

## 6. Pieter Geyl and the idea of federalism

*Leen Dorsman*

When on 1 January 1914, only a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, Pieter Geyl was hired as London correspondent of the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (NRC), one of the leading liberal newspapers in the Netherlands, he entered a profession that suited his literary, political and career aspirations well. Although his later appointment as university professor gave him the societal status he longed for, journalism remained second nature to him. His newspaper writing informed his work as a historian and, conversely, his work as a journalist always had a historical dimension to it. While it would go too far to call the war a godsend for Geyl, it did catapult his career. London in those years was the place to be for journalists, and Geyl was situated right in the eye of the storm. For someone as inquiring and ambitious as he was, this was the perfect position.

That journalism and history-writing can go hand in hand may sound like a banal statement nowadays, but this was not a combination that was accepted easily by academic historians in the early twentieth-century Netherlands. Journalists hardly ever crossed the boundaries into historical research in the academic sense, and however much some historians commented on current developments, for example Johan Huizinga, this was rarely connected with their academic work (the same would become true for the later Geyl, after he accepted the chair in modern history at Utrecht University in 1936).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Geyl always insisted that ‘history plays a role in current politics’ and that this was what gave the historical profession its importance.<sup>2</sup>

The First World War had a significant influence on the development of contemporary historiography and Geyl was in good company. Many of the professional historians in the Netherlands were writing about the war, for example Petrus Johannes Blok (Geyl’s mentor at Leiden University), Herman Colenbrander (also at Leiden), Hajo Brugmans (University of

<sup>1</sup> P. Luykx, ‘De beoefening van de nieuwste geschiedenis’, in *De laatste tijd: Geschiedschrijving over Nederland in de 20ste eeuw*, ed. P. Luykx and N. Bootsma (Utrecht, 1987), pp. 9–65, on Geyl, pp. 22–3.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Het land aan de ketting van De Gaulle – de fout van “57”’, *Het Vrije Volk*, 26 April 1963.

Amsterdam) and Willem Kernkamp, who held the Utrecht chair in modern history until Geyl succeeded him in 1936.<sup>3</sup> All of these scholars published extensively in newspapers and current affairs periodicals and some of them also re-published these articles later in edited volumes or anthologies.

### *Federalism*

In many respects, Geyl's ideas from his early years in London continued to shape his later historical and political thinking, as he confirms in his autobiography, written from memory one world war later, during his captivity at the hands of the Nazis. His being taken prisoner in October 1940, although on the face of it to 'safeguard' the lives of Germans interned in the Dutch East Indies, was not incidental, as in the late 1930s he had campaigned against fascism with the political movement *Eenheid Door Democratie* ('Unity through Democracy') and he had also been one of the first Dutch academics to openly protest against German anti-Jewish measures. At first, he was detained in the political section of Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar in Germany; later he was transferred to the south of the Netherlands, first to Haaren and then to the former Catholic seminary Beekvliet in Sint-Michielsgestel, where, along with other prisoners, mostly members of the Dutch political and intellectual elite, he had time to deliberate about the future of the Netherlands after the German defeat.<sup>4</sup>

A clue to the significance of federalism in Geyl's political thinking can be found in an intriguing paragraph in his memoirs, according to which he considered writing a biography of the liberal politician Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914) and so developed a keen interest in British imperial problems. On the occasion of Chamberlain's death in July 1914, Geyl published an extensive obituary for this statesman of 'gigantic vitality and dynamism' in the NRC.<sup>5</sup> He became so familiar with the problems of the British empire that his understanding of this topic guided him throughout the interwar period and into the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> Especially during the discussions he

<sup>3</sup> P. Blaas, 'Nederlandse historici en de Eerste Wereldoorlog', in *Wankel evenwicht: Neutraal Nederland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, ed. M. Kraaijestein and P. Schulten (Soesterberg, 2007), pp. 14–31. On Kernkamp as a journalist see L. Dorsman, *G. W. Kernkamp: Historicus en democraat (1864–1943)* (Groningen, 1990), pp. 125–205.

