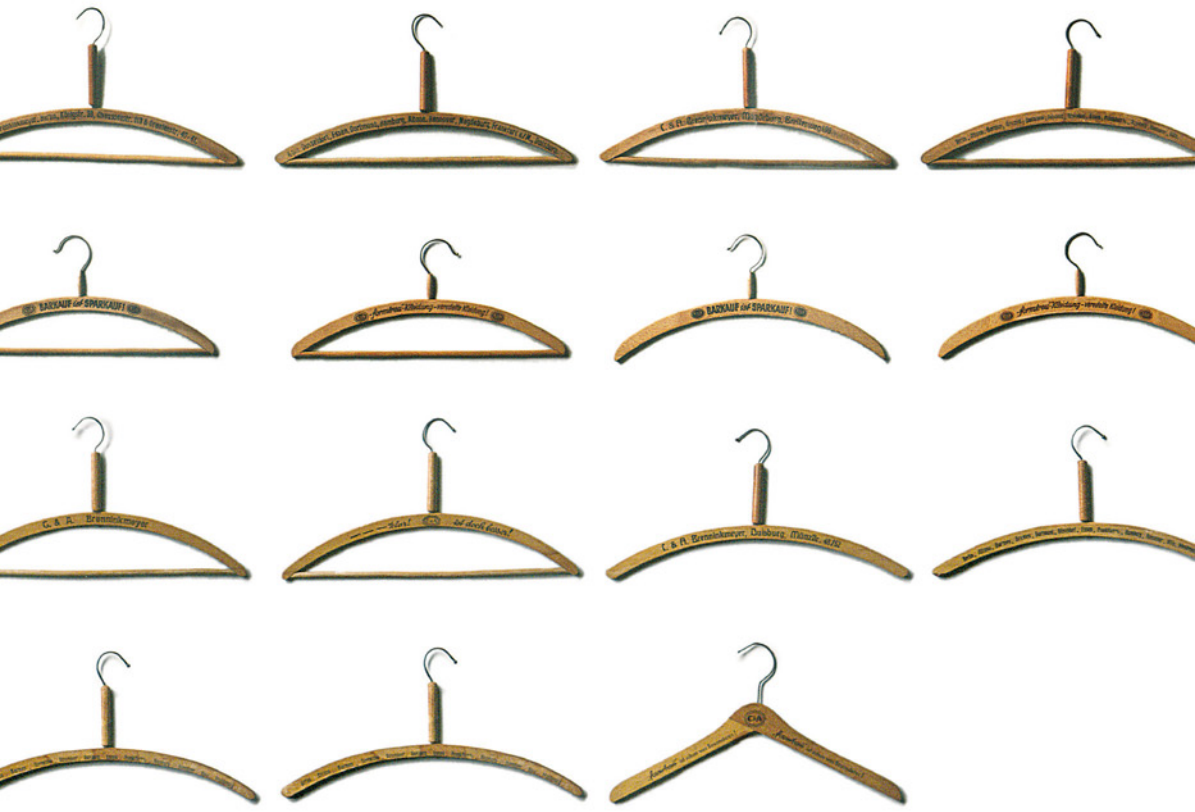
MARK SPOERER

C&A

A Family Business in Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom

1911 – 1961



C.H.BECK

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A Family Business
in Germany, the Netherlands
and the United Kingdom

1911–1961

Translated by Jefferson Chase,
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Preface

This book is the outcome of a research project carried out over several years under the auspices of the University of Regensburg, with funding from the C&A entrepreneurs of the Brenninkmeijer family, who have been the sole owners of C&A since its founding in 1841. The goal of the project was to write a history of C&A that would meet the standards of contemporary scholarly research. The geographical focus of the study is Germany, where C&A has been operating stores since 1911. The chronological focus is the Third Reich – in other words, the years from 1933 to 1945, the period for which I have endeavoured to provide as complete a historical account as possible. Special attention has been paid to the period of the Second World War. During those years, the founding company was located in the occupied Netherlands, while the two affiliated companies were located in the warring nations of Germany and Great Britain.

I am the sole author and bear full responsibility for the content. As part of the project, Uwe Balder, Anna Pauli and Julia Schnaus have written dissertations on the German clothing retail trade and the German clothing industry – the two branches in which C&A was most active during the years 1911 to 1961. I am grateful to their expertise, which has allowed me to avoid several errors and amend some hastily reached conclusions. Martin Götz, Arthur Haberlach, Silvana Hofmeister, Joshua Hruzik, Johannes Kiechle, Julia Langholz, Alfred Reichenberger and Michael Rösser provided me with support during various phases of research and in the production of the manuscript. With her tireless dedication, Roswitha Geiger freed us from the organisational burden that a project of this magnitude entails. The administration of the University of Regensburg also provided timely and unbureaucratic support that has enabled us to meet project deadlines.

I also wish to extend my gratitude to the group of owners of the Brenninkmeijer family, who entrusted me with access to the source material, some of which included family-related matters not relevant to the subject of this investigation. Under the leadership of Joseph Brenninkmeyer, the "history committee" established by the family, whose members also include Kai Bosecker, Bert and Erik Brenninkmeijer, Aloys Buch, Bernd Hillekamps and Arie Tervoort, accom-

C&A Holland advertising poster from spring 1924
Source: DCM, Sig. 128548.

panied the project with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy, also helping to arrange interviews with contemporary witnesses. In these very interesting conversations, carried out with Albert, Ernest, Nico and Rudolf Brenninkmeijer and Karl-Heinz Henrichfreise, Edgar Klees and Paul Meyer, I benefited from numerous insights and useful background information. The discussions with the history committee regarding the three drafts of this manuscript took place within a very helpful and constructive atmosphere, and substantially contributed to the quality of the final product. In this respect, I also wish to extend particular thanks to Mr. Hillekamps.

