



THE COLD WAR IN UTRECHT

2025

JOIN US ON A WALK THROUGH UTRECHT
CITY CENTRE, VIEWED THROUGH A COLD
WAR LENS

| THE COLD WAR RESEARCH NETWORK | JULY 2026
DIRK VAN HEININGEN | JORAN STERREBURG | SUZANNA HOLLERMANN



BE SWEEPED AWAY BY THESE STORIES

| JAARBEURSPLEIN | NO NUKES FESTIVAL

VVDM headquarters and a performance by the Dutch band Doe Maar.

| NOORDERTUNNEL | FALLOUT SHELTER CENTRAL STATION

A hidden shortcut beneath Central Station with a surprisingly useful history.

| TIVOLI VREDENBURG | BB CABARET

The 'Bescherming Bevolking' urgently needed volunteers – was the solution found in cabaret performances?

| STADHUIS UTRECHT | BAREND SCHREUDER

A prominent Utrecht member of the Communist Party of the Netherlands made a Knight at City Hall.

| KROMME NIEUWEGRACHT | NATO DEMONSTRATION

NATO's 20th anniversary was anything but celebrated in Utrecht.

| DOMTOREN | SATURN V

Utrecht's most iconic landmark briefly became an American missile.

| SMEEBRUG | PROTEST AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR

Student Olav Meijer hangs a controversial banner outside his window.

| MARIAPLAATS | 'DE WAARHEID' OFFICE

Unrest grips the country and Utrecht's city centre after the Hungarian uprising in late 1956.

| VREDENBURGPLEIN | CINEMA BRESSER

The 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia causes a stir in a Utrecht cinema.

From the authors

What traces of the Cold War can still be found in a city like Utrecht today? At first glance, little seems to remain of a conflict that held the world in its grip for more than four decades. Yet, throughout the city, reminders of a period that brought profound tensions to both the Netherlands and the wider world can still be found.

During this approximately 90-minute walking tour, you will discover how the legacy of the Cold War continues to shape Utrecht's urban landscape. Through a series of significant locations and stories, you will explore the tangible traces of this conflict and gain a deeper understanding of this period in Dutch history. Each location will tell its own story on how international tensions became tangible in the city of Utrecht. Some places show how people prepared or handled a possible nuclear war, while other locations show how political conflicts grew into social tensions within the city itself. Together, this walk provides a local perspective on a global conflict.

We hope that this walking tour will not only provide a fun activity, but also offer a new perspective on the history of the Cold War and Utrecht. This project was very special and interesting for us. We really enjoyed researching and bringing back to life this somewhat forgotten history. That is why we hope that everyone walks through the city with as much curiosity and pleasure as we had putting together this route. Have fun walking!

~Dirk, Joran and Suzanna



Practical Information

Before you set off, please read the practical information below to help you make the most of your walking tour.

ROUTE:



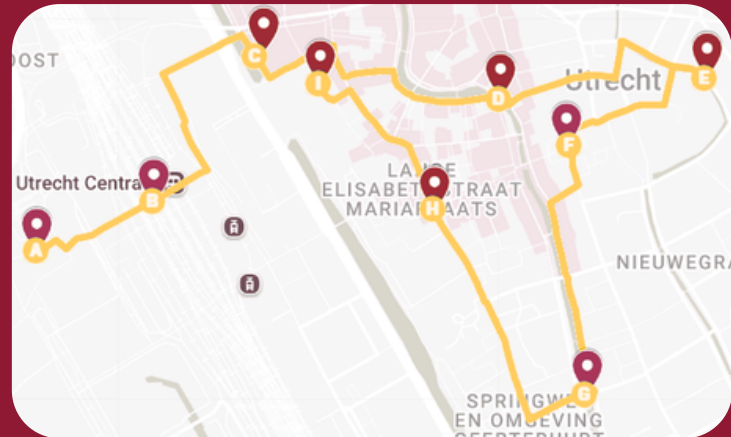
This walking tour has been designed as a logical route connecting the different locations. You are welcome to follow this order, but this is not required. Each location tells its own story, meaning you can also complete the tour in any order you prefer.

LISTENING:

Each stop is accompanied by a short audio fragment that explains the historical background of the location. These recordings are available on the Cold War Research Network website and can easily be played on your smartphone while walking to the next stop or once you have arrived..