<sup>4</sup> Officially Geyl was taken hostage as retaliation for the arrest of Germans in the Dutch East Indies after the outbreak of the war on 10 May 1940. On his participation in discussions on the post-war political system of the Netherlands see M. de Keizer, *De gijzelaars van Sint Michielsgestel: Een elite-beraad in oorlogstijd* (Alphen aan den Rijn, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> 'Joseph Chamberlain', *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 6 July 1914. It is not accidental that Geyl wanted to write Chamberlain's biography. He had always had a preoccupation with charismatic personalities. The term he used for such a person was 'een figuur' ('a character').

<sup>6</sup> P. Geyl, *Ik die zo weinig in mijn verleden leef: Autobiografie, 1887–1940*, ed. W. Berkelaar,

had at Beekvliet about the future constitutional relationship between the Netherlands and its own empire in the Dutch East Indies, Geyl realized that he could resort to the idea of federalism as a solution to a wide range of political problems that he had developed during those war years in London.

The unity of the British empire, or *de Rijksgedachte*, as he called it in Dutch, and the idea of empire not only intrigued him as a war-time journalist, but it also served as a framework for much of his historical and political thinking in the years to come. Of course, the paragraph on Chamberlain was only a brief passage in a typescript of several hundred pages and there may be doubt about the accuracy of Geyl's recollections three decades after the events, but still a point can be made for the central importance of federalist thought for Geyl.<sup>7</sup>

The first time Geyl wrote extensively about British imperialism and federalism was in a 1915 NRC article entitled 'Problemen van het Britse Rijk' ('Problems of the British empire').<sup>8</sup> As is generally known, the Irish question, which Geyl followed closely, had federalist aspects to it, but the immediate reason for publishing his article was the Canadian prime minister Robert Borden's attending a meeting of the British cabinet. As Geyl observed, the relationship between Britain and its dominions was notoriously 'delicate and bad' and a Canadian prime minister attending a cabinet meeting not spectacular in itself. Because of the war situation, however, this turned into a very important issue, according to Geyl. The challenge for the British empire was the relationship between Britain and its self-governing colonies; in other words, how to deal with the dilemma of having a democracy rule over other democracies. He drew a comparison with ancient Rome, which had to fundamentally reconsider its relationship with its subjects and allies after the transition from republic to empire. Geyl was convinced that the political situation after the First World War would entail similar consequences for Britain as the transition two millennia earlier, despite the apparent difference in the role of the monarch, an absolutist emperor in Rome but a constitutional king with curtailed powers in Britain. Set against this background, one of the burning questions was whether the British constitution could and would over time evolve into a federal system.<sup>9</sup> This federalist concept provides a common thread through

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L. Dorsman and P. van Hees (Amsterdam, 2009), p. 59. A typescript of the autobiography is kept in the Special Collections of Utrecht University Library. It contains handwritten comments by Geyl himself from a later date.

<sup>7</sup> The autobiography spans 55 years, is very detailed and was written without access to notes or source material.

<sup>8</sup> *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 31 July 1915.

<sup>9</sup> J. Kendle, *Federal Britain: A History* (London, 1997). The book covers British history

Geyl's work; it reappears in his writings and political activism for the Flemish movement in the 1920s and 1930s and re-emerges in his post-Second World War writings on Europe.

In his newspaper article on the 'problems of the British empire', Geyl saw the origins of the problem in the second half of the nineteenth century, when conservatives and liberals debated the question of the extent to which the colonies were to become free and independent. Partly as a result of the decision not to sever the bonds with the motherland by the dominions themselves, the modern imperialism of politicians such as Joseph Chamberlain was made possible. One of the ways of tightening the bonds between colonies and motherland was the introduction, in 1887, of a so-called colonial (later imperial) conference that convened every four years. However, over the course of time, the idea of national self-determination had evolved in the constituent parts of the British empire and the Great War had played a decisive role in this development. Geyl quite rightly realized that the dominions' war effort against Germany offered them potential leverage in discussions about the empire's post-war structure. The system of self-governance worked only as long as it was more or less restricted to internal affairs of the colonies, but now, because of the massive scale of the war, the system had reached its limits and started creaking. The crucial question was whether to let the colonies assume responsibility for their own military defence or whether to leave this to the mother country Britain. The problem was exacerbated because the political parties in the dominions were themselves divided in their opinions. Also, considerations of military strategy played a role in the debate.