Invaluable support came from Kai Bosecker, who is responsible for the Mettingen C&A archive (Westphalia). With the very able assistance of Annegret Buller, he gathered the material required at short notice. He investigated the holdings of numerous public archives before the project was launched, provided many useful tips and wrote important background reports, including a report on the so-called Aryanisation programme in Germany. For research in outside archives, I also wish to thank Annemarie Vriezen, who carried out research at the Nationaal Archief, The Hague, as well as Adrian Leonard and John Loughlin (National Archives, Kew), Alfons Adam and Alena Buršíková (Brno) and especially Roman Smolorz (Wrocław, Brno, Łódź, Ostrava, Warsaw). I also received important information from Johannes Bähr, Frans van Poppel and Ben Wubs, and assistance from Joachim Scholtyseck in matters related to project organisation.

Over these past several years, Ute Siepermann has accompanied the project and finally the manuscript with goodwill, a sense of humour and a healthy distaste for overly long sentences.

I extend my sincere gratitude to all concerned.

Mark Spoerer, March 2016

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"Klamotten kaufen" – "buying clothes" – is an expression that is first known to have appeared in written German in 1972.[1] The term "Klamotten" first occured in written German in 1882, coming into popular usage in mid-1930s Germany. Unlike the word "Kleidung" – which means "clothing" – the word "Klamotten" carries with it a slightly dismissive whiff, a suggestion that the clothes in question are cheap and easily available. But for most classes of society, at least until the first quarter of the twentieth century, purchasing clothing was a significant expense, something that required due care and deliberation. New articles of clothing were sewn at home, using fabrics that had been woven at home or purchased. Or they could be obtained from a tailor, who cut the cloth and sewed it specially to order. Custom-made clothing, of course, came at a price. For most consumers in the lower classes, clothing made by a tailor was something reserved for a very special occasion.

In western and central European towns and cities during the 1850s, lower-class households still were spending about 65 per cent of their total household income on food and nearly 15 per cent of their total income on clothing and housing (including heating and light). Over the course of industrialisation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, productivity increased in both Germany and the Netherlands. This brought with it a higher standard of living, which gradually came to approach that of Great Britain, the world's leading industrial nation. Food expenditure, however, did not grow as quickly as incomes – as people grow wealthier, the amount of food they consume tends to increase only slightly, although the food they consume may indeed be higher in quality. Clothing and housing expenditure, however, increased proportionally to the rise

1 See Google's word frequency count in the Ngram Viewer (http://books.google.com/ngrams/, 17. 3. 2016). The noun "Klamotten" ("clothes") appears there for the first time in 1882 but does not come into frequent use until 1937 in the textual sources examined.

in income.[2] Around the turn of the twentieth century, working-class households in Belgium (which have been the subject of particularly intensive scholarly scrutiny) were still spending about 15 per cent of their income on clothing (including shoes).[3] This same pattern took place in neighbouring countries, which were also in the process of industrialising. During the late 1920s, a large-scale survey carried out in Germany examined both working-class households as well as households headed by salaried employees and civil servants, distinguishing between two income levels within each social category. This study found that food expenses ranged from 48 per cent of household income (among poor families) to 22 per cent of household income (among wealthier families). The share of household income spent on clothing remained at roughly 12 per cent, however, with households headed by salaried employees and civil servants spending a slightly higher share of income on clothing than working-class households.[4] After the Second World War, the share of household income spent on clothing fell from just under 14 per cent in 1952 to just over 12 per cent in 1961. Today, approximately five per cent of household income is spent on clothing.[5]

While the wearing of exceptionally elegant, fashionable or unusual clothing has always been a marker of social distinctions, this marker was long the province of the higher social classes. For the less-affluent social classes, a whiff of luxury was limited to "Sunday best." Ordinary workaday clothing was worn and "turned" until it could no longer be mended or shown in public. Only then would a replacement garment be sewn or purchased. Even in the late nineteenth century, most purchased clothing was still obtained on the second-hand market. The market for used clothing was much larger than it is today – for ordinary people, second-hand clothing was the norm. The lower-classes, in particular, purchased almost exclusively second-hand clothing until well into the late nineteenth century.[6]

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2 See the detailed survey of household budgets among Belgian working-class families in Engel (1857), especially pp. 169–171.

3 See Engel (1895), p. 82.

4 See Statistisches Reichsamt (1932), Vol. I, pp. 20, 32, 43; summarised in Spoerer/Streb (2013a), p. 82. – Expenditures for clothing here and elsewhere in this text, unless otherwise indicated, also include shoes.

5 See Reckendrees (2007), especially pp. 39, 41, 44 f.; on the figures for Germany, see Reckendrees (2007a); Statistisches Bundesamt (2014), p. 168; for the United Kingdom see Jefferys (1954), p. 44; Weatherburn (1957), pp. 159 f. For the United Kingdom, the ranges during the years between 1880 and 1950 are quite similar, at between approximately 9 and 12 per cent. Godley (1995), pp. 51 f., estimates for a similar period of analysis that income elasticity of demand for clothing was one, meaning that the demand for clothing grew proportionally to household income.

6 See Worth (2007), p. 18.

In view of the importance of clothing as a basic human need, it is not surprising that the histories of countries that were among the first to industrialise – notably England and, within Germany, Saxony in particular – are closely linked to innovations in the textile sector. Once the production of yarn had been mechanised, it was weaving rather than spinning which became the production bottleneck. This in turn spurred the rise of new inventions in the weaving industry, a process which also prompted innovation in the nascent machine-manufacturing industry. Steam engines, for example, were employed in the mining industry and in locomotives, spurring the rise of modern railway transportation in the mid-nineteenth century. In the textile industry, new machinery helped transform the spinning and weaving sectors.