NAVIGATION:

The complete walking route is available in Google Maps. Simply scan the QR code or use the link on the Walk Through Utrecht page to open the route directly on your phone and follow it throughout the tour.



TAKE YOUR TIME:

The full walk takes approximately one and a half hours, but you decide the pace. Feel free to take a break, enjoy lunch or a coffee, visit a museum, or explore other parts of Utrecht's historic city centre along the way.

www.coldwarresearchnetwork.nl

TIPS:

- Wear comfortable walking shoes.
- Bring an umbrella or raincoat if the weather is acting Dutch and uncertain.
- Don't forget your phone and, if you prefer, headphones or earbuds for the audio fragments.
- Take your time to explore, the historic centre of Utrecht has plenty to offer beyond the tour itself!



N ° 52.08887"
E ° 5.10624"

Jaarbeursplein - VVDM

On this site at Jaarbeursplein once stood the headquarters of the Association of Conscript Servicemen (VVDM). Founded in 1966, the trade union for Dutch conscripts was unique in Europe at the time. In 1969, the VVDM was formally recognized as a negotiating partner of the Dutch Minister of Defence. Throughout the 1970s, the organization became known for its campaigns to improve the position of conscripted soldiers. These included the abolition of the compulsory military salute, compensation schemes for professional servicemen, and opposition to the mandatory short-hair policy in the Dutch armed forces.

At its peak during the 1970s, the VVDM counted more than 40,000 members—nearly 80 percent of all Dutch conscripts. When compulsory military service was suspended in the 1990s, the organization's future was effectively sealed. At its final congress in 1996, the VVDM formally dissolved. At the same time, the VVDM Heritage Foundation was established, with the organization's remaining assets transferred to it so that the association could be re-established should conscription ever be reintroduced. The foundation still exists today.

At the same time, Jaarbeursplein served as a stage for cultural resistance against the excesses of the Cold War. On 9 April 1982, the Dutch band Doe Maar performed at the No Nukes Festival with the memorable words: "You still have homework to do before the bomb falls."

As the festival's organizing foundation put it: "Now you can show, in a swinging way, that you are against these dangerous developments as well." Other performers included The Stranglers, The Sound, and U2. Their participation reflected a broader trend: throughout the 1970s and 1980s, public opposition in the Netherlands to the deployment and stationing of nuclear weapons in Western Europe grew steadily.



N ° 52.08974"
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Noordertunnel CS - Fallout Shelter

As the population of Utrecht steadily increased from the 1960s onwards, the large-scale evacuation of civilians came to be regarded as impractical. Consequently, the focus of civil defence shifted towards providing protection in underground shelters. As part of this strategy, several air-raid and nuclear shelters were established throughout Utrecht, where residents could seek refuge in the event of a nuclear attack.

To reduce costs, the authorities sought wherever possible to combine these shelters with other types of infrastructure. For example, the basements of newly constructed apartment buildings were designed to function as fallout shelters while also serving practical purposes in peacetime. One notable example was the Noordertunnel beneath Utrecht Central Station, which was converted into a nuclear fallout shelter in 1974. From its entrance at Smakkelaarsveld to just before the staircase leading to Platform 3, the tunnel could be fully sealed with heavy, gas-tight doors. This created a shelter capable of accommodating approximately 2,000 people, who could remain there for up to two days. The shelter disappeared in the early 1990s during the construction of the Noordgebouw.

The shelter was equipped with, among other things, a tandem bicycle that could be used to operate the ventilation pump manually in the event of a power failure, as well as so-called fallout showers for the decontamination of people exposed to radioactive fallout. Although the shelter itself no longer exists, it is still commemorated today by a text embedded in the tunnel floor, an audio presentation, and two viewing windows through which part of the former interior can be seen, preserving the memory of this Cold War landmark.



Tivoli Vredenburg - Burger Beweging

For more than three decades, the Netherlands was home to the Civil Defence Organization (Bescherming Bevolking, BB, 1952–1986), a civilian organisation modelled on the British Civil Defence Service. Its primary task was to protect, evacuate, and assist the population during times of war and major disasters. An important aspect of its work involved informing the Dutch public about the possibility of a Third World War, which was expected to be fought with both conventional and nuclear weapons. The BB employed a permanent core of civil servants but depended largely on volunteers. Consequently, the participation of local citizens was also essential in Utrecht.