Soon after arriving in London Geyl had become a member of the National Liberal Club at Whitehall Place, where he especially enjoyed the library. Among the journals he found there must have been *The Round Table: Quarterly Review of the Politics of the British Empire*, the mouthpiece of a movement operating under the same name. It had a federalist outlook and when in 1917 the idea of an annually meeting imperial cabinet, including representatives of the dominion governments, was widely discussed and accepted, Geyl, on 17 June 1917, dedicated an NRC article to the Round Table's plans.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the notion that the remit of the imperial cabinet

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from around 1600, because Kende sees federalism as one of the central ideas in its political development.

<sup>10</sup> *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 17 June 1917, 'De Round Table over de constitutioneele hervorming' ('The Round Table on constitutional reform'). This contribution was published on 17 June but is dated 1 June 1917. In a contribution to the NRC of 2 Sept. 1915 Geyl remarked that *The Round Table* was not well known in the Netherlands but that it was 'a very important journal'.

should include foreign policy and its proceedings, therefore, had to be kept confidential led to the suggestion that the quadrennial imperial conferences could act as a kind of commonwealth parliament. In this way, the Round Table movement was trying to reintroduce the previously rejected idea of a federal British empire through the back door. Two days before, on 15 June, Geyl had written about the demise of federalism.<sup>11</sup> In this article, Geyl pointed to Jan Smuts, the South African military leader, member of the Imperial War Cabinet and future prime minister of South Africa, who rejected all federalist suggestions for the empire and was instead in favour of a solution along the lines of the League of Nations, namely a free association of peoples.

Geyl's interest in British discussions about federalism initially led him, as noted above, to write a biography of Chamberlain as a means of investigating the constitutional problems of the British empire in more detail. To lay the groundwork, he offered a couple of articles on the British statesman to the Dutch monthly *De Gids*. The editors declined but eventually published three lengthy and more widely framed articles under the title 'De constitutioneele ontwikkeling van het Britsche Rijk' ('The constitutional development of the British empire') in 1917. The three articles comprised a detailed history of nineteenth-century British imperialism and the attempt to establish a means of cooperation with the colonies in the Imperial Federation League of 1884, which had supported a federalist kind of organization for the British empire.<sup>12</sup> However, these articles are written in a highly descriptive way, and it is difficult to discern Geyl's personal opinion in them.

### ***India and Indonesia***

Nevertheless, Geyl could not let the subject go. Even after giving up his post as NRC correspondent in 1919, he continued to write about the subject in the 1920s, according to his memoirs in the periodical *Economisch-Statistische Berichten* (ESB) and in the daily *De Locomotief* in the Dutch East Indies. While his contributions to the colonial newspaper could not be identified, Geyl indeed published a series of articles about the imperial conferences in the ESB. In the first of these, he wrote that it was very likely that at a certain moment the dominions would become self-governing entities, but he also believed that, in the end, all the parties involved would want to prevent the empire from falling apart.<sup>13</sup> The real question was what shape the empire would take in the future. One of the possibilities Geyl discussed

<sup>11</sup> The article was titled 'Het Rijkskabinet' ('The imperial cabinet').

<sup>12</sup> *De Gids*, lxxxi (1917), 2, 515–33; *De Gids*, lxxxi (1917), 132–55 and 313–55.

<sup>13</sup> 'De Rijksconferentie', *Economisch-Statistische Berichten*, vi (1921), 286, 291, 296.

was a federalist solution, although most dominions were not very keen on this kind of outcome. And federal systems, according to Geyl, tended to work only for geographically contiguous territories and not at a distance, as would be the case of the British empire. Furthermore, the history of the position of the province of Holland in the Dutch Republic alone demonstrated how difficult it was to achieve equality among the constituent parts of a federation.

