to the village of Hilversum, Gooilust.⁶⁴ He would have seen the flames from his home. 'The large, the flourishing, the populous [village of] Hilversum is one third rubble, and hundreds of people are dependent on charity now', the correspondent reports.⁶⁵ Not even the church was spared. Its tower collapsed and the fire destroyed the graves within the

⁶¹ Reverhorst, *Stryen door het vyer verteert*, 27-28.

⁶² Keyzer, *Omstandig verhaal*, 19.

⁶³ Visser, 'Verlichte doopsgezinden', 148, n. 66.

⁶⁴ Visser, 'Verlichte doopsgezinden', 143.

⁶⁵ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 212: 'Het groot, het bloeiend, het volkryk Hilversum is voor een derde gedeelte in een puinhoop veranderd, en honderden van Menschen tot den bedelzak gebragt.' This trope – the difference between a prosperous present and a disastrous present – has also been observed in English pamphlets on fire disasters: Morgan, 'The Representation', 275.

building, leading people to find the bones of their ancestors burning, their bodies turned to ash.⁶⁶ The flames threatened the dead as much as they did the living.

Despite the physical destruction, the community itself did not fall into a state of chaos. Neither the letter in *De Filosooph* nor the three newspapers that reported the fire contained any mention of looting.⁶⁷ A short article in the newspaper *Leydse Courant* primarily comprised descriptions of all the acts of mutual aid that had occurred. Carts with food and other necessary goods from around the region arrived at the destroyed village, it reported. The correspondent in *De Filosooph* added that bread was sent daily from the mansions owned by urban patricians (such as Gooilust). The newspaper and the letter-writer thus emphasised the regional solidarity with the affected community.

Just like in Broek op Langedijk, generosity did not just come from outside the village, but was also extended within the village itself. 'Charity', wrote the Leiden newspaper, was 'also shown as much as possible by those lucky enough to have been unaffected by the fire, and their house became places of refuge, such that some were occupied by no fewer than fifty people'.⁶⁸ According to these descriptions, the privations of the disaster did not push people towards acts of simple self-preservation, but actually provoked extraordinary acts of solidarity.

While the newspapers from Leiden and Haarlem and the letter in *De Filosooph* focused on the many acts of kindness that followed the disaster, *De Filosooph's* correspondent emphasised how the villagers even put aside the historical friction felt between Protestants and Catholics.⁶⁹ Though the correspondent described the opening of houses to accommodate the victims much as the Leiden newspaper had done, he went one step further:

Nature triumphed; the spirit of sectarianism and partisanship, which usually divides Christianity so miserably, gave way to human compassion, with Catholics and non-Catholics regarding each other as nothing less than fellow Christians and citizens.⁷⁰

By claiming that nature triumphed, the author indicated that the traditional tensions between Catholics and Protestants were perhaps even against human nature itself. Nevertheless, it had taken the experience of catastrophe for the villagers, and others, to see each other as equals in both faith and citizenship. Hilversum and the surrounding Gooi region were Catholic enclaves in the predominantly Protestant province of Holland. This fact notwithstanding, Catholics in Hilversum were, as was the case in many parts of Holland, not permitted to practice their religion publicly. Instead, Catholics held tolerated Masses in a non-distinct farm that was turned into a clandestine church.⁷¹ Despite the political

⁶⁶ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 211.

⁶⁷ *De Filosooph* 27 (30 June 1766); *Opregte Groninger courant*, 1 July 1766; *Oprechte Haarlemsche courant*, 28 June 1766.

⁶⁸ *Leydse Courant*, 30 June 1766: 'de Liefdaadigheid ook zoo veel mogelyk betoond word door zoodaanige Liederen, die het Geluk hebben gehad, dat zy van den Brand bevryd gebleeven zyn, stellende hunne Huizen open tot Toevlugt en Schuilplaats der Ellendeligen, zoo, dat in eenige Huizen wel vyftig Menschen logeeren.'

⁶⁹ The *Opregte Groninger courant* of 1 July 1766 did not mention the local and regional solidarity. Of all the newspaper reports, this article provided the most factual report.

⁷⁰ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 213: 'De Natuur zegepraalde; die Geest van secte en partyschap, welke anders de Christenheid zo jammerlyk verdeelt, week voor een Menschelyk mededogen, en Roomschen en Onroomschen beschouwden malkanderen niet anders dan als Christenen en Medeburgers.'