Although the production of yarn and woven fabrics underwent a rapid process of mechanisation and a corresponding rationalisation and concentration of production, the clothing industry and textile trade initially remained in the hands of small-scale enterprises. In many cases, this meant the tailor's shop around the corner. The reason is obvious: while spinning and weaving is essentially a two-dimensional process, fitting fabrics to the human body is a more complex task that is less amenable to the standardisation that is the precondition for mass-production. In the early nineteenth century, the only form of clothing produced on a larger scale were military uniforms. But soldiers could also be fat and thin, tall or short – and they all required a different size of uniform. It comes as no surprise that the first attempts at standardised sizing in the textile industry were introduced for military uniforms.[7]

Rising incomes and with it the proportional rise in household income devoted to clothing thus took place at the same time as standardised manufacturing methods were gradually being introduced in military procurement. It was only a matter of time before clever entrepreneurs would begin manufacturing ready-made clothing for mass civilian use. This was the birth of "off the rack" clothing. The rise of ready-made clothing – meaning the mass production of clothing for later sale, rather than the one-off production of custom-made clothing to order – took place in a number of industrialising countries within roughly the same timeframe during the mid-nineteenth century. Soon thereafter, the sewing machine commenced its rapid conquest. Unlike spinning machines and mechanical looms, the sewing machine soon dropped in price, becoming more affordable for private households than a spinning wheel or a loom.[8] The sewing machine also

7 On the history of ready-to-wear sizing and size standardisation, see Döring (1992), pp. 106–108; König (2000), pp. 191 f.; Köster (2011), pp. 21 f., and more generally Ashdown (2007).

8 See Godley (2006).

made it much easier to alter clothing that was not a perfect fit, or alter clothing that had been outgrown.

Entrepreneurs in the clothing trade soon realised that a market had been born in which the economy of scale would reign before long. By purchasing merchandise in larger amounts, they were able to negotiate higher discounts from ready-made clothing manufacturers. At the same time, purchasing larger amounts of stock made it possible to obtain better control over fixed costs such as rent, administrative costs and soon also advertising. Although the difference between purchase price and sales price had narrowed, this could be compensated for by higher turnover. Not long afterwards came the birth of the department store and the rise of the first larger textile speciality stores and soon also textile chain stores, which sold fabric and cloth as well as the new ready-made clothing.[9]

One of these early retail chains was C(lemens) & A(ugust) Brenninkmeijer, which was founded in the Netherlands and then made the move into Germany in 1911. One branch of the family had lived in the region of Westphalia and the Netherlands since at least the last third of the seventeenth century. In 1841, the Brenninkmeijer family[10] founded the C. & A. Brenninkmeijer company and opened their first store in the Dutch town of Sneek. The store was located in a warehouse used for the itinerant clothing trade. On 14 August 1860, the company opened its first store for draperies and ladies' clothing just down the street from the warehouse in Sneek.[11] Since the beginning of the twentieth century, C&A has focused on the sale of mass-market clothing for the lower (income) classes, touting its range of "modern, chic, well-made clothing of all kinds for women and children at unusually affordable prices."[12] In 1911, the Brenninkmeijers made the move into Germany, opening their first branch in Berlin – Germany's largest city by far and the centre of the German ladies' wear industry. Within just two decades, C&A had emerged as one of the largest fashion retail chains in Germany. After the Second World War, the group grew to become the market leader in western Europe, a position it would occupy until the 1980s – and in some loca-

9 See Spiekermann (1999), p. 364.

10 In the following, when reference is made to "the Brenninkmeijers", this refers only to the family members who were active in the C&A group rather than the many branches of the extended Brenninkmeijer family. "Brenninkmeyer" is the German and English spelling of the Dutch name "Brenninkmeijer." In what follows, the Dutch form of the name will be used unless the specific company names or the citation of sources require the German or English spelling.

11 See Draiflessen (2010), pp. 42, 50, 52; memoirs of Hermann Gerhard Brenninkmeijer (transcription), pp. 1, 3, DCM, Sig. 109331.

12 Advertisement C&A Deutschland of 28. 5. 1911, DCM, Sig. 1400.

tions into the 1990s. Parallel to the their expansion in the Netherlands and Germany, in 1922 the Brenninkmeijers also moved into Great Britain, where they began establishing a large network of branches. By late 1961, the group presided over 101 European C&A branches and two additional branches in New York, which sold clothing valued at an equivalent of more than 500 million euros to a largely working- and middle-class clientele.[13] By 1929, Germany had become the most important national market within the C&A group, and would remain so during the remainder of the period under investigation.[14]

This book retraces the history of C&A with a special focus on the development of the German branch from its founding in 1911 until 1961 – one year after West Germany had achieved full employment (in 1960) and the same year that, in August, the German Democratic Republic began to build the wall that would isolate East Germany from the West. For the western European clothing retail trade, the 1950s represent an important break; during these years, the market was transformed from a "seller's market" (in which the main problem was procuring merchandise) to a "buyer's market" (in which sales volume became the most pressing issue).[15] After 1963, C&A began to open fashion chain stores in many other countries, a process that falls outside the scope of this investigation.[16] Although this study focuses on developments within Germany, it also retraces the development of the founding company in the Netherlands and the development of C&A Modes, which was established in Great Britain in 1922. Indeed, many of the organisational changes at C&A Deutschland (C&A Germany) can only be understood within the context of the history of the C&A group and the Brenninkmeijer family of entrepreneurs. This study also briefly retraces the beginnings of C&A in the United States. It was the United States which, in the wake of the devastating impact of the

13 See ISJ 1961, DCM, Sig. 122761. The 26 Dutch branches had a total turnover of 245.5 million guilders (67.6 million €). The corresponding statistics for Germany and the United Kingdom were as follows: 41 branches with a total of 1253 billion DM (311.7 million €) turnover, and 33 branches with a total of 46.8 million pounds (131.2 million €) turnover, respectively. The two branches in the United States had a total turnover of approximately 3 million USD. – The conversion to euros has been made by calculating the contemporary value of the USD. The European *unit of account* (the precursor to the euro) corresponded to one USD at the time. See also Spoerer/Streb (2013), pp. 242–244.

14 Here and in what follows, the term "group" is understood in the economic sense and is also used when no capital or other legal relationship exists between two enterprises. In such cases, the enterprises are described as part of a group when active members of the C&A entrepreneurial leadership were active in both companies.

