

Domestic Politics and Neutrality (The Netherlands)

By [Pauline Onderwater](#)

Summary

When the First World War broke out, the Netherlands' most important political parties put aside their differences to help uphold the country's neutrality throughout the war. However, the Netherlands could not escape the severe strains the war put on the everyday life of the Dutch population, and the government had to make ever-greater infringements on society. The truce between the parties did not last long, and differences came to the fore again.

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Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, political equality in [the Netherlands](#) had increased significantly. The electorate had been expanded in 1887 and 1897 to encompass about 50 percent of the male population over the age of twenty-five. In the years after 1897, this would be expanded further to about 68 percent. The electorate was mostly based on census records, but it was also possible to apply for voting rights on the basis of certain diplomas. Women were excluded from voting. Members of the Lower House were elected at the district level by absolute majority.

The 1913 elections failed to put a majority cabinet in place. The Lower House was comprised of 100 seats at the time, and the Christian right, with only forty-five seats, thus lost its parliamentary majority. The parties of the liberal left had combined forces and delivered a joint election program, yet with thirty-seven seats, they, too, fell short of a majority. For the first time, the Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiders Partij*,

SDAP) was invited to join the government, after winning eighteen seats. It declined the invitation, however, because it did not deem this in the interest of the proletariat.¹ After strenuous negotiations had resulted in a deadlock and options seemed to have run out for a majority cabinet, [P.W.A. Cort van der Linden \(1846-1935\)](#) was asked to form an extra-parliamentary cabinet. Cort van der Linden had been Minister of Justice in the Pierson cabinet of 1897-1901, and although he was a liberal, he considered political parties a hindrance to serving the public interest. Accepting the task requested of him, Cort van der Linden formed a minority cabinet unbound by party politics, which was to finally put two lingering matters to rest: the financial equalization for religious schools, which, until then, had not received any governmental subsidies, and the introduction of general suffrage.²

A political truce

These constitutional changes had to be put on hold, however, when the First World War broke out. The Dutch States-General was immediately summoned in August 1914 to approve a number of military and economic laws. Cort van der Linden asked the States-General to lend its support to the government in this time of crisis, a call echoed by everyone who subsequently took the floor. In belligerent countries, the majority of socialists had rallied to fight what was everywhere depicted as a defensive war. In the Netherlands, socialists “only” had to support maintaining [neutrality](#), and so they did. As SDAP leader [Pieter Jelles Troelstra \(1860-1930\)](#) declared during the deliberations in the Lower House, “In these severe circumstances, the national thought outweighs the national differences”.³

The Dutch parties therefore entered into a “God’s peace”, in which political differences were put aside in order to devote all the country’s strength to its defence. This was comparable to what happened in belligerent countries, and a similar language is even discernible: e.g. the German [Burgfrieden](#) (*‘Ich kenne keine Parteien mehr, ich kenne nur noch Deutsche’*) and the French *Union Sacrée*. Yet, in the months following the outbreak of the war, this truce revealed itself to be more symbolic than concrete, in contrast to the *Burgfrieden*, which lasted well into 1917.

In the Netherlands, the first cracks in the peace appeared when Minister of Agriculture, Industry, and Trade [Willem Treub \(1858-1931\)](#) proposed introducing new taxes to cover the costs of mobilisation, something which did not sit well with Troelstra.⁴ Eventually, Treub settled for a state loan in place of the tax, but it had become clear that political debates could and would not be suspended for the entire war. The resumption of normal politics could not be put off forever. In September 1915, the government decided to resume its plans from before the war, such as the revisions to the constitution.⁵

Although the political parties, most notably the Social Democrats, were highly critical of governmental policy during the war, Cort van der Linden was able to marginalise the power of the Houses in favour of the cabinet. At the beginning of the war, he had told the Lower House that the government would not be sharing potentially sensitive information on matters of foreign policy or mobilisation, because doing so might endanger Dutch neutrality. The parties in the Lower House did not seem to want to challenge this stance.⁶ Upholding neutrality was more important in the end than engaging in political disputes.