⁷¹ Ronde, 'Strijd in Hilversum'.

dominance of the Dutch Reformed Church, Catholic villagers in Hilversum outnumbered Protestants by two to one, and the lines in *De Filosooph* about shared Christianity and citizenship should be read in this context.

In addition to this local situation, the passage should also be understood with reference to the wider debate on the coexistence of denominations. At the time, Dutch academics and pamphleteers discussed whether or not religious minorities should be tolerated. Inspired by Enlightenment ideas, some argued that authorities should even treat members of marginal denominations equally to the members of the Reformed public church.⁷² Cornelis van Engelen, the magazine's editor (and, most likely, the author of the letter under scrutiny here), was an enlightened Mennonite. As such, he was himself a member of a tolerated minority.⁷³ This could have compelled him to argue for religious tolerance or even denominational equality in the letter.⁷⁴

There is more to this passage than the simple observation of events. Readers would have interpreted it as a call to overlook the religious differences with their own neighbours, just like the victims did. From the end of the seventeenth century, poor relief was increasingly 'confessionalised': town governments encouraged and expected churches to care for the needy of their own denomination.⁷⁵ A congregation thus accrued more of the features of a mutual aid organisation, and this active social function would have strengthened a citizen's identification with his or her denomination. The letter on the fire of Hilversum was at odds with this trend. By stressing a supra-denominational notion of Christianity, Protestants in Amsterdam were encouraged to identify with the poor Catholic sufferers and, subsequently, donate money to them. More than just a representation of regional and local circles of solidarity in the immediate relief phase, the issue of *De Filosooph* sought to cultivate a social identity that went beyond denomination.

Collecting for Reconstruction

The letter in *De Filosooph* began with the horrific experience of the correspondent who just arrived at the burning village. In the middle of the day, the author wrote, the sky was darkened by smoke. It was hard to breathe. He could hear the destruction in the wailing of the victims.⁷⁶ After this general depiction of total despair, the author focuses on several specific stories, some of which are just two or three sentences long. One concerned a mother who escaped the fire with her deceased baby in her arms.⁷⁷ Another featured an older, blind woman who died screaming while her husband tried to save her.⁷⁸

72 Wall, 'Toleration', 114-116; Eijnatten, 'The Eighteenth-Century Dutch "Toleration" Debate', 42-44.

73 This background could also explain another short reference in the letter to the generosity of Mennonites in an earlier disaster situation: Visser, 'Verlichte doopsgezinden', 142-157.

74 Mennonites adopted notions of religious tolerance earlier than Reformed groups: Wall, 'Toleration', 117.

75 Teeuwen, 'Collections', 275-276; Nederveen Meerkerk and Vermeesch, 'Reforming outdoor relief, 144-145; Parker, 'The pillars'.

76 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 209.

77 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 209.

78 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 211.

Horrific anecdotes like these were common in early modern disaster narratives. The literary scholar Françoise Lavocat contends that short stories functioned as synecdoches of a catastrophe. As such, they were meant to transport readers to the disaster area while simultaneously evoking horror and pity.⁷⁹ Indeed, the contributor to *De Filosooph* was fully aware of the emotional impact of the stories he told. Referring to the cruel death of the blind woman, he described it as a scene ‘which would have moved a stone heart to pity’.⁸⁰ The writer thus made the conscious choice to narrate stories that would evoke compassion and prompt readers to make charitable donations.

Research into disaster relief after English urban fires shows that donations were collected regionally and even nationally.⁸¹ Although less research has been done on this topic in the Netherlands, historians did find that relief money could also originate from outside of the affected area.⁸² Solidarity reached thus beyond the location of a disaster. In her insightful analysis of administrative sources surrounding the fire of Hilversum, the historian Erica Boersma has shown that the village council convinced the States of Holland to help the village.⁸³ Although not all demands were granted, the States exempted the village from taxes and tolls, made a major financial contribution of 10,000 guilders for the reconstruction of the Reformed church, and made available a loan for other rebuilding work. Furthermore, the provincial government allowed the mayor of Hilversum to request that other cities organise collections. For such a collection to take place successfully, not only must the town officials be convinced that Hilversum was worthy of compassion and aid, but the town’s inhabitants had to be likewise moved.