15 See Banken (2007), pp. 140, 144.

16 On the development after 1961, see Draiflessen (2011).

Second World War and the rise of the Cold War, the Brenninkmeijier family would for some years regard as the centre of its commercial (and family) future.

Writing the history of a company is always a methodologically fraught undertaking. For one, the historian must always remain aware of the fact that company histories are generally a history of the "winning side" – after all, the company is still in existence and it can afford to have its history subjected to scholarly scrutiny. In a sense, C&A is paradigmatic of this natural process of selection, since it is the only still-extant company among those that had their origins in what was known as the *Tödden* trade of itinerant traders.[17] For companies that have foundered and gone out of business, the surviving source material is usually too scanty to allow for a company history.[18]

Furthermore, companies are always embedded within a specific industry and economy. What share of the success or failure of a company is due to its own actions and those of its leadership? Did a company fare better or worse than the industry average, and did the industry itself fare better or worse than other industries within that economy? Would a canny company leadership have responded to structural changes by diversifying or changing course – keeping the company afloat even if the larger industry in which it was embedded foundered?

From its inception, the project that gave rise to this book also sought to present the history of C&A within its larger economic and political context. In practice, this also meant embedding the history of C&A within the context and trajectory of the larger sector; indeed, it is only this comparison that allows us to tease out what is unique and specific to this company. To allow for this comparison, the project sponsored three doctoral dissertations, which relate to the history of the clothing industry, the textile retail trade, and marketing within the textile retail trade from approximately 1900 to 1945 (or to 1975 respectively) in Germany. In the comparative studies undertaken by Anna Pauli regarding

17 On the unusual history of the Brenninkmeijers see also Lucassen (1987), p. 91. For example, the companies that were cited in Oberpenning (1996), p. 382, including Hettlage, Boecker, Lampe and Voss, are no longer in the market or have been taken over by other companies. By contrast, the large and extended Leffers family is still involved in the clothing retail business, for example via the SinnLeffers and Leffers-Mode companies.

18 See Plumpe (2003); Spoerer (2004), pp. 111–117. – For Germany, fortunately, this is true only in part. In a number of different locations, regional business archives that are usually sponsored by chambers of industry and commerce serve as repositories for company archives, including companies that have gone out of business. In eastern Germany, highly interesting historical material related to a variety of companies was passed on by socialist successor enterprises to the various state archives during the GDR years. Documents of this kind were also consulted in this study (related to C&A branches in East Berlin, Magdeburg and Leipzig).

marketing in the clothing retail trade and by Julia Schnaus regarding the clothing industry, C&A is just one case study among many. Findings from these two studies have been incorporated into several chapters of this book.[19] The dissertation on advertising practices and the two sector-specific dissertations have both broken new ground – low-tech industries are generally ignored in most economic and company histories.[20] This is particularly true when it comes to trade and the retail industry.[21]

The question of commercial success and failure is also central to this analysis. As a result, this study has attended to the specific characteristics of family firms. Like many similar companies, C&A was a family firm at the start of the twentieth century – but unlike many other large and internationally active companies and groups, C&A today is still a family firm. The term "family firm" encompasses a diverse variety of forms with respect to ownership and management. However, C&A was and remains a family firm in the narrow sense of the term: until the mid-1990s, only men who were direct descendants of Clemens or August Brenninkmeijer were permitted to ascend to the ownership ranks and entitled to share in the company's profits. During the period under investigation there were only two exceptions – exceptions that were both regarded as temporary and that were both associated with the Second World War and its aftermath. Apart from those two instances, only members of the Brenninkmeijer family could ascend to top management (board of directors), and all company shares remained in their hands. This principle raises some important questions. How can a family firm ensure that a successor generation will be ready and waiting to assume the reins when the time comes? By what process is the corporate leadership selected? And what is the process for resolving conflicts within the company?[22]

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19 Important findings regarding C&A's advertising practices described in a number of sections as well as the section on cash purchasing are taken from the dissertation by Anna Pauli on advertising in the clothing retail trade, which was prepared within the framework of this larger project. The same holds for Julia Schnaus' work (regarding the history of the clothing industry) and the discussion on the awarding of contracts to the Łódź ghetto (discussed in Chapter 4). In several places, the findings of Uwe Balder's study on the clothing retail trade are also incorporated here.

20 On the Netherlands see, for example, Sluyterman/Winkelman (1993).

21 See the useful studies by Homburg (2000), p. 171, and Banken (2007), pp. 117 f., 135; see also Jonker/Sluyterman (2000), p. 12.

22 A social history of C&A would also be an interesting undertaking, particularly because few if any comparable studies currently exist. However, the archival sources contain almost no information regarding the situation of company staff. By the interwar period at the very latest, C&A was already carrying out regular surveys regarding staffing and social statistics, but the results of these analyses have not survived; see DCM, Sig. 109969. The only sources that

Another unusual aspect of C&A's history is the international character of the entrepreneurial family and its commercial ventures. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the first two generations of Brenninkmeijer entrepreneurs displayed a very pragmatic attitude toward citizenship – depending on which citizenship brought with it more advantages, individual Brenninkmeijers assumed either Dutch or Prussian (and later German) citizenship.[23] The Netherlands remained a neutral nation during the First World War, and became one of the first victims of Germany's expansionist agenda during the Second World War. During the Second World War, C&A maintained operations in both Great Britain and Germany – two warring nations – while its head office remained in the occupied Netherlands. For this reason, comparing the circumstances and actions of the three affiliated C&A companies during the Second World War is very useful. But even beyond those years, the comparison is extremely illuminating, not least because it documents how C&A operated within what the political scientists Peter Hall and David Soskice have described in their influential survey as three different "varieties of capitalism" within Europe: the two opposing poles of Great Britain (economically liberal and oriented towards competition) and Germany (corporative with a great deal of state influence), and the Dutch variety, which was situated somewhere in between.[24] But how was a group of this nature organised and coordinated in practice? Was the Dutch citizenship of the Brenninkmeijers during the First World War and especially in the Third Reich a liability or an advantage? What are the options available to the management of a company that wants to do business in both the country of the victors and the country of the vanquished?

