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Beerenbrouck, Charles Ruijs de

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Ruijs de Beerenbrouck, *Charles Joseph Maria*
Dutch Prime Minister (1918-1922)
Born 01 December 1873 in Roermond, The Netherlands
Died 17 April 1936 in Utrecht, The Netherlands

Ruijs de Beerenbrouck was a Dutch Prime Minister who successfully dealt with the threat of revolution in November 1918.

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1. Education and Early Career

In September 1918, forty-four year old Charles Ruijs de Beerenbrouck (1873-1936) became the youngest Prime Minister of the Netherlands, succeeding one of the oldest, [Pieter Wilhelm Adriaan Cort van der Linden \(1846-1935\)](#), who was seventy-two when he left office. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck was a Catholic aristocrat from Holland's most southern province, Limburg. He studied law at Leiden and then returned to Maastricht, the provincial capital, where he set up a legal practice and worked hard to improve the social conditions of the working class.

In 1905 he was elected to parliament for the *Rooms-Katholieke Staatspartij* (The Roman Catholic

State Party), but he never became a prominent parliamentarian. A few months after the outbreak of World War I (WWI), he was appointed Commissar for the Refugees in the southern provinces. The enormous influx of [refugees](#) from [Belgium](#) in the first few months of the war (totalling around 1 million) compelled the government to set up a huge administrative and logistical operation to move them out of the border areas and house them in hastily set up refugee camps across the country. In this capacity Ruijs de Beerenbrouck proved himself an able administrator. In May 1918 he succeeded his father as Limburg's provincial governor, which initially seemed to put an end to his political career. However, the general elections of July 1918 would change that.

2. Becoming a National Statesman

One of the previous government's major achievements was a constitutional reform that introduced proportional representation and increased the electorate. The Roman Catholic Party benefited most from the new system: with thirty of the 100 seats it became the biggest party in the new parliament. Attempts to form a new government with the other Catholic and Protestant parties proved a laborious process. In September 1919, after a lengthy formation period in which the most likely candidates were either unwilling, unavailable or unacceptable to their coalition partners, Ruijs de Beerenbrouck emerged as the compromise candidate and became Holland's first Catholic prime minister.

3. Turbulent Times

Ruijs de Beerenbrouck's government soon ran into unforeseen war-related difficulties. On 10 November 1918, the ex-Kaiser [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) asked for political asylum. He was not a welcome guest; the Dutch government feared the Allies might demand his extradition and they did not want to antagonize the Entente. However, it was decided that following his abdication, the ex-Kaiser qualified for refugee status and should therefore be granted political asylum.

Two days later the socialist leader [Pieter Jelles Troelstra \(1860-1930\)](#) announced in parliament that the revolution had spread to Holland and demanded that the government relinquish power. Ruijs de Beerenbrouck refused, called in the army to secure strategic positions and diffused the revolutionary tension by substantially increasing food rations, asking for the unpopular commander-in-chief's resignation and announcing plans for imminent demobilisation and social reforms.

The [peace talks in Paris](#) brought further worries, as it was feared that Belgium might demand safer borders, which would involve the annexation of two Dutch territories: Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and the southern part of Limburg, Ruijs de Beerenbrouck's native province. A campaign was started to preserve these threatened areas. Representatives were dispatched to Paris to collect information and lobby for the Dutch cause. [Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands \(1880-1962\)](#) was sent on a highly successful propaganda tour in the south to drum up patriotic feelings. In the end, the annexation threat was successfully averted, mainly because the major powers did not have much sympathy for the Belgian claims.

4. Returning to “Normal”

After this rocky start, Ruijs de Beerenbrouck's government focused on the transition back to pre-war normality. All the internal conflicts, which had lain dormant throughout the war years, resurfaced, but the government soldiered on, introducing significant social reforms such as the eight-hour working day and women's right to vote. After the war he led two further cabinets (1922-1925 and 1929-1933), ending his political career as speaker in the lower house.

Ruijs de Beerenbrouck was not considered a brilliant lawmaker or great visionary, but he was a well-liked leader who assembled a competent team of ministers around him. In the compromise culture of Dutch politics he had the great gift of not making enemies. His personality was summed up in the (German) lines he once copied down in his diary: “*Leide gerne / Rede wenig / Schweige still / Bete viel*” (“Suffer willingly / Talk sparingly / Be taciturn / Pray a lot”).^[1]

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Notes

1. ↑ Quoted in Puchinger, G.: *Ontmoetingen met Nederlandse Politici* [Meetings with Dutch politicians], Zutphen 1981, p. 98.

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