As his audience mainly comprised the inhabitants of Amsterdam, the letter-writer in *De Filosooph* contributed to this goal by calling upon multiple identities. The letter incorporated readers within circles of solidarity while it positioned sufferers from Hilversum in these same circles. In the letter, the author emphasised two identities: Christianity and nationhood.⁸⁴ These identities were overlapping, as the correspondent also made clear. The fundamental argument was that everyone ‘who holds duty, reason, virtue, humanity, faith, fatherland, and town dear’ would be in favour of organising a collection.⁸⁵ The letter included a reprint of another letter signed by the mayor of Hilversum, Pieter Cnollenburg, who had pleaded with people in the region to help out.⁸⁶ The mayor addressed everyone who ‘out of Christian love and compassion’ would be willing to give food, clothing, and money to the victims. These goods and contributions could be brought to the house of a former mayor living nearby the village. Cnollenburg’s reference to Christian charity is

79 Lavocat, ‘Narratives of Catastrophe’, 265.

80 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 211: ‘een steenen hart tot medelyden zou bewoogen hebben’.

81 Morgan, ‘The Representation’, 279-285; Field, ‘Charitable Giving’; Kitching, ‘Fire Disasters’, 175-176.

82 Boersma, ‘Bovenregionale solidariteit’; Teeuwen, ‘Collections’, 277-279; Leeuwen, ‘Liefdadige giften’, 435. With regard to transregional solidarity in the cases of floods, see Bosch, ‘Natuur en cultuur’, 40-43; Zellem, ‘Nooyt gehoorde’, 15-18; Driessen, ‘De hulperlening’.

83 Boersma, ‘Bovenregionale solidariteit’.

84 For a similar case, see Boersma, *Noodhulp zonder natiestaat*, 289-291.

85 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 215: ‘wien Pligt, Rede, Deugd, Menschelykheid, Godsdienst, Vaderland, en Stad ter harte gaan’.

86 *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 215.

repeated by the writer of the letter in *De Filosooph*. As we have seen, the correspondent considered Christianity as an overarching category that covered various denominations, including the Catholic villagers of Hilversum.

In addition, the author framed the fire of Hilversum as a *national* catastrophe, arguing that the Dutch could not let their fellow countrymen suffer: 'They are unfortunates; unfortunates in the highest degree; unfortunates through no fault of their own; unfortunates in the heart of your country; yes, your fellow compatriots and brothers.'⁸⁷ Positioned between Amsterdam and Utrecht, Hilversum, the authors stressed, was 'in the heart of your country'. By presenting the ruined village of Hilversum and its suffering inhabitants as fellow members of the Dutch nation, the author addressed a wide circle of solidarity of the readers of *De Filosooph*. The term 'brothers' made the abstract nation analogous with the concrete family, one's closest circle of solidarity.⁸⁸ The author emphasised that the Dutch people could not let the inhabitants of Hilversum down, for the simple reason that they were like members of a national family.

The writer regarded being part of the same national community as ample grounds for the expression of solidarity. After all, it would not be the first time the Dutch nation collected for its unfortunate citizens:

No righteous Dutchman would ever let his brother suffer without aiding him! The twenty thousand guilders that were collected a couple of years ago for the benefit of the market traders of the Hague in the blink of an eye, so to speak, are simple evidence of this. It is not without ground or reason, then, that our nation has acquired the praiseworthy epithet of being the most generous among all the foreign people.⁸⁹

Here, the author referred to a collection in response to a fire that destroyed many market stands during a fair held in The Hague on 9 May 1758. The number of twenty thousand guilders was used by the correspondent as a factual confirmation of the claim that the Dutch made up a generous nation.⁹⁰ Furthermore, by employing this 'generous nation' motif, the author did not just remember the past, he also used this memory to encourage charitable acts in the present. The members of the nation were called to live up to their collective identity. By stressing that the fire of Hilversum was 'a similar case', the author set expectations on his readers: just as you did then, so should you give now.⁹¹

The letter-writer refers multiple times to national solidarity. Nonetheless, it is clear that this presumed solidarity was more rhetorical than real, as his target audience was the citizenry of Amsterdam. *De Filosooph* was published there, and many of its readers would

⁸⁷ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 214: 'Het zyn Ongelukkigen; Ongelukkigen in den hoogsten trap; Ongelukkigen buiten hunne schuld; Ongelukkigen in het hart van uw Land, ja uwe Landgenooten en Broeders.'

⁸⁸ Meijer, 'Vorst', 302-303.