These business and, especially with respect to the Third Reich, ethical dilemmas also raise a third dimension. The Brenninkmeijer family has its roots in the northern region of Westphalia, where the population remained largely Roman Catholic after the Reformation. When the family relocated the centre of its operations to the Protestant Netherlands, initially in the Frisia region, they retained their religious affiliation. The Brenninkmeijer family was unusual in its devotion to its faith and always believed itself obligated to uphold ethical standards. From 1921 at

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provide some limited information on these issues are the Minutes of the Branch Managers' Meetings from 1934 onward. With only a few exceptions, personnel files have survived only for senior staff. With the (partial) exception of Woolworth's, this is a general problem for histories of this industry; see, for example, Pitrone (2003), chapters 10, 11, 13 and 15. In that study, the company's founding family is the focus of the investigation, though.

23 For more details, see Th. W. Vogelaar: "De nationaliteit der familie Brenninkmeijer", April 1951, DCM, Sig. 107932.

24 See Hall/Soskice (2001); Touwen (2014), pp. 2 f., 18–22, and esp. 78–87; Sluyterman (2015), pp. 1 f.

the very latest, the family generally devoted about ten per cent of its after-tax profits to charitable purposes.[25] At the same time, however, under the Third Reich the German branch of the Brenninkmeijer family took part in the "Aryanisation" programme and awarded contracts to the ghetto in Łódź. In at least one production site, women from the Soviet Union laboured for the company under terrible working and living conditions. How can this behaviour be understood within the company's professed ethical stance? Even under circumstances that were less politically problematic, it is worth investigating the extent to which the family's Catholic faith had an impact on their corporate and business practices – for instance, with respect to the social benefits offered to company employees, to name but one example.

It was mainly questions of this nature that led the Brenninkmeijer family to commission a history of C&A. To fulfil contemporary standards of historical inquiry, I and my team were permitted access to all group and family sources and materials relevant to this investigation. While I certainly discussed the manuscript drafts with representatives of the family and the group, final decisions on wording were mine alone. The company's owners and the group itself have agreed that all the historical documents cited in this study will remain accessible at the C&A archive in Mettingen (Westphalia).[26]

With respect to the sources, however, one should not expect miracles. During our conversations, representatives of the family repeatedly emphasised that as retailers their main goal was always to ensure that merchandise would enter and leave the branch as quickly as possible. Until quite recently, this was also the practice with obsolete business documents.[27] In addition, in November 1943 a large number of C&A Deutschland's files were destroyed in a fire after an air attack on Berlin. Only a short time before, however, a portion of these files had been evacuated to Mettingen. Twenty years later, on 15 February 1963, the central administrative office for the Netherlands company was destroyed in a fire in Amsterdam. Many historical documents were badly damaged or destroyed.[28] In a stroke of good fortune, it appears that a portion of these documents had just been

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25 The first mention of the ten-per-cent rule can be found in: Minutes of Shareholder Meeting 15. 3. 1921, sheet 8, DCM, Sig. 122762. In 1925, the ten-per-cent rule was integrated into the articles of association of the Allgemeine Textil-Fabrikations- und Handels-AG C&A Brenninkmeijer; see StaA HH, 424–11_Dd 726. Beginning in 1948, it became a tradition among the family entrepreneurs to affirm the ten-per-cent rule each year; see Minutes of Meetings beginning 30./31. 1. 1948, sheet 4, DCM, Sig. 122767. See also "Himmelreich", in: *Capital* (1983), No. 12, p. 166.

26 On the topic of commissioned historical work more generally, see Feldman (1999).

27 See also Köster (2011), pp. 14 f.

28 See Interview Martin Brenninkmeijer (2008), lines 1761–1770, DCM, Sig. 128634.

analysed for an upcoming company history, which was then written over the course of the 1960s. In the early 1970s, handwritten additions were made to this study which was never completed.[29]

Another important category of sources are the minutes of supervisory and management board meetings and other similar documents; here, too, the sources were limited. For the period after 1919, there exist what are generally extremely concise minutes of shareholder meetings. Until 1946, these accounts were all handwritten.[30] For the period from 1925 to 1960, with some interruptions, there are also hand-written minutes of the board of directors meetings at C&A Holland. Most of these minutes, though, are limited to issues related to pensions and bonuses. For the period of the Second World War, however, where travel restrictions meant that only a handful of shareholder meetings took place, these minutes provide valuable information.[31] The best-documented company of the group, comparatively speaking, is C&A Modes in the United Kingdom. For C&A Modes, the archives contain a (very concise) summary of the outcomes of all directorate meetings. During the years 1941–1954, these minutes were more detailed.

In the case of C&A Deutschland, only a small and fragmentary record of such meetings has been preserved.[32] However, for 1930 and later years, the advisory circulars written by the main Berlin office to the branch managers of the various German branches are available. From 1934 onwards, the minutes of meet-

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29 See Willem J. Blaisse/H. J. Dekkers: "Van tiöttenhandel tot internationaal concern", DCM, Sig. 128926 (220 numbered sheets, 42 additional numbered sheets for uncompleted final chapter, and enclosures); cited as "BD" in what follows. – Willem Blaisse (born 1902) joined the company in March 1934 as a lawyer and became a high-ranking employee. After the Second World War, he attended most of the meetings of the family entrepreneurs. The file cluster in which the manuscript is located is dated 1974, but the authors must have viewed documents that were destroyed or badly damaged in the fire of 1963, including the balance sheet books, which they describe as their most important source (sheet 73). The main section of the manuscript was probably written in 1966/67; see, for example, sheet 97 (dated 2. 10. 1967), and sheet 132: "nu in 1966." Blaisse also conducted interviews in 1966/67; see Chronik Langemeyer, preface, DCM, Sig. 107422. On the entry of Blaisse into the company, see ISJ 1934, sheet 62, DCM, Sig. 122734.