Another federalist case was the subject of an ESB article by Geyl in 1930, this time internal federalism in British India. Here was a situation in which the federal territories were geographically contiguous, and in the preceding years India had indeed been moving towards self-rule and self-determination. However, Geyl did not have much confidence in the process, partly because he considered India to be an underdeveloped backwater, but also because, in his view, federations could work only when the forms of government of their constituent parts were more or less the same, which was not the case in India. The Hindu–Muslim divide also stood in the way of a real federalist solution there. In 1931 Geyl wrote: ‘Almost always federations come into existence when already independent unions decide to come together.’<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, in these publications Geyl rarely mentions the Dutch colonial empire in the East Indies, and there are several reasons for this.<sup>15</sup> In the first place, he was not interested in Dutch East Indian politics. In a letter from 1927 to the historian F. C. Gerretson, with whom he entertained a lifelong, if not unproblematic, friendship, Geyl wrote, ‘this is rather far-off to me’,<sup>16</sup> which is probably the reason why he never drew a detailed comparison between India and the Dutch East Indies. It might also have to do with his attitude to non-white populations. When he visited South Africa in 1937, for example, Geyl was not specifically interested in the racial segregation of early apartheid;<sup>17</sup> it was only after the system hardened in the 1950s and 1960s that he became critical of the system. In the same letter Geyl responded to Gerretson, who previously had expressed anxiety about the future relationship of the Netherlands and its colony (‘a catastrophe is inevitable’), writing ‘I take some comfort in the thought that some years ago

<sup>14</sup> ‘De Britse Rijksconferentie’, *Economisch-Statistische Berichten*, xv (1930), 773, 777.

<sup>15</sup> Only in a review of E. Thompson and G. T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (London, 1934) does Geyl write that a comparison between India and the Dutch East Indies seems natural enough, but that one also should be very careful because of the many differences in the land and the people. The review is in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 9 June 1934, reprinted in *Soerabaiaasch Handelsblad*, 14 July 1934.

<sup>16</sup> *Briefwisseling Gerretson–Geyl*, ed. P. van Hees and G. Puchinger, i (Baarn, 1979), p. 230 (letter to F. C. Gerretson of 2 Nov. 1927).

<sup>17</sup> *Pieter Geyl in Zuid-Afrika: Verslag van de lezingentournee langs universiteiten in Zuid-Afrika, juli–december 1937*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (Amsterdam, 2000).

the English also had a rather gloomy view on their position in their Indies, which was followed by a considerable *détente*. In those Indian peoples, there is such a miserable low level of perseverance and aptitude of construction.<sup>18</sup> This is another reason why Geyl was able to imagine, however difficult it might prove to achieve in practice, a federalist solution for the British empire, but not for the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies. Federalism might be a solution for complicated political situations but, as we saw earlier, in Geyl's opinion only worked as federalism between equals and when the involved entities were geographically contiguous. For the British empire, both inequality and distance were great obstacles, but the same would apply for a federation of the Netherlands and future Indonesia.

### *The Flemish question*

None of Geyl's publications on the constitutional problems of the British empire make a connection to his pet subject, the Flemish question in Belgium. This seems strange, as Geyl had been deeply involved in the Flemish movement since his student years in the 1910s and, particularly after the end of the First World War, there is exponential growth in publications about the position of Flanders within the Belgian state. In the 1920s the debate became rather heated and Geyl was more and more involved in Flemish political activism, to the point that he was refused entry to Belgium twice (in 1929 and 1933).

Geyl, however, rarely made a connection between the two cases, although federalism was discussed in both contexts. He only referred to the British situation a few times to give additional weight to his opinions about federalism as a possible way forward for Belgium; one example can be found in his correspondence with Herman Vos, his most important ally in the campaign for a federative system there. In 1926, Geyl invited Vos over to London during the imperial conference that took place from 19 October to 22 November that year. They planned to consult the South African prime minister J. B. M. Hertzog, who advocated the end of empire and its replacement by a British commonwealth,<sup>19</sup> in which all dominions

<sup>18</sup> It was not Geyl but Gerretson who frequently used the term '*Rijksgedachte*' when discussing the Dutch–Indonesian question. Geyl used the term only in respect to British imperial policy. See Gerretson's 1954 valedictory speech at Utrecht University: *De Rijksgedachte* (Utrecht, 1954). In the 1930s and 1940s the term had been rather contaminated with Nazi connotations.