⁸⁹ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 214: 'Geen regtschaape Nederlander zag ooit zynen Broeder lyden zonder hem te helpen! Twintig duizend guldens, ten voordeele der Haagsche Kramers, in een gelyk geval, voor eenige jaaren, in een oogenblik, om zo te spreken, gecollecteerd, kunnen hier een klein bewys van geeven, en 't is niet zonder grond of rede, dat onze Natie den schoonen Eernaam van Goedhartig by alle vreemde Volkeren verworven heeft.'

⁹⁰ The 'generous nation' motif is also recurring in nineteenth-century representations of disasters, as Fons Meijer and Lotte Jensen have shown. See Meijer, *Verbonden door rampspoed*; Jensen, 'Floods', 227-228.

⁹¹ Hanneke van Asperen noted a similar use of memories of past generosity in publications following the fire of Amsterdam's theatre: Asperen, 'Catastrophes on Stage', 17.

have lived in the city. The writer specifically addressed them as ‘our fellow townsmen’, thus implying that he, too, was an inhabitant of Amsterdam.⁹² But if the letter was intended for a specific audience – the middling sorts and elites in Amsterdam who read *De Filosooph* – why was he so eager to address the whole nation?

Historians have argued that the first Dutch (proto-)national collections were organised in the wake of eighteenth-century flood disasters.⁹³ Although these collections transcended regions and their organisers claimed that they were national, the extent to which these collections actually drew funds from all across the country is debatable. Their organisation and funding were firmly centred in the province of Holland.⁹⁴ A similar nuance applies to the collection for Hilversum, which focused primarily on Amsterdam. Still, the author of the letter tapped into the notion of shared nationhood. This notion would, just like the overarching category of Christianity, circumvent potential religious tensions. Furthermore, the perceived commonality of nationhood located victims within the circle of solidarity of the readers.

Another way in which the author evoked generosity among the Amsterdammers was by framing the collection as one from which they also benefitted themselves. He provided the readers of *De Filosooph* with two economic arguments that aligned the collection with the interests of their own city. Firstly, the correspondent addressed the strong economic ties between the city of Amsterdam and nearby Hilversum, especially with regard to the village’s textile industry which, he asserted, contributed considerably to the economy of Amsterdam.⁹⁵ He thereby implied that Amsterdam would profit economically from Hilversum’s recovery. Secondly, if the citizens of Amsterdam would not contribute to the reconstruction of the village, the unfortunates risked becoming ‘a disastrous ballast to society and ourselves’.⁹⁶ It could be that he and his audience worried that the victims could seek refuge in Amsterdam. Extremely cold winters and other natural disasters made people from the countryside travel to a central city in their region.⁹⁷ Once they arrived, the local diaconate would be obliged to care for them. Amsterdam also faced such a potential drain of its charity funds.

In sum, the letter in *De Filosooph* employed three strategies to convince its mainly Amsterdam-based readership to contribute to the recovery of Hilversum. Firstly, by employing emotionally charged stories, the destruction of the fire was made tangible. Secondly, the correspondent emphasised overarching identifications: Christianity and nationhood. By addressing these wider circles, the fact that Hilversum was a predominantly Catholic village could be ignored. Donating money or goods was presented as an expectation for those who regarded themselves as Christian and Dutch. Finally, economic arguments stressed that the recovery of Hilversum would benefit Amsterdam. However, these pragmatic arguments were carefully bound up within the lofty ideals of solidarity.

⁹² *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 215.

⁹³ Bosch, ‘Natuur en cultuur’, 41-43; Driessen, ‘De hulpverlening’, 81.

⁹⁴ Zelle, ‘Nooyt gehoorde’, 16-17.

⁹⁵ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 214-215.

⁹⁶ *De Filosooph* 27 (7 July 1766), 215: ‘daar zy anders een rampzalige ballast voor de Maatschappy en ons zelve worden’.

⁹⁷ Buursma, ‘Dese bekommerlijke tijden’, 376-383.

Remembering Generosity

During the 1766 fire in Leiden, the wind turned in a favourable direction at a critical moment. For the writer of the 1767 commemoration book, it was divine intervention.⁹⁸ If ‘the wind had not changed, all the adjacent houses would have been in great danger’.⁹⁹ A nearby attic, the author noted, was filled with hay and would have given additional fuel to the fire. The material damage, as well as the number of casualties, a pamphlet writer acknowledged, could thus have been far worse.¹⁰⁰ Still, the impact of the fire reached beyond the lost goods and lives. After the fire was extinguished, it left a visible hole in the heart of town. The damaged buildings were located next to the Visbrug, the oldest bridge of Leiden, and the central node of three canals. Because of this prominent location the ruins were visible to many. The devastating flames transformed the inhabitants’ spatial experience of the city.