30 The first minutes suggest that there were no written records kept before this date; see Minutes of Meeting 18. 2. 1919, DCM, Sig. 122762. BD, sheet 153, DCM, Sig. 128926, contains the information that in 1912 there existed minutes of the "algemene aandeelhoudersvergadering van de N. V. Algemeene Confectiehandel van C. & A. Brenninkmeijer." These minutes have not survived.

31 See Notulen Directievergaderingen, DCM, Sig. 109511–109513.

32 From the Directorate Minutes of the years 1948–1954, only the sections related to advertising measures have been preserved; see DCM, Sig. 112777.

ings of the managers of the German branches have been preserved. Personnel files for many of the managers also still exist, which are particularly valuable sources of information for the National Socialist years. These records allowed us to examine a question that is rarely considered in company histories – a question that is particularly relevant to a company whose central focus is ladies' apparel: to what extent were female employees permitted to ascend to managerial ranks, and what was their remuneration compared to their male colleagues? By contrast, there is little or no information available regarding non-managerial staff as well as relationships to suppliers. Even figures related to staffing levels at the three affiliated companies are incomplete at best, although some can be reconstructed on the basis of what is very fragmentary information. For C&A Deutschland, the tax reports and tax audit reports prepared by financial auditors for the purposes of tax assessment (which are held in public archives) proved to be an extremely rich source of information, as did the auditors' reports prepared after 1945.[33]

Also particularly useful were the annual reports of the three C&A companies in the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom, which beginning in 1926 were prepared according to largely uniform criteria. These reports are not balance sheets, but rather profit and loss accounts, some of which contain extensive commentary. The annual reports provide extremely useful insights into the company's internal financial accounting, although they do not allow direct conclusions to be drawn about the group as a whole. To some extent, the annual reports also help explain some ups and downs of the business over the years. Until 1930, the results of these calculations were expressed in Swiss francs or Dutch guilders, which facilitates comparison. After July and September 1931, when the currencies of Germany and Great Britain were in turmoil, the values began to be expressed in the respective national currencies. This practice also continued after the Second World War even though exchange rates remained largely fixed under the Bretton Woods system. The British C&A annual reports are particularly comprehensive and include analyses that address issues that go beyond purely internal matters. By contrast, the Dutch and German reports, which were initially quite informative, became in the 1950 a largely uncommented compilation of numbers and figures.

Rather surprisingly, the term "fashion" is mentioned only rarely in the abovecited sources and documents. In the few cases in which it does appear, it is exclusively in relation to financial questions. As a result, questions of fashion will not

33 See Tax Audit Reports of Allgemeine Textil-Fabrikations- und Handels-AG C&A Brenninkmeyer, C&A Brenninkmeijer KG, Verwaltungs-AG für kaufm. Beteiligungen and Herfa GmbH, all in: BADV, shelf 8/6. – Regarding the usefulness of audit and tax audit reports as sources, see also Spoerer (1996), pp. 36 f., 92–100 and idem (1998).

be central to this study.[34] However, C&A has compiled a relatively systematic set of documents relating to its various advertising and marketing campaigns. To remedy this gap, this study includes a number of these images that have been reprinted for this volume.

The holdings of public archives are generally unrevealing when it comes to C&A. As a company that was not important to the rearmament effort, C&A was rarely mentioned in the records compiled by the various Berlin ministries and the armaments offices of the Third Reich, which have served as very rich sources for histories of other companies. As already mentioned above, the tax reports and tax audit reports compiled by the tax authorities are one important exception. The Brenninkmeijer group was a very international one, and tax auditors constantly suspected (often with good reason) that profits were being transferred abroad. These transactions were always the subject of special scrutiny by the tax authorities. As a result, the tax and audit records are an excellent source of information regarding C&A's foreign connections and provide an extremely useful window on the extensive affiliations within the group's companies. And even though C&A was not regarded as central to the rearmament or war effort, the Brenninkmeijer group was still seen as strategically significant due to the vast sums of tax that were at stake. Indeed, in 1934 the Reich Minister of Finance took a personal interest in the inquiries. The holdings of the Nationaal Archief (The Hague) and the National Archives (Kew/London) were also examined for this study, particularly with respect to the immediate post-war years and the years which follow.[35] However, these holdings again showed that relatively little official correspondence was devoted to a retail company with little strategic wartime significance. The Nationaal Archief contains a smattering of ministerial correspondence related to accusations of collaboration made by the British occupation authorities against the Brenninkmeijers who lived in Germany, and a handful of documents related to the question of compensation for C&A properties that were expropriated by the German Democratic Republic and Poland.

The Aryanisation proceedings in Hamburg, Wuppertal-Elberfeld, Berlin and Bremen can be reconstructed with a fairly high degree of detail based on the files contained in local archives. In the course of our research, the extent to which the German clothing industry, clothing retailers and department store chains were involved in commissioning orders for goods produced in the ghettos of Central Europe during the Second World War became apparent. During our research, we

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34 On fashion during the period under investigation, see also Loschek (1995) and Guenther (2004).

35 I wish to thank Dr. Annemarie Vriezen and Dr. Adrian Leonard as well as Prof. John Loughlin (Cambridge) for their assistance.

paid particular attention to Łódź and Warsaw, searching for companies affiliated with the C&A group. As we discovered, in spring 1941 the German ghetto administration of Łódź (Litzmannstadt in German) invited a large number of major clothing companies to collaborate in clothing manufacturing within the ghetto. In the case of C&A, this collaboration began in late 1942 at the latest, and continued until ghetto production was shut down in late summer 1944.[36]

For the period before 1919, the holdings in both the company's own archives and in public archives are extremely scanty. The exceptions include several memoirs written by members of the Brenninkmeijer family, a small number of balance sheet books, and a handful of documents related to issues of company law. For Germany, the journal *Der Konfektionär*, which was published from 1886 to 1936, proved to be a surprisingly rich source, containing numerous articles about C&A (many of them quite critical in tone).[37] With some caveats, this is also true for *Deutsche Konfektion*, which was published from 1899 to 1935, with a period between 1927 and 1934 when it operated under the name *Zeitschrift für Textilwirtschaft*.