More governmental interference

“To restore quiet and order and to instil trust, intervention was necessary. And thus we intervened”, wrote Treub in 1917 on the start of the war in 1914.⁷ The government was not alone in feeling this necessity, he continued; it had even had to resist the population’s desire for greater intervention.⁸ The government’s role in society had already been growing in the years preceding the First World War, particularly in the larger cities. In the 1890s, a new phase of social politics had begun when the working hours of municipal employees were limited. This was first measure taken to protect healthy, adult workers.⁹ Other significant examples of governmental intervention from the pre-war years were the *Woningwet* (Housing Act) and the *Leerplichtwet* (Compulsory Education Act), both from 1901.

Local governments had seemed more willing than the national government to experiment with social politics in the years leading up to the First World War. The national government, up until then reluctant to intervene in society too much, quickly abandoned this stance once the war broke out. Already in August 1914, several laws were passed that allowed the government to interfere in the economic life of the country. The *Levensmiddelenwet* (Food Act) allowed mayors to confiscate any products, materials, or domestic items in their municipality and sell them for a nationally-set maximum price.¹⁰ Another law allowed the government to prohibit certain goods from being exported, and the *Beurswet* (Stock Market Act) placed the stock market under governmental control.¹¹ Most of Treub’s measures were meant to benefit consumers rather than producers, yet it was also important to find a balance between the internal market and exports. The Dutch agriculture sector had depended on the world market before the war, and for meat and dairy products, the domestic market had simply become too small.¹² Treub soon permitted several exemptions from the trade bans, and the Dutch export of agricultural goods and fish soared in the first years of the war. These rising exports, however, often resulted in shortages in the Dutch market. There has not been enough research yet to support the claim that, as has been shown for Germany, the war widened the divide between the (producing) countryside and the (consuming) cities,

but it is safe to say relations were strained. The [rural population](#) was highly critical of Treub's measures and felt that it was being treated unfairly.¹³

In the meantime, local relief committees were founded in several municipalities, mostly thanks to private, middle-class initiatives. These committees were expressly intended to address the needs of people suffering as a result of the mobilisation, and not those of the "real", structural poor, who would still have to rely on municipal relief.¹⁴ This is an interesting distinction, because poor relief had always been considered "society's work", and while this attitude persisted in the case of the "real" poor, war relief seemed to be considered more of a governmental affair. As early as 10 August 1914, the National Relief Committee was founded to oversee the local committees. Members of the national committee included representatives from the four largest trade unions, the national Unemployment Council, the National Women's Council, the Society for Industry, and several agricultural organisations.¹⁵

Most of the crisis measures in the Netherlands were an interesting mixture of public and private initiatives. The government saw more and more need to intervene in society, but simultaneously wished to delegate certain activities to private initiatives. The most notable example of this was the creation of the [Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij](#) ([Netherlands Overseas Trust](#), or NOT), an organisation that could negotiate with the warring parties about trade quotas and restrictions. Although officially a private organisation, it did enjoy (silent) governmental support, and belligerent countries considered it as something of an extension of the Dutch government. The NOT allowed the government to indirectly keep the economy going while preserving Dutch neutrality.¹⁶ The National Relief Committee was a private initiative as well, but as it was involved in the execution of several laws, it was also a curious instance of public work in private hands. Furthermore, because it delegated much of its authority to local committees, these became quite powerful.¹⁷

Indeed, local authorities were instrumental in the increasing governmental intervention in society. Already before the war, local governments had been more likely to intervene than the national one, and this situation only intensified during the war. Especially when it came to combatting unemployment, which varied greatly by region, municipalities took a myriad of measures. Many municipalities established employment offices and offered loans to companies in financial trouble.¹⁸

Food supply represented the greatest challenge for both local and national governments during the war. The Netherlands was highly dependent on grain imports, especially from the [United States](#), and the [British blockade](#) made the access to grain far from certain.

Consequently, bread became a problem. Municipalities used the *Levensmiddelenwet* to confiscate rye and wheat, and often prohibited the baking of white bread because it required more wheat than brown bread. In 1915, a distribution system was set up for several food products.¹⁹ Most of the national government's measures were executed by local authorities.

In the last years of the war, scarcity increased as the belligerent countries made ever more severe demands on trade, demanding, for instance, Dutch goods in exchange for imports. This sometimes led to shortages of certain goods for the Dutch population. In 1916, the *Distributiewet* (Distribution Act) attempted to achieve a more equal distribution of goods. In 1915, Treub's successor, [Folkert Posthuma \(1874-1943\)](#), had already founded a Central Administration Office for the Distribution of Foods, but as a separate organisation was founded for almost every food product, state control was severely hampered. The new law sought to tighten governmental control in this respect.²⁰

No rice!