<sup>19</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ed. P. van Hees and A. W. Willemsen (3 vols, Utrecht/Antwerp/Amsterdam, 1973–5), i, p. 359, letter of 12 Oct. 1926. Hertzog was also seen as an advocate of the Dutch or 'Diets' element in Afrikaner culture, against the anglicizing tendencies of his political rival Jan Smuts. When both groups merged in the late 1930s, Geyl was disappointed in Hertzog and his followers.

would be equal in status and constitute 'autonomous communities within the British Empire' (Balfour Declaration of 1926). It must have been an attractive idea to both Geyl and Vos. In 1930 Geyl again quoted the South African example in a letter to Vos, mentioning, alongside Irish Home Rule and the Nordic union between Sweden and Norway, the voluntary granting of self-government to the South African provinces of Transvaal and Orange River in 1907. This, he felt, was the way to establish a reasonable political answer to a complicated problem, and a similar federalist solution, in Geyl's view, would not only bring peace to Belgium but also diminish the risk of another war in Europe.<sup>20</sup> In a letter of 1930 to Jeroom Leuridan, a Flemish nationalist and member of the Belgian parliament, he once again used the model of South Africa (in this case Hertzog's acceptance of the commonwealth in 1926) to explain that the acceptance of self-government, a step in the direction of a federalist solution, was not necessarily negative and did not mean giving up further ambitions.<sup>21</sup>

Among Dutch and Belgian historians there is a long-standing and heated debate about 'the true Geyl', whether he was part of a movement that aimed to dismantle Belgium or whether he was only campaigning, if in a particularly zealous way, for Flemish autonomy within a Belgian framework.<sup>22</sup> In the context of this chapter, the question may be reframed as: did Geyl advocate a federalist solution to the Flemish question? The answer seems obvious because Geyl was one of the architects of the *federaal statuut* (federal statute) that was brought before the Belgian parliament in 1931. But even then, different forms of federalism were conceivable. Was the statute about a federation of two or three Belgian communities based on language, or was it about a federal union between the Netherlands and

<sup>20</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 300, letter of 11 Feb. 1930.

<sup>21</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 327, letter of 13 Oct. 1930. The British example is also used in support of federative tendencies in the inaugural address at the acceptance of his extraordinary professorship at the University of Rotterdam in 1938, 'Het nationalisme als factor in de moderne Europese geschiedenis' ('Nationalism as an element in recent European history'). The address primarily targeted the federal cooperation of different nationalisms within one state. Although he saw all kinds of problems, the tradition of self-governance within the British empire that was codified in the statute of Westminster of 1931 proved that such a coexistence of different nationalisms within one political system was possible. He added that this did not *prove* anything, nevertheless it was at least a *creed*. Reprinted in *Verzamelde opstellen*, iii (Utrecht/Antwerp, 1978), pp. 3–21, his remarks on the statute of Westminster on p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Mainly a controversy between historians in Leuven and Utrecht, in which the Leuven historians accused Geyl of aiming for the dissolution of the Belgian state. For an overview of the debate see L. Simons, 'Pieter Geyl en de Groot-Nederlandse gedachte', in L. Simons, *Antwerpen–Den Haag Retour: Over twee volken gescheiden door dezelfde taal* (Tielt, 1990), pp. 41–73, and Fons Meijer's chapter in this volume.



Flanders, which to all practical intents and purposes would have meant the dissolution of the Belgian state? Behind this ambiguity lies another question, namely whether the proposed federal statute was an end in itself or whether it was tactical, one step in the direction of a more radical solution.