On 3 October, the citizens of Leiden would celebrate the lifting of the 1574 Siege of Leiden. Because of this, the anonymous author noted, ‘one has twice as much reason to remember this pitiful circumstance, because [it] occurred on a day, which is, unlike others, extraordinary’.¹⁰¹ The timing of the disaster had a major impact on the urban calendar. It was not merely the spatial coordinates of community life that were transformed, but its temporal ones, too. The catastrophe affected a central place and moment in the history of the urban community.

This bifold influence seems to have triggered an extraordinary sense of solidarity and unity in the urban community. Two widows whose livelihoods were destroyed in the flames asked the city council to organise a collection for the victims.¹⁰² Town-wide collections were usually organised for public works and charitable institutions. According to the commemoration book, the council members nonetheless decided to organise the collection because they were moved by the sorrow of the women and their families.¹⁰³ They also took into account, the earlier pamphlet argued, ‘the laudable affection’ the council members ‘found among the good citizens’ of Leiden.¹⁰⁴ Collectively felt pity for the victims was thus regarded as a justification for the collection.

On Monday 13 October, ten days after the fire, the inhabitants of Leiden were required to be at home at eight o’clock in the morning to await the collector’s knock.¹⁰⁵ The council

⁹⁸ During the 1574 Siege of Leiden, the wind also changed in a favourable direction at a crucial moment, allowing the waterborne rebel troops to reach the city. In general, the idea that God or a saint intervened during fires by changing the direction of the wind can be traced back as far as the Middle Ages: Ferragud and Marsilla, ‘The Great Fire’, 500.

⁹⁹ *Afbeeldingen*, 15-16: ‘was de Wind niet veranderd, zoo hadden alle de omstaende Huizen groot gevaer gelopen’.

¹⁰⁰ *Korte beschryving*, 7.

¹⁰¹ *Afbeeldingen*, 3-4: ‘men dubbele reden heeft om deeze droevige Omstandigheid in gedachten te houden, als voorgevallen op eenen dag, welke ons buiten anderen zonderling is’.

¹⁰² For a comparable case in Zwolle, see Teeuwen, *Financing Poor Relief*, 104.

¹⁰³ *Afbeeldingen*, 22. In the fire disaster relief programmes in early modern England, widows also received more relief money than other applicants: Field, ‘Charitable Giving’, 19-20.

¹⁰⁴ *Korte beschryving*, 9-10: ‘de loffelyke genegenheid [...] vernoomen hebben by de goede burgers en ingezeeten’.

¹⁰⁵ *Afbeeldingen*, 25-26.

expected the citizens to give as much as they could contribute when the collector arrived at their door. On the Sunday before the day of the collection, clergymen city-wide encouraged their churchgoers to donate.¹⁰⁶ The Sunday after the collection, the members of the Protestant congregations as well as the Catholic parish were thanked by their respective leaders for their generosity.¹⁰⁷ Yet, though regular poor relief in Leiden was confessionalised, this collection was not held in churches but in the neighbourhoods.¹⁰⁸ Both publications also listed the amount of money collected in each town district. The presence of these lists in the publications can be understood as a measure of accountability, but there is also another way of explaining this public assertion of generosity in Leiden.¹⁰⁹ Neighbourhoods (*gebuurten*) were the urban spaces in which a large part of the lives of their inhabitants took place. They were political entities and communities that endowed their inhabitants with a common identity.¹¹⁰ The overview of collected contributions addressed these neighbourhood identities, turning the collection into a kind of generosity competition.¹¹¹ It made inhabitants proud of their own neighbourhoods and, with respect to the total sum, of the whole city.

Solidarity was a source of pride for the urban community. The first page of the 1766 pamphlet stated that it was meant as a commemorative text. The author noted that the tragedy of 3 October had moved him or her to write about 'these [circumstances], as well as the loyal generosity of our beloved fellow citizens', in order to 'remember them forever'.¹¹² A similar argument can be made about the commemoration book published in 1767. The publisher, Cornelis van Hooegeveen, stressed in a promotional notification that the book would be printed on 'extra heavy and fine paper'.¹¹³ This shows that the book was not meant to be ephemeral. Instead, it was to be kept and preserved, to retell the story of generosity.