From 1917 onwards, scarcity became so pronounced that the government turned from distribution and price control to rationing. The more austere the shortages and government's measures became, the more discontent grew among the Dutch population. The publicist [C.K. Elout \(1870-1947\)](#) commented after the war that every sense of solidarity disappeared, to be replaced by egotism, distrust, and bitter criticism of the government: "The stomach was the only body part where the Dutchman was hit by the war; and now that stomach started to dominate the brain."²¹ Minister Posthuma's policy was criticised particularly harshly by the public and the press. People did not want to eat brown bread instead of white, and they did not want to sit in unheated buildings, as they did in 1917 when coal became so scarce that schools closed in the afternoon. But the potato shortages were most upsetting, and even became symbolic for all complaints about scarcity. In 1917, things came to a head in Amsterdam with the so-called Potato Riots. Though they remain the best-known protests of the country's wartime protests, the Potato Riots were not the only disturbances; especially in 1917 and 1918, there were several strikes and large demonstrations against government policies.

Potatoes, a staple food in the Netherlands, continued to pose problems, because much of the supply had to be exported to Germany, among other countries, in exchange for coal. Even when there were enough potatoes, their quality sometimes left much to be desired. The fact that, meanwhile, shiploads of potatoes were being sent to [Germany](#) and [Britain](#) was hard for the people to take. In the summer of 1917, matters came to a head. On 28 June, the supply of potatoes was sold out at nine in the morning. Women then proceeded to empty out an

unguarded barge, and two days later, they did the same with several carriages that were being unloaded in the Rietlanden neighbourhood of Amsterdam, a port area with a largely lower-class population. On 2 July, the leader of the radical Socialist Democratic Party (SDP), [D.J. Wijnkoop \(1876-1941\)](#), addressed a crowd on Dam Square, criticising the policies of both the national and the municipal governments. After that, a crowd plundered its way through the city; this activity was repeated for the next few days. Angry women marched to the office of acting mayor [N.M.J. Jitta \(1858-1940\)](#) and declared that if they tried to feed their husbands rice, they could count on a beating. The women's actions were soon complemented by strikes by male workers in several factories on 4 July. In the end, the municipal government felt compelled to ask the army to step in to help control the unrest. On 5 July, the police and army put down the riots. Nine people were killed and over 100 wounded during these violent outbursts.

Hunger and scarcity provided important impulses for the Potato Riots, but Amsterdam's women were also motivated by a sense of social injustice. Both the national and the municipal government were expected to provide at least a basic level of necessities. The mayor, however, shifted the blame entirely to the central government.

Threat of Revolution

"At present, the workers' class in the Netherlands is taking the political power. It will have to constitute itself as a revolutionary power".²² Thus spoke SDAP leader Troelstra on Monday, 11 November 1918, and he echoed this claim in Parliament the following day. He was convinced that the time had come to overthrow the existing political system. Yet, his declaration of revolution would find its way into the history books as "Troelstra's mistake", because the radical changes he foresaw failed to materialize. He especially overestimated the role of the army, which had proven crucial in the [German revolution](#). Fears of a Dutch revolution were stoked when riots broke out in the army barracks at the Harskamp on 25 October 1918, and later at other locations, prompted by dissatisfaction over food rations and the cancellation of leave. Even though these riots were no more severe than earlier disturbances during the years of mobilization, the great amount of attention given to them caused shock and unrest throughout the country.²³ Troelstra was convinced that the army was no longer a reliable instrument for the government, and seemed to assume it would thus side with the SDAP, an assumption based largely on the German situation. Of course, the earlier strikes and demonstrations, and most notably the Potato Riots, had already shown that there was great discontent among the Dutch population, but Troelstra felt that the unrest in those last weeks of the war clearly indicated that the time for revolution had come. He thought the Netherlands would emulate the international course of events: "It is our responsibility to use

this historical moment for the political elevation of the workers' class", he said.²⁴