Geyl is not easy to interpret because on the Flemish question his earlier thoughts about federalism fit in with his *Groot-Nederlandse Gedachte*, the Greater Netherlands idea. Was it federalism within Belgium that he was aiming for, or was a political Greater Netherlands the ultimate goal? In the three-volume edition of his correspondence on the matter, *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, one can find supporting evidence for both positions. He regularly put in writing that a partition of Belgium was not what he sought,<sup>23</sup> but on more than one occasion he also told correspondents that the proposition of a federal charter was purely tactical, that for him federalism was 'een noodwendig tussenstadium' ('a necessary interim stage').<sup>24</sup> One might say that he espoused a Fabian tactical approach of progressing gently in order not to estrange the less radical elements among his pro-Flemish allies.

Then again, Geyl also wrote to several of his correspondents that to him Belgium was 'not worth a straw' and that there was no inherent contradiction between federalism and the Greater Netherlands idea. Neither did he hesitate to call 'the reunion of Flanders and the Netherlands' the ideal solution to the problem.<sup>25</sup> For many of those involved in the debate about Geyl's real intentions, foremost among them Louis Vos and Lode Wils from Leuven, this was enough to conclude that Geyl was not sincere in his collaboration with the federalists.<sup>26</sup>

In my view, Geyl did employ tactics, but not so much the tactics of slow Fabian-like progress, in which a federal solution was only a stage on the way to a Greater Netherlands. Instead, his calculation may have been that he expected the francophone part of Belgium to reject the proposal of a Belgian federation of communities based on language, and then only one, radical, solution would be left. It must be said, however, that the proposed federation was entirely in line with Geyl's view of the preconditions for a federal solution for the British empire: equal communities, with a balance of interests, partly based on self-defence against a hostile outside world. Geyl, as a historian, would also have been concerned about the possible

<sup>23</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, i, eg. p. 238; ii, pp. 210, 303.

<sup>24</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, eg. pp. 230, 234, 252.

<sup>25</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, eg. pp. 326, 327, 331.

<sup>26</sup> When reading Geyl's texts on this question, one is often confronted with a certain ambiguity. It is not always clear from his formulations where exactly he stands. An example is his contribution 'Het Federal Statuut voor België' for his own journal *Leiding* (1931), ii, 301–3. Even close reading does not reveal what he believes the solution should be.

consequences of a partition of Belgium for the European equilibrium;<sup>27</sup> as a resident of London and as a journalist he had been at the centre of the European disaster of the First World War and must have seen the importance of balancing the fragile European political situation.

### *European federalism*

The federalist concept resurfaced in Geyl's work after the Second World War. This time it emerged in the context of the beginning of European integration. By this point, Geyl had not only become a well-known historian with his contrarian interpretation of the history of the Dutch republic and the house of Orange-Nassau, but also a public intellectual engaged in a broad range of topics. One of the characteristic features of the post-war Geyl was his leaning towards the philosophy of history, espoused especially in his discussions with Arnold Toynbee, which brought him world fame, and in the preface to his book on Napoleon with the famous quote of history being 'a discussion without end'.

In a speech given in 1953 on the occasion of the 317th anniversary of the founding of Utrecht University with the title 'Een historicus tegenover de wereld van nu' ('A historian vis-à-vis today's world') and the subtitle 'The European federation', Geyl tried to bring his philosophy of history and his ideas about federalism together.<sup>28</sup> This speech, delivered more than sixty years ago, has lost nothing of its urgency and still holds a message for us today. To begin with, Geyl queried the purpose of history: does it help us to understand the complex world of today? Beginning his search for an answer with Friedrich Nietzsche's *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* ('On the Use and Abuse of History for Life') and its rejection of an excessive focus on history, which on the one hand can lead to paralysis and saturation and on the other to a strong call to action, which can turn into fanaticism because people think they are acting 'in opdracht van de tijd' ('by order of the times'),<sup>29</sup> Geyl spoke of a 'false fatality': in his view, there was no predestined course of history; instead, history was an open process. This echoes his famous discussions with Toynbee and those with communist and determinist historians such as Jan Romein. In this respect, the world of 1953 was a direct result of a series of catastrophes that had to be seen in conjunction with 'far-reaching and deep-rooted causes'. To

<sup>27</sup> *Geyl en Vlaanderen*, ii, p. 331.