The prints in the book served a similar goal. These images, which were designed and etched by Noach van der Meer, depicted the houses before the fire and after their restoration (figs. 1 and 3). As such, they memorialised the event and the changes in the urban space it brought about. Moreover, after the city block was restored with the collected funds, the buildings themselves were also turned into a material memory. On the cornice (fig. 3) of the new buildings, an inscription read:

The loyalty of the citizenry has here restored, that which was destroyed by the violence of the flames, to an improved state. AD MDCCLXVI.¹¹⁴

106 *Afbeeldingen*, 29.

107 *Afbeeldingen*, 29.

108 Nederveen Meerkerk and Vermeesch, 'Reforming outdoor relief', 144-145.

109 Lists that accounted for expenses were published, for instance, after a 1740 relief operation for flood disaster victims: Driessen, 'De hulpverlening', 97; Bosch, 'Natuur en cultuur', 43.

110 Dorren, 'Communities within the Community'; Walle, *Buurthouden*, 105-108; Roodenburg, 'Naar een etnografie', 232.

111 For similar lists with collection contributions of congregations, see Duiveman, 'Praying', 553.

112 *Korte beschrijving*, 1: 'om dezelve, gelijk ook de trouwhartige mededeelzaamheid onzer geliefde Medeburgenen, eeuwig in geheugen te houden'.

113 Hooegeveen, *Bericht*, 2.

114 'De trouw der burgery heeft hier, t geen door geweld der vlammen wierd gesloopt, in betren staat hersteld. An° MDCCLXVI'.

The inscription emphasised that the reconstruction was a collective endeavour, a communal achievement of the loyal citizenry, and that the end result was an actual improvement compared to the buildings as they were before the conflagration.¹¹⁵ Similarly, one of the anonymous poems compared the real, destructive conflagration with metaphorical fire in the urban community:

The houses perished to useless rubble and ashes;
But the citizens' burning love, which was always stronger,
Did raise from the ashes and ruins these [new] buildings.¹¹⁶

Similar lines can be found in other poems in the book, which placed equal stress on the success of the citizenry in overcoming the disaster. The text on the cornice and the poems presented the reconstructed block as a sign of resilience and solidarity of the urban community.

In the village of Amstelveen, buildings could not reflect the generosity that surfaced during a collection following the 1792 conflagration. In the third volume of *De Nederlandsche stad- en dorpsbeschrijver*, published three years after the catastrophe, Van Ollefen described the reconstruction of Amstelveen. As much of the rebuilding was yet to take place, the author concluded that the village 'had lost much of its old splendour'.¹¹⁷ Dissatisfied inhabitants, Van Ollefen reported, claimed that the money collected was not divided fairly. Some even suspected corruption. Van Ollefen condemned these rumours, claiming that the authorities acted in good faith.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, he could not deny that just seven buildings of the many more that were destroyed were rebuilt. The reconstruction process disappointed. While the monument was not yet to be constructed, Van Ollefen created a memorial in words. A fund of some 23,000 guilders was collected within the city walls of Amsterdam, he reported, and there were additional financial contributions from elsewhere.¹¹⁹ Just as in Hilversum, it seems that in this case most of the funds came from Amsterdam.

In his initial pamphlet on the fire in Amstelveen, published shortly after the events and later added to the third volume, Van Ollefen added a short poem of just four lines. This poem was a variation on an earlier piece that described how the city of Amsterdam repelled an attack by the Prussian army in 1787. The village of Amstelveen was taken by the enemy's troops during this invasion. The memory of this assault alone would 'push tears out of the eyes' of the readers, contended Van Ollefen, but the fire disaster gave even more reasons to take pity on the villagers.¹²⁰ Van Ollefen stressed circles of solidarity based on the Christian faith and, more importantly, nationhood.¹²¹ The 1787 poem praised the

115 For similar cases of reconstruction optimism after the fire of the townhall of Amsterdam in 1652, see Lange, 'Die Katastrophe', 26.

116 *Afbeeldingen*, 50: 'De Woningen vergaen tot nietig puin en asch;/Maer 's Burgers Liefdevuur, dat altijd sterker was,/Deedt uit die asch en puin dees Woningen verrijzen.'