After Troelstra's revolutionary speech, the government, which also doubted the trustworthiness of the army and feared a possible revolution, decided to mobilize the Voluntary *Landstorm* Corps. On 13 November, Member of Parliament [L.F. Duymaer Van Twist \(1865-1961\)](#) proposed founding a new loyal army corps; this gave rise to voluntary guard troops, and eventually the Special Voluntary *Landstorm* (BVL), which remained a force against internal left-wing unrest throughout the interwar years. On 14 November, the first train with some 600 Frisian volunteers arrived at The Hague.²⁵ The anti-revolutionary movement quickly gained momentum, especially after the government announced rapid demobilisation and promised to improve the food situation. Several prominent SDAP members distanced themselves from their leader, and on 14 November, the SDAP faction suffered a clear defeat in the parliamentary debates. Since it had become clear that the army would not rise in opposition against the government, Troelstra had to admit that he had made a mistake in proclaiming revolution.²⁶ Yet the revolution attempt had not been entirely without effect, since the government did issue a statement announcing plans for certain reforms. For instance, 1919 saw the introduction of the eight-hour workday.

In an interview after the war, Cort van der Linden declared that he had had the foresight to take the sting out of the revolution before it had even begun: "Through this constitutional revision, the cause for revolution was already removed in an era in which there was no danger yet for revolution. The revision of the constitution, next to an idealistic-political justification, also had a factual necessity."²⁷ He was referring to the so-called Pacification of 1917, in which both the "school struggle" (a highly idealistic political discussion about whether or not religious schools should have equal financial status to public schools) and the question of enfranchisement had been settled.

For a long time, this has been deemed one of the greatest successes in Dutch politics, the great example on which the entire polder model would later be based. Some remarks must be made in this respect, however. First of all, it should be kept in mind that terms such as equality had a very different meaning at the beginning of the 20th century. Women who fought for female suffrage, for instance, did not characterise their struggle in the terms of equality that we might assume. Women did not necessarily have to be equal to men, but had a maternal role to play in both the family and society as a whole. Feminists often spoke of expanding women's social and political role, arguing that under female guidance, something such as the Great War would never have happened. The way to achieve "spiritual maternity" was to get a greater say in society via suffrage.²⁸

Secondly, the idea of the pacification as a watershed moment in Dutch politics has been downplayed by later historians as well. Even before the war, there had been several attempts to expand enfranchisement. The “school struggle” had also been more or less resolved before the war. The role of Cort van der Linden as the great “pacifier” has also been somewhat reconsidered. His biographer did not find evidence of any “trade-off” between right and left, although the prime minister did prefer back-door tactics, which of course were not recorded.²⁹ Be that as it may, there were other politicians who played an equally important role in achieving the 1917 constitutional revision.

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that Dutch politics looked quite different after the war. Since Thorbecke’s constitution of 1848, Dutch politics had been dominated by liberals, and most of the Dutch population did not consider politics of much importance. Of course, this had already started to change before the war with the establishment of political parties, who increasingly described issues in idealistic terms to gain grassroots support. After the war, this new way of doing politics really took flight. However, this was due more to the change of the electoral system from constituency-based to proportional representation, as specified in the 1917 constitutional reform.³⁰ This, then, was the opportunity for new parties to be acknowledged for their contribution to society. Small parties were established on both the left and the right, and the SDAP especially expanded the reach of politics.

Conclusion

The question remains to what extent the First World War influenced these political changes. Many developments were merely a continuation from those started in the 19th century. It is nevertheless striking how much the Lower House accepted from the government. Cort van der Linden repeatedly pointed out how unfavourable any cabinet changes or crises would be during the war, even though belligerent countries themselves saw such changes.

Admittedly, the “God’s peace” made by the most important political parties in August 1914 was only short-lived, and the socialists in particular became highly critical of governmental wartime measures. There was little understanding for the continuing mobilisation, and rationing and distribution measures were also highly criticised. Yet the government itself refused to expand on its policies in the name of upholding neutrality, and this was – astonishingly – accepted by the Houses.

While most political developments might have come about even without the war, the increasing intervention of the government in society did represent a clear break from pre-war views on the role of the state. Most of the crisis measures and organisations were quickly disbanded after the war, especially after the “revolution scare” of November 1918. Yet, some

crucial steps had been taken towards changing the relationship between the state and its citizens. In times of crisis, citizens now increasingly looked upon the government to alleviate their troubles. With this, the first important steps towards the welfare state had thus been taken between 1914 and 1918.

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Notes

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Key Person(s)

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