The recruitment campaign launched in Utrecht on the second of February in 1953 proved remarkably successful. Within just a few months, more than 6000 volunteers had enrolled. To strengthen members' commitment to the organisation, the BB organised so-called "bonding evenings," including cabaret performances at Tivoli. Football matches and walking tours were also arranged to foster community spirit and attract additional volunteers. Although the campaign was initially highly successful, the Utrecht branch of the BB soon experienced a significant decline in membership, reflecting a nationwide trend.

Over the years, criticism of the BB grew within the media, academic circles, and political parties, leading to a gradual decline in the organisation's public standing. This development was reflected in its membership figures. Whereas the Utrecht BB counted more than 6000 civil defence volunteers in 1953, this number had fallen to around 4000 by 1957 and to just over 2000 by the end of 1959. Activities were also organised at neighbourhood level in an effort to maintain public engagement, but these initiatives failed to reverse the downward trend. To maintain adequate staffing levels, compulsory civil defence service (the so called *noodwachtplicht*) was introduced in 1958. Men exempt from regular military service were thereafter required to serve in the BB. Although this measure enabled the organisation to regain its intended strength, its voluntary character gradually disappeared.

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City Hall Utrecht - Barend Schreuder

During the first decades of the Cold War, Dutch politics was heavily influenced by the growing tensions between East and West. As the Soviet Union and the United States confronted one another in an ideological struggle between communism and capitalism, this conflict also became increasingly visible within Dutch society. Throughout the 1950s, anti-communist sentiment continued to grow, placing the Communist Party of the Netherlands, or CPN, under increasing pressure.

To many Dutch citizens, the party was no longer seen as just another political movement, but rather as an extension of Moscow. Communists were frequently excluded from public office and faced widespread social distrust. Against this historical background, it is therefore remarkable that, in 1981, a Utrecht communist was awarded one of the Netherlands' highest royal honours.

At Utrecht City Hall, in June 1981, an event took place that would have been almost unimaginable only a few decades earlier. Barend Schreuder, who had served for many years as a municipal councillor for the Communist Party of the Netherlands, was appointed a Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau.



He received this prestigious honour in recognition of his long-standing service to the city of Utrecht and its political life. Looking back with the perspective of a historian, Schreuder's royal decoration illustrates just how dramatically the position of Dutch communists changed throughout the Cold War—from deep political isolation to public recognition.

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Barend Schreuder became one of the most recognisable figures in Utrecht's local politics and within the Dutch Communist Party. At a time when communists were often politically isolated, he nevertheless established himself as a respected and influential member of the city council. His political career demonstrates that local political relationships were often less polarised than the fierce ideological divisions that characterised the Cold War on the international stage. Although his communist beliefs remained the subject of debate throughout his career, Schreuder gradually earned a reputation as a trusted and valued representative of a significant part of Utrecht's population.

Communists were, of course, not generally known for their support of the Dutch monarchy. From a traditional Marxist perspective, the monarchy was seen as a symbol of an outdated social order that would eventually disappear. Within the Communist Party of the Netherlands, criticism of the monarchy and the hereditary privileges associated with it remained common for many years. For that reason, Schreuder's decision to accept a royal honour attracted considerable attention.

Yet his decision also demonstrates that political reality is often more complex than ideological principles alone. Although communists in the Netherlands remained deeply unpopular throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s, the Communist Party increasingly focused on democratic participation and local government during the late 1970s. For many local politicians, including Schreuder, practical service to their city and its residents became more important than the ideological confrontation that had dominated the international Cold War. His royal decoration was therefore widely understood not as an endorsement of communist ideology, but as recognition of his personal commitment to Utrecht and its people.



Kromme Nieuwegracht - NAVO Demonstration

In 1969, NATO was twenty years old. For a new generation of students, that was no cause for celebration, but rather a reason to protest. They did not see the alliance as a guardian of peace, but as part of an arms race and an American foreign policy that, at the time, was also waging a bloody war in Vietnam. On the Kromme Nieuwegracht, the Socialist Youth, a revolutionary socialist youth movement, organized a demonstration against NATO that summer, right in the middle of the national Peace Week.