C&A itself published only a handful of historical accounts, which is unsurprising for a group that was legendary for avoiding the public eye until well into the 1990s.[38] This has since changed. The early years of Clemens and August Brenninkmeijer during the nineteenth century have been documented in a highly professional exhibition catalogue of nearly 200 pages published in 2010. This was followed a year later by another exhibition, again accompanied by an equally professional catalogue, which surveyed C&A's history by way of its advertising and marketing campaigns, which have always been an important part of the company's operation. Issues related to fashion, advertising and the architecture of the branches are addressed with greater insight and detail in this catalogue than in the present study, which has a different thematic focus.[39]

The literature by independent authors regarding the history of C&A as a company is limited to two German publications, both of them written by busi-

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36 For his meticulous archival research, I wish to thank Dr. Roman Smolorz (University of Regensburg), who also obtained valuable information from Polish and Czech colleagues as well as staff of the German Historical Institute in Warsaw.

37 The publication was continued until 1943 under the name *Vereinigte Textil- und Bekleidungszeitschrift* but focused almost exclusively on export issues. On the history of the publications *Der Konfektionär* and *Deutsche Konfektion*, see the dissertation by Uwe Balder about the textile retail trade, which was completed within the framework of this project.

38 See for example Bläsing (1978), esp. p. 173, fn. 3; "C&A Brenninkmeyer: Stummer Gigant", in: *Der Spiegel*, No. 15 (7. 4. 1969), pp. 73–78; "Eendracht maakt Macht", in: ibid., No. 16 (14. 4. 1980), pp. 62–66; "Secretive Brenninkmeyers", in: *New York Times* (5. 9. 1983).

39 See Draiflessen (2010) and idem (2011); see also Vriezen (2011).

ness journalists.[40] One is by Hans Otto Eglau, who in 1972 published a book about corporate dynasties in West German commerce, which offered a case study of the Brenninkmeijers and 12 other families. In 2005, Bettina Weiguny published a book about the Brenninkmeijer family and C&A.[41] Her account also addresses the history of the company since the 1960s, which is not part of this study. Although both of these works are intended for popular audiences and are inclined to be rather free in their opinions as is typical for the genre, both books are factually well-researched and accurate overall.

Only a few historical studies have been made about the clothing retail trade. Regional and local histories have examined the *Tödden* (alternatively written as *Tüötten*, *Tiötten*, etc.), as the itinerant traders of northwestern Germany were called. The Brenninkmeijers also belonged to this tradition. Over time, these accounts have moved away from a highly romanticised and hagiographical description and now include a number of impressively researched social histories.[42] One pioneering work on Germany is the study by Uwe Spiekermann on the development of the retail trade, which examines both the food and clothing retail trade to document the shift toward department stores in the late German Empire.[43] On the Netherlands, the transition to the ready-made industry and to the modern clothing trade has been the topic of several studies, most particularly by Kitty de Leeuw and Yves Segers.[44] A comprehensive popular history by Roger Miellet, who also hails from a family of department store owners, offers a sweeping survey of western and central European department store and clothing store chains as well as some case studies of individual companies.[45]

Other historical studies have examined specific department stores (but not purely textile retailers such as C&A). For this study, the published histories on Karstadt, Schocken, Wertheim and Marks & Spencer are of particular relevance.[46] But a glance at the large clothing retail chains listed in Tables 3.1 (p. 80) and 3.7 (p. 122) shows how little we know today about companies that would have been household names for most every Dutch or German consumer in the first half of the twentieth century.

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40 There is also an article by Bläsing (1978), which is only four pages long and contains a number of errors.

41 See Eglau (1972); Weiguny (2005).

42 See Vershofen (1969); Rickelmann (1976 and 1978); Reininghaus (1993); Wolf (1993); and especially Oberpenning (1996); Küpker (2008).

43 See Spiekermann (1999).

44 See de Leeuw (1992); Segers (2002); and Miellet (1986, 1987 and 1992); Stobart/Blondé (2014).

45 See especially Miellet/Voorn (2001).

46 See Lenz (1995); Fuchs (1990); Ladwig-Winters (1997); Briggs (1984); Worth (2007).

Literature on the clothing industry is even sparser. Andrew Godley, who has been studying the British clothing industry for some years now, stated in 1997 that there was no other key industrial sector in the history of the western world that had received as little scholarly attention as the clothing industry.[47] For Germany, we have yet to see a study of the industry carried out according to contemporary historical standards. On the Netherlands, in addition to the study by de Leeuw mentioned above, there is also an account focusing on the textile retail trade by Alice Wolff-Gerzon, published in 1949, which is still relevant today. In terms of company histories, the brief survey of Hugo Boss AG by Roman Köster is also worthy of mention.[48]

Recent historical literature on family firms has also proven useful in terms of the larger background context. For the international dimension, the standard reference is the study by Andrea Colli. The dissertation by Christina Lubinski also offers an in-depth account of the operations of West German family firms.[49]

The structure of this study is largely chronological, which is also necessitated by the profound ruptures that the First and Second World Wars brought to the history of Europe in the twentieth century. Because this study examines the history of a group in three different countries, the chronology does not always follow the conventions of national histories. German readers, for example, might be surprised by the fact that the National Socialist period (1933 to 1945) is not addressed within a single chronological chapter. For a group like C&A, whose various subdivisions were located in two enemy nations and one occupied nation between May 1940 and May 1945, the start of the Second World War represented a more profound rupture than it might have been for a German company, whose history under National Socialism would more easily be covered within a single chapter.