<sup>28</sup> 'Een historicus tegenover de wereld van nu', *Socialisme en Democratie*, April 1953, 193–206.

<sup>29</sup> By using the terminology 'in opdracht van de tijd' Geyl was referring to Jan Romein, his communist colleague at the University of Amsterdam, who had in 1946 published a book with this title.

demonstrate what he meant by this, he quoted a report containing plans for a European federation commissioned by the foreign ministers of the six countries that together constituted the European Council and the European Coal and Steel Community.<sup>30</sup> The plan proposed a European parliament with two chambers and partly direct elections and contained ideas about the establishment of a European Court of Justice. Geyl called this a somewhat unitarian, centralized plan. But not to worry, he wrote; it was just a plan, no more. The danger he foresaw in it was that some interest groups in Europe would interpret these developments as the predetermined course of history. For these interest groups, a large part of the European population did not share the ideal of a united Europe only because they were not yet ready for it; they would understand it in time. Looking at the events of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it can be seen how prophetic Geyl was in this respect.<sup>31</sup> 'Brexit' and similar movements in other European countries to leave the European Union are based precisely on this idea that the 'elites' for years and years had not been listening to opinions on the ground.

However, this is not the point here. Geyl was not opposed to a federative solution to Europe's problems; on the contrary, he considered it a fundamental condition of European stability. But he did not want to proceed too fast and believed that those who wanted to pursue this process had first to converge and have some form of rapprochement. The Italian parliamentary tradition was distinct from the Dutch tradition. And the Germans had different interests to the French. And, he added, Europe would not be complete without the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries.

We find the same idea in a contribution to the broadsheet *Het Parool* in 1954 entitled 'Onorthodoxe bedenkingen tegen de Klein-Europa-politiek' ('Unorthodox considerations against the politics of a small Europe'), again still relevant today.<sup>32</sup> Geyl observed that there was a lot of vagueness in ideas about Europe, that there was no real public discussion of the subject and that many national politicians were suggesting that Europe had embarked on a road that had passed 'the point of no return'. Geyl wondered if this was really the case and had a few points to make. First, when politicians spoke about Europe they were talking about a very limited concept of Europe, namely the small subset of Europe that was the 'Europe of the Six', which to his mind could never be the idea of Europe as a whole. Second, he asked if a united Europe could serve as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union. In order for this to be possible, according to Geyl, it would be advisable to

<sup>30</sup> France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

<sup>31</sup> Repeated one year later by Gerretson in his *De Rijksgedachte*, pp. 22–3.

<sup>32</sup> *Het Parool*, 8 and 19 Jan. 1954.

have Germany as a member of NATO. This limited idea of Europe was not European idealism but rather French *realpolitik*. Finally, Geyl had doubts about the idea of European elections, as no common European political party system was in existence. He rejected a European federalism that would lead to a European hotchpotch, in which there would no longer be a place for national traditions and peculiarities. What he really wanted, he wrote in an afterword to this newspaper article, was a European federation that took into account national characteristics.<sup>33</sup> He had no doubts, he wrote explicitly, that such a federation was necessary and that it should encompass both an economical and a military federation.

However, Geyl also had some misgivings about certain federative ideas. As mentioned above, he envisaged a more inclusive Europe, not the Europe of the Six. He emphasized this view in an interview in the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* in 1963, in which he denounced de Gaulle's veto on Britain's accession to the European project, writing, 'now we are "locked in" in a small Europe'.<sup>34</sup> But even then, he doubted that the transition of power to a European parliament was advisable. Small countries such as the Netherlands would lose their uniqueness, which was at least partly based on language. Here again, we see Geyl's idea of federalism in its optimal form: yes, federalism provides a solution to political divisions, but it will only work between equal partners. This held for relations between the UK and its dominions; federalism would have worked in Belgium, if Wallonia had been prepared to see Flanders as an equal partner; and it could lead to a united Europe, if small nations could maintain their uniqueness within the greater European idea.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, this chapter has shown that the idea of federalism, an idea he encountered initially when observing the consequences of the First World War for the relationship between the UK and its colonies, played a central role in Pieter Geyl's political thinking. To him, federalism was a solution for a divided world, but only when all partners in a federation agreed to work on an equal footing.