That Peace Week, organized since 1967 by the Interchurch Peace Council (IKV), carried the theme "No Charity, but Justice" in 1969 – a message that aligned seamlessly with the students' demands.



The Vredenburg square, behind Tivoli, also bore traces of the 1969 Peace Week. A group of students went on a hunger strike there from the 20 to 27 of September, living on water, bread, and cane sugar, in order to engage passers-by in conversation about poor countries. An information stall was set up, along with a discussion center and a "peace bonfire," with permission from the municipal government.

Dom Tower Utrecht – Space Exhibition '86

N ° 52.09077"
E ° 5.12165"

The Cold War generally conjures up images of nuclear weapons, the Berlin Wall, and the confrontation between East and West. But as this walk demonstrates, the Cold War was fought on a variety of fronts. Space exploration and technological developments were a key way for the United States and the Soviet Union to demonstrate their superiority over one another. Beginning with the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in 1957, a technological race unfolded in which both superpowers sought to prove their scientific, military, and economic superiority. The exploration and even conquest of space thus became much more than a scientific achievement; it evolved into a powerful instrument in the ideological struggle between East and West.

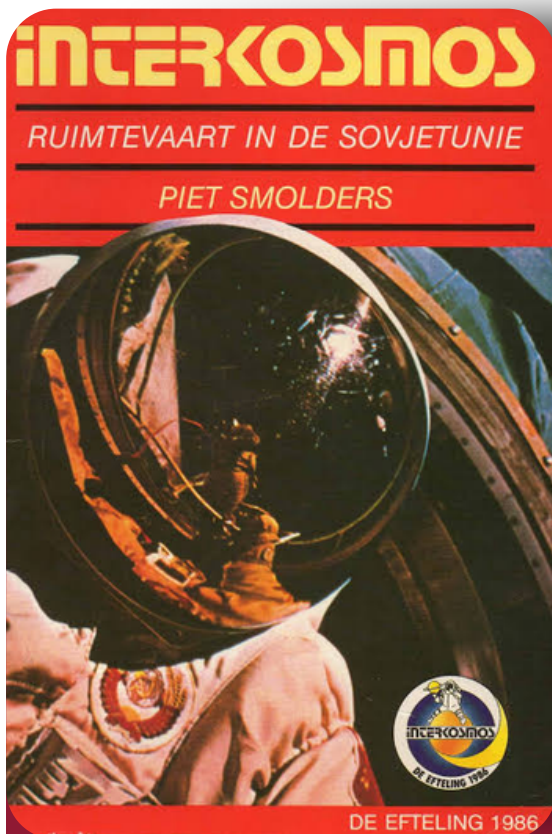
The Soviet Union initially achieved impressive successes. In 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space, while the United States gained international prestige a few years later with the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969. Although the most spectacular phase of the Space Race took place in the 1960s, spaceflight remained an important symbol of technological progress even afterward. By the mid-1980s, the emphasis had gradually shifted from competition to international cooperation and public interest in space exploration.



The growing public fascination with space travel was partly fueled by the Space Exhibition, which was held in Utrecht in the summer of 1986. The exhibition featured original space artifacts, scale models, and information about the American space programs, attracting thousands of visitors. To draw attention to the event, the Netherlands' most famous tower, the Dom Tower in Utrecht, was transformed into a giant Saturn V rocket—the launch vehicle used to send the Apollo missions to the moon. The exterior cladding on the Dom turned the city's most famous monument into a life-size tribute to the rocket and to space exploration for several weeks.

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The choice of the Saturn V, in particular, was telling. While the rocket had symbolized the American victory in the Space Race during the 1960s, by 1986 it had primarily become an international icon of technological innovation. Visitors no longer came out of Cold War-era tension, but out of admiration for an era in which science and technology had pushed the boundaries of what was possible. Yet the exhibition inadvertently took on a special historical significance. Just a few months earlier, on January 28, 1986, the American space shuttle Challenger had exploded shortly after launch, killing all seven astronauts. In addition, the Chernobyl disaster was still fresh in people's minds. Both events served as a reminder that technological progress, however impressive, always came with great risks.