117 Ollefen, 'De Nederlandsche', III, 4.

118 Ollefen, 'De Nederlandsche', III, 3-4.

119 Ollefen, 'De Nederlandsche', III, 3.

120 Ollefen, *Naauwkeurig verslag*, 2.

121 Ollefen, *Naauwkeurig verslag*, 4; Ollefen, 'De Nederlandsche', III, 2.

bravery of the town's citizens and the Dutch in general. Van Ollefen quoted four lines from this earlier poem, and followed with a new version:

Virtue rose up in the heart; and in the dejected being,
By which one recognises Civilis's posterity,
the Batavian mark of human kindness could be seen,
Which sends the needy such ample relief.¹²²

Civilis was a mythical general who was believed to have fought against Roman oppression, and was generally regarded as a forebear of the Dutch nation. In Van Ollefen's version of the poem, generosity during the collection was thus presented as a national characteristic. The charity of the Dutch nation following the fire disaster, Van Ollefen claimed, compensated for the fact that Amstelveen could not be saved from Prussian occupation five years earlier.

The sources on the conflagrations of Leiden and Amstelveen show two 'memory projects' that remembered solidarity of the past.¹²³ In the case of Leiden, the pamphlet, commemoration book, and cornice of the rebuilt houses asserted the solidarity of the urban community. Text, images, and physical buildings all played their part in this memorialisation. Little of the generosity that followed the conflagration of Amstelveen was transformed into walls or roofs, yet Van Ollefen sought to remember the solidarity shown by the Christian and patriotic Dutch nation.

Conclusion

This article has analysed representations of fire disasters in poems, pamphlets, newspaper articles, sermons, and a commemoration book. Some sources do acknowledge the threat of social disorder that existed during and after such disasters, and preachers invoked divine punishment upon looters, while authorities took measures to prevent stealing. That said, authors drew more attention to acts of kindness.¹²⁴ The texts that flowed from the pens of various writers and poets described various phases of various catastrophes, yet they all shared one element: an emphasis on solidarity.

This focus of the authors can be explained by real events. Sociological research on recent disasters has shown that people all over the world tend to be kind in catastrophic situations. What actually happens in a disaster and what is represented by media, however, are not necessarily the same. Actual events are selected, magnified, and moulded into narratives. Cultural representations of disaster situations reflect social imaginaries: widely-held convictions about how people live together. In addition, authors appropriate discourses and narratives surrounding disasters to assert their own agenda and address social identities of readers. Authors describing the late-eighteenth-century fire disasters included

¹²² Ollefen, *Naaauwkeurig verslag*, 4: 'In 't hart verhief zig deugd, en in 't bedrukte wezen,/Waarvan men in den ramp CIVILIS nakroost kent,/Stond het Bataafsche merk, Menschlievendheid te lezen,/Die den noodlijdenden, zo ruim verkwikking zendt.'

¹²³ For the concept of 'memory project', see Conway, 'New Directions', 445-446.

¹²⁴ Cf. Packer, 'Rising', 173-175.

actual events in their poems and prose. There is little reason to doubt the suggestion that the villagers of Overtoom hurried to Amstelveen to aid the victims, or that the students helped with extinguishing the 1776 fire in Leiden. Writers selected these facts and emphasised the elements of the disastrous event which fitted their intended story, a story that revolved around solidarity.

Authors could have chosen another narrative. They could have also emphasised the moral depravity of looters, for instance. However, even the ministers only mentioned these antisocial acts in passing during their sermons. Another element that authors left out or discouraged was the laying of blame for a fire onto a specific individual. The Hilversum fire, for example, was widely known to have broken out in the house of a Jewish butcher.¹²⁵ The correspondent in *De Filosooph* did not mention this well-known fact, possibly to circumvent antisemitic sentiments which could undermine his argument for religious tolerance. Instead of focusing on looting and blame, authors showed all the acts of kindness people performed and encouraged readers to join in this communal kindness. The letter on the fire of Hilversum in *De Filosooph* did echo Enlightenment debates about religious tolerance and human nature. As such, the emphasis on solidarity reflected a social imaginary.

In addition, the letter and the other publications discussed above did have specific agency and goals. Authors drew attention to the connections between readers and victims of disasters. By addressing and strengthening the identification of their reader with certain groups, some of the sources encouraged solidarity. Others celebrated and memorialised the solidarity of the past, strengthening the identification of readers with their city, region, religion, or nation. The reciprocal relation between identities and solidarity is, I argue, key in understanding the representations of fire disasters. Through their writings on catastrophes, writers sought to kindle compassion on paper.

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¹²⁵ *Leydse Courant*, 30 June 1766.

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