As Hermann von der Dunk put it in his biographical entry on Geyl for the *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, Pieter Geyl was not a philosopher but more of a common-sense thinker.<sup>35</sup> Federalism was a

<sup>33</sup> In a postscript published in *Het Parool*, 19 Jan. 1954, in reaction to comments by Pieter 't Hoen in *Het Parool*, viii, 15 and 16 Jan. 1954.

<sup>34</sup> 'Het land aan de ketting van De Gaulle – de fout van "57"', *Het Vrije Volk*, 26 April 1963.

<sup>35</sup> *Nieuwe Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging*, ii (Tielt, 1998), pp. 1302–5: '... een

recurring idea in his works, but he never indulged in theorizing federalism as a concept. Neither did he delve into the history of the concept, which, as is commonly acknowledged, to a large extent derives from the ideas of Johannes Althusius (1557–1638), Calvinist law professor at the University of Herborn in Germany.<sup>36</sup> Remarkable also is the fact that Geyl very rarely mentions the United States as an example of a successful federalist system, somewhat surprising given that as a Low Countries historian he was well aware of the manifold connections and parallels between American independence and Dutch early modern history. The impact of his experiences with imperial politics in London during the First World War was apparently so strong that it became the sole source of his ideas of federalism as a political solution.

Following in the footsteps of the German-American political theorist Carl Joachim Friedrich (1901–84), nowadays federalism is frequently seen as a dynamic concept, not so much as a condition but as a process.<sup>37</sup> This is interesting in respect to Geyl's federalism, especially with regard to the question of what he was really seeking when promoting a federal statute for Belgium in 1930–31. One might say that it was his step-by-step approach that showed his awareness of the idea of federalism as a process; his writings on the development of European unity in the 1950s and 1960s also demonstrate this awareness. In *The Idea of Greater Britain* Duncan Bell suggests, following Michael Burgess, that it is necessary to distinguish between the two separate concepts of 'federalism' and 'federation', although they are frequently used interchangeably. 'Federalism', for the most part, denotes 'a positive valuation of diversity', while 'federation' is used when referring to a specific form of government.<sup>38</sup> Looking at Geyl's writings, we find exactly this intermingling of concepts. He is very much interested in diversity, be it within the small Belgian state or in Europe at large. His biggest fear is that in a greater Europe the diversity of small countries might be lost. More problematic is the idea of federation, because it involves political decision making and political action.

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krachtige, maar geen diepe geest'.

<sup>36</sup> K. Scott, *Federalism: a Normative Theory and Its Practical Relevance* (New York/London, 2011), pp. 1–45.

<sup>37</sup> Scott, *Federalism*, p. 136; M. Burgess, 'Opening Pandora's box: Process and paradox in the federalism of political identity', in *The Ways of Federalism in Western Countries and the Horizons of Territorial Autonomy in Spain*, ed. Alberto Lopez-Basaguren and Leire Escajedo San Epifanio, i (Berlin, 2013), pp. 3–15.

<sup>38</sup> D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2017), pp. 94–5. Bell refers to M. Burgess, 'Federalism and federation', in *Comparative Federalism and Federation*, ed. M. Burgess and A.-G. Gagnon (London, 1993), pp. 3–14 and to P. King, *Federalism and Federation* (London, 1982), ch. 1.

Here lies Geyl's weak point when talking about federalist ideas. It sometimes looks as if the risks involved in a federalization process never crossed his mind. By becoming federal or proposing a federation, the noble idea of federalist diversity could also open Pandora's box; one never knew what powers might be released.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup> M. Burgess, 'Opening Pandora's box', pp. 13–14.