The American exhibition did not go unnoticed on the other side of the Iron Curtain. That same year, the Soviet exhibition Interkosmos was organized at Efteling. While the focus in Utrecht was on American achievements, the Soviet Union showcased its own in Brabant. Although the most intense phase of the Space Race was by then a thing of the past, space exploration remained an important means by which both powers showcased their technological expertise, scientific progress, and national pride to an international audience. The exhibitions in Utrecht and at Efteling show that, in the 1980s, the competition between East and West no longer took place exclusively on launch pads or in research centers, but also in museums and exhibitions where the general public was introduced to the achievements of both blocs.

Anyone looking up at the Dom Tower today sees the familiar silhouette of Utrecht. In the summer of 1986, it looked very different. The tower was temporarily transformed into the largest “rocket” in the Netherlands, reminding visitors that the Cold War was not only about political confrontations and military threats, but also about dreams, innovation, and the ongoing quest for technological progress. The wrapped Dom Tower demonstrates how a global geopolitical conflict could even become visible in the heart of Utrecht.

Smeebrug - Vietnam War and Olav Meijer

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E ° 5.12214"

On the Smeebrug, where the Oudegracht offers a peaceful sight today, a different event took place on January 6, 1973. A few weeks earlier, peace negotiations between the United States and Vietnam had begun in Paris, until the U.S. government carried out heavy bombing raids on North Vietnam around Christmas. These so-called Christmas bombings also sparked widespread outrage in the Netherlands.