Over the course of the research for this volume, it became apparent that for a company that would become as large and convoluted as C&A after the Second World War, a great deal of information about now-defunct branches has disappeared from sight. For the company, too, an overview of this information would be helpful. This study thus concludes with an extensive appendix, which includes tabular overviews of the first four generations of Brenninkmeijer entrepreneurs, a list of companies within the C&A group to 1961 and a list of the branches established in the Netherlands, Germany and the United Kingdom up until 1961.

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47 See Godley (1997), p. 3.

48 See Wolff-Gerzon (1949); Köster (2011).

49 See Colli (2003); Lubinski (2010); see also Hilger (2009) and Lubinski/Fear/Fernández Pérez (eds.) (2013).

Chapter 2

The Rise of the Brenninkmeijers (1600–1918)

The history of the Brenninkmeijer family can be traced back to the year 1600, when Johann toe Twee genannt Brenninckmeijer then Brenninckhove was granted a fiefdom of farmland in Mettingen (Westphalia). The farm itself was first mentioned in documents dating from 1462.[1] In the Tecklenburger Land region, of which Mettingen is a part, it had for centuries been tradition that, during the months when little work needed to be done on the fields, the locally-cultivated flax would be spun into linen thread and then woven into linen cloth. This provided the farming families of the region with cloth to meet their own needs, as well as an additional source of income alongside what they were able to eke out from the arduous agricultural labour.

Whatever linen was not needed by the families themselves could be sold. In Mettingen and in a number of other villages in the Tecklenburger Land region (especially the villages of Hopsten and Recke), many farmers – or sons of farmers – set out as *Packenträger* (back-packing merchants) or *Tödden* (itinerant traders), carrying their packs of linen goods across the countryside. Alongside local handmade linen goods, these travelling merchants increasingly also traded in linens which they had acquired from neighbouring regions. This itinerant trade is believed to have originated no later than the seventeenth century.[2] During the weeks or even months in which the itinerant trader was underway, the farmer's wife had to oversee the farm and all the farmhands on her own. Since the Tecklenburger Land was a region in which property passed undivided to a single heri-

1 See BD, sheet 45, DCM, Sig. 128926; Rickelmann (1978), pp. 43 f., 100.

2 See Oberpenning (1996), p. 11. The unusual designation is believed to have derived from the Gothic word for "(*herum-*)*ziehen*" ("wandering about"), see Rickelmann (1978), p. 313.

Figure 2.1: The Brenninck farm in Mettingen
Source: Drawing by Otto Dicke ca. 1972, DCM, Sig. 109283.

tor (*Anerbengebiet*), the linen trade provided an alternative livelihood for sons who were not entitled to inherit the family farm.

This merchant trade network continued to expand. By the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, it had extended across the northern half of Germany all the way to the Baltic Sea and the Netherlands. However, the merchandise had long since ceased to be local and handmade. Instead, the wares were purchased by the *Tödden* or by wholesalers who specialised in the intermediate trade of goods produced in the protoindustrial regions of northwestern Germany, including the County of Ravensberg, the Principality of Minden and the County of Lippe. In addition to linens, this merchandise also included many other kinds of woven and other textiles. By the mid-eighteenth century, this trade comprised articles of clothing, as well.[3] Because of the heavy loads the *Tödden* were forced to carry as well as the risk of robbery, this type of itinerant trade was fraught with risk. As a result, the *Tödden* always carried a rosary with them – they were all Catholic – and often also a handgun for protection in an emergency. The *Tödden* generally spent up to three-quarters of the year on the road with their wares, which they tied into packs and carried strapped on their backs. They sold them at

3 See Oberpenning (1996), pp. 314 f.

farms and in villages, where they went door to door. For their mainly farming clientele, purchasing needed items from the *Tödden* was a practical solution, as it spared them the onerous journey to the nearest town, which was often some distance away. An analysis of the Mettingen birth register suggests that the local *Tödden* spent mainly the winter months (December to February) and the high-summer harvest season (July/August) on their farms at home.[4] When their trade was profitable, the *Tödden* often acquired a horse or even a wagon. That allowed them to sell not only woven linen goods and linen thread but also other merchandise, often including small iron items. This form of trade peaked in the mid-eighteenth century. It was relatively profitable, which meant that Mettingen, Hopsten and Recke were seen as comparatively affluent villages in the region. Despite the presence of the mining industry, the region was still largely agricultural, so the *Tödden* thus enjoyed a measure of standing.[5] In 1749, Mettingen had 280 households and 1,741 residents, of whom 153 worked as *Tödden*.[6]

Depending upon their main market region, the *Tödden* were divided into the *Oberländer* and the *Holländer* ("Uplanders" and "Dutchmen"). The former, who were also called the *Bubnländer* or the *Oberreicher*, plied their trade mainly in northern and eastern Germany. Some also settled in local towns and founded clothing stores. The best-known of these businesses was the G. Hettlage firm of Elberfeld, which soon established branches across northwestern Germany.[7] Gerhard Hettlage (1852–1913), whose mother was a Brenninkmeijer, was born in Mettingen.

The *Holländer* plied their trade in the Netherlands. The County of Lingen, where Mettingen is located, was for many years Dutch territory (1551–1702, with intermittent interruptions). In 1702, the County of Lingen became part of Prussia. The Netherlands (which at the time included what is today Belgium) had, since at least the late Middle Ages, been one of the wealthiest regions of Europe; particularly in the "golden" seventeenth century, it was also one of Europe's most dynamic regions.[8] This affluence was not limited to the towns of the region, but also extended to many farming families in surrounding rural areas.

The *Holländer* focused on the comparatively sparsely populated and highly agrarian but also relatively affluent northern provinces, in particular Frisia. *Tödden* who were connected by family ties often joined forces and established ware-

4 See Küpker (2008), pp. 178, 319.

5 See Rickelmann (1978), pp. 301–320; Vriezen (2011), pp. 120 f.

6 See Küpker (2008), p. 163.

7 See Rickelmann (1978), p. 335.

8 With respect to the retail trade, see van den Heuvel (2014) and, for the nineteenth century, van Zanden/Riel (2004), esp. pp. 204, 307.