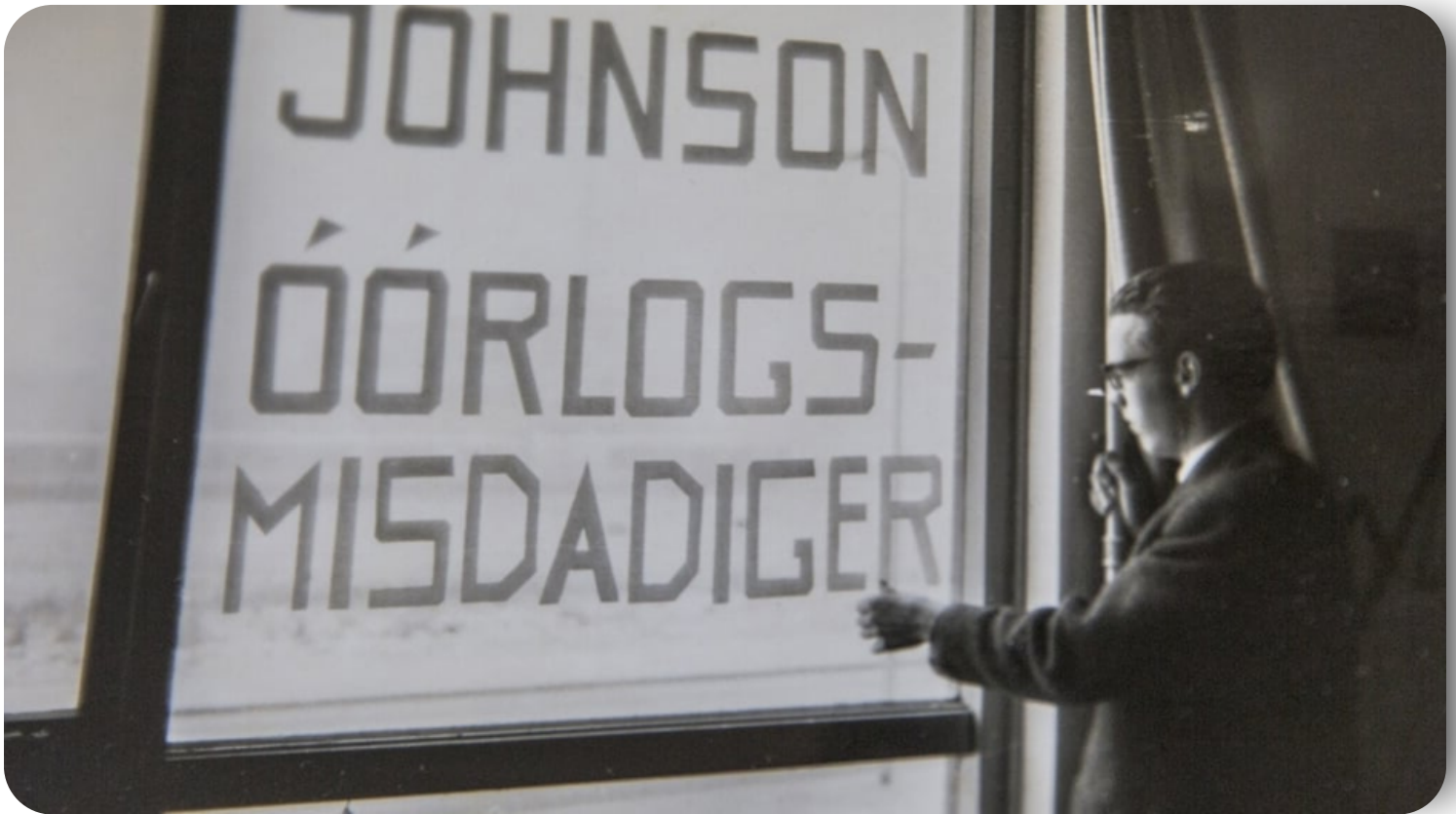


The result was the largest demonstration the postwar Netherlands had seen up to that point. Estimates of the number of participants range from fifty to one hundred thousand people, coming from all over the country. The demonstration enjoyed broad public support: at the Jaarbeurs, both PvdA, the workers party, House Speaker Anne Vondeling and KVP, the catholic peoples party, politician Marga Klompé addressed the crowd, and the ruling parties at the time—the ARP and KVP—also expressed their solidarity with the demonstrators.

N ° 52.08633"
E ° 5.12214"

Among those present was Olav Meijer, holding a sign reading "Nixon NATO Nazi." For Meijer, this was not the first time he had spoken out against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As early as February 1968, while a sociology student, he had displayed the text "Johnson war criminal" in the window of his dorm room on Ina Boudier-Bakkerlaan. The reaction was greater than he had expected: the university and even the U.S. Embassy intervened in the matter, and Meijer was arrested. Within a day, students in various cities hung the same text in their windows.

Meijer was ultimately fined. Reflecting on that period later, he said, "I've never regretted it."



Mariaplaats - office of De Waarheid

A decade after the end of the Second World War and the division of Europe into East and West, dissatisfaction began to grow within several communist countries in the Eastern Bloc. In October 1956, Hungarian students, workers, and citizens rose up en masse against the communist government and the dominant influence of the Soviet Union.

At first, the uprising appeared to be successful. Soviet troops partially withdrew, and reform-minded politicians were given greater freedom to pursue political change. This situation changed dramatically when, on 4 November, the Soviet Union violently crushed the uprising. Soviet tanks entered Budapest, thousands of Hungarians lost their lives, and large numbers of refugees fled across Western Europe.



The Hungarian Uprising also had significant repercussions in the Netherlands. The events provoked widespread public outrage, which manifested itself in various ways throughout Dutch society. Extensive newspaper coverage of the fighting in Budapest, the refugee crisis, and the violent actions of the Soviet Union fuelled public indignation. For many Dutch people, Hungary came to symbolise the violent and oppressive nature of communism. This outrage—and in some cases outright anger—was directed not only at Moscow, but also at Dutch communists and organisations associated with the Soviet Union.

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E ° 5.11774"

At the time of the Hungarian Uprising, a regional office of De Waarheid, the newspaper of the Communist Party of the Netherlands (CPN), was located on Mariaplaats in the centre of Utrecht. The newspaper suddenly found itself at the heart of international tensions that had become strikingly local. The office became an important symbolic target for demonstrators. In November 1956, protesters gathered outside the building, and as the day progressed tensions escalated. According to contemporary reports, the windows of the premises were smashed and the police had to intervene to prevent further violence. Similar incidents occurred in several Dutch cities, particularly where offices of the CPN and De Waarheid were located.



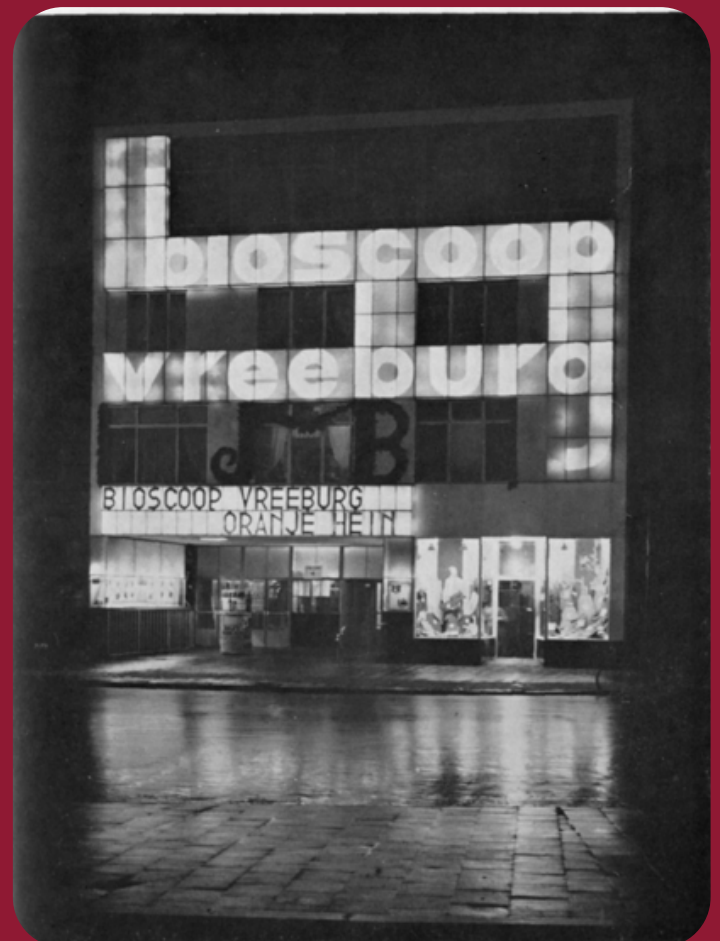
The strong domestic reactions to the Hungarian Uprising illustrate how rapidly anti-communist sentiment grew in the Netherlands during the late 1950s. Since the beginning of the Cold War, communists had increasingly become the subject of political and social criticism, but the events of 1956 significantly accelerated this development. For many Dutch people, the CPN was no longer regarded as a legitimate political party, but rather as an extension of Moscow. Dutch communists were increasingly held responsible for the decisions made by the Kremlin, more than 2,400 kilometres away. At first glance, this pleasant and characteristically Dutch square appears to have little connection with the global Cold War, let alone with resistance in Eastern Europe. Yet, for anyone willing to look through the eyes of a historian, Mariaplaats demonstrates how an international crisis could be translated into a local reality.

Vredenburg -Cinema Salon Bresser

The struggle between East and West was not only fought through nuclear weapons and political crises but also on the cultural front. Films, books, music, and television all helped shape the way people perceived "the other side of the Iron curtain." Cinemas, in particular, were more than places of entertainment; the silver screen also offered audiences a window into international relations and ideological divisions. For many years, one of Utrecht's best-known cinemas stood on Vredenburg: Salon Bresser.

Opened in 1908 by entrepreneur Bresser, the cinema quickly became a well-known landmark in the city and developed into a cinema where innovative productions were screened alongside popular films.

During the Cold War, the cinema's programme also reflected international political developments. In the summer of 1968, Salon Bresser screened the American comedy *The Russians Are Coming, the Russians Are Coming*. The film tells the story of a Soviet submarine that accidentally runs aground off the coast of a small American island. Although the island's residents initially panic, fearing a Soviet invasion, it soon becomes clear that the crew has no hostile intentions. As the story unfolds, suspicion and fear gradually give way to mutual understanding and cooperation.



N ° 52.09184"
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In doing so, the film held up a mirror to its audience, suggesting that perhaps the Russians were not the ruthless enemy they were so often believed to be. It was precisely this message that made the events of August 1968 all the more poignant. On 20 and 21 August, troops from the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia to suppress the reforms of the so-called Prague Spring.



The invasion provoked widespread international outrage and public opinion in the Netherlands shifted almost overnight. Cinemas removed promotional material for *The Russians are coming* while several screenings were cancelled or postponed. A film that had encouraged understanding between East and West only days earlier was suddenly overtaken by political reality.

The story of *Salon Bresser* illustrates just how closely culture and politics were intertwined during the Cold War. International events could shape, within a matter of days, what people watched in cinemas and how they viewed the world. The invasion of Czechoslovakia not only altered the political balance in Europe but also transformed the way a seemingly light-hearted comedy was received by Dutch audiences.

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