Foreign Policy (Norway)

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Summary

Norway was a "neutral ally" of Great Britain during the war because of the immense pressure from the belligerents to stop Norwegian supplies to the enemy. The accelerating westward bending of neutrality resulted from Norway's dependence on supplies from the Western great power, Great Britain. The abandonment of neutrality culminated in the "tonnage Agreement" of June 1917, and was completed by giving in to Western demands to complete the western closure of the North Sea in 1918. By the war's end, Norway's contribution to the Western victory was recognised at the Paris Peace Conference.

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Introduction

On 4 August 1914, the Scandinavian governments declared their neutrality policies in a war that quickly escalated into total war[1] aiming “to cripple the enemy”, according to the British foreign secretary.[2] The “principal weapon” was economic pressure.[3] Even the neutrals would be pressured into participating in the reciprocal blockades of the two camps – the Entente and the central powers – that quickly followed. The “essence of the spirit of neutrality”, namely the equal treatment of all the warriors,[4] was rapidly broken as the belligerents declared that even food was contraband which should be denied to the enemy. The British threatened to prevent supplies from reaching any neutrals who refused to terminate business with Germany. The Germans threatened to retaliate if Norway gave in to the British claims. The Norwegian merchant navy, one of the world’s leading navies, had no other choice than to participate in the blockade. German submarine campaigns were one of the responses. During

the war, around 2,000 Norwegian seamen lost their lives in the submarine war as result of the merchant navy having been enrolled in the Allies' supply service, both in the English Channel and on the northern route to Arkhangelsk.

After four years of continuous diplomatic pressure, the Norwegian government de facto terminated all export to the Central Powers. Norway emerged from the war a "neutral ally" of the Entente, as Olav Riste (1933-2015) has concluded.[5] It managed to stay out of the war and provide supplies to the population, but participated in the economic part of it on the Entente side.

This paper will discuss the gliding flight of Norway from neutrality to a semi-alliance with the Entente, starting with an overview of the intellectual hand baggage of Norway's foreign policy leadership. The paper ends with some glimpses into the conflicts that led from neutrality to close cooperation with the Entente powers.

International Law, Political Leadership, and Intellectual Starting Point

Neutrality was a real political alternative to joining the war in 1914. In contrast to traditional mistrust of neutrality politics as being opportunistic and immoral,[6] recent scholars paint a picture of the 19th century as the age of the trinity of nationalism/militarism, economic liberalism, and the dawn of internationalism. This picture includes the development of binding rules for peaceful international conflict resolution, created by both international lawyers and global merchants who opposed, for instance, blockade politics.[7]

Maartje Abbenhuis and Stephen Neff observe that neutrality had been a political option in international politics for hundreds of years. By the Declaration of Paris in 1856, neutrality was legally regulated in lists of rights and duties for belligerents, as well as for neutral states. The rules were confirmed by the British Admiralty in 1866, and strengthened during peace conferences in 1899, 1907 and 1909.[8] Thus neutrality had reached its peak of international respectability in 1914,[9] regarded and used as a peaceful variant of Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) slogan: "continuation of policy by other means",[10] for instance by Germany during the Anglo-Boer War,[11]Britain during the German unification wars, or the United States during World War I until April 1917.

It was only *during* the war that neutrality was devalued as a policy for "spineless profiteer[s]"[12] or for weak and opportunistic states.[13] The brutality of total war, not the

weakness of small state leaders, meant that it became “almost impossible” to stay neutral.[14] In the beginning, however, neutrality was neither impossible nor opportunistic.

The Norwegian confidence in international law had long historical roots. Historian and later foreign minister (1935-1940) Halvdan Koht (1873-1965) declared in his opening speech at the congress of the International Law Association in Kristiania in 1905 that Norway intended to “fortifier” “l’esprit norvégien” with international law.[15] Neutrality was the core of this spirit.

Along with the belief in neutral intentions based on neutrality rules, the foreign policy starting point in 1914 was the historical lesson of the Napoleonic wars that neutral non-policy depended on British naval rule.[16] If Norway were forced to abandon its neutrality politics, “we trust”, as Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen (1848-1928) revealed in a toast on board a visiting British warship in 1908, “in the British nation”.[17] The Norwegian political elite understood Norway’s dependence on British protection,[18] which was due to the Norwegian economic dependence on international commerce, in terms of supplies as well as access for its merchant fleet to global freight markets. The belief in Britain, therefore, was not a question of sympathising more with Britain than with any other of the European great powers.[19] On the contrary, the British first sea lord (1904-1910 and 1914-1915), John Fisher (1841-1920), had revealed informally to the Norwegian envoy in London just a few years prior to 1914 that Britain might occupy a Norwegian harbour and keep it as long as needed during a war with Germany.[20] Therefore, the Norwegian neutrality policy was based on distrust, not trust, towards Britain and any other great power. Hence, Norway, like other minor states, was dependent on using international law, not arms, as a protective shield against foreign perils and to maintain its perceived twin duties: keeping Norway out of war and securing the necessary supplies for its inhabitants during a total war.[21]

International law did not cease to work during the war. All powers, minor and great, had to use legally trained personnel to prepare and present legal arguments in order to accept or repudiate diplomatic protests against the use of power and pressure to participate in the economic war. International law was thus a political power that could not be ignored by the belligerents.

The Norwegian political leadership was aware of the power of law, but also of the vulnerability of small powers in between big combatants. Both Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen and Foreign Minister Nils Claus Ihlen (1855-1925) were large scale industrialists with dominant political vocations, namely social reform and national economic wellbeing, based on classic economic liberalism. They deviated regarding education and personalities.

Knudsen was spontaneous, as demonstrated in his toast on trust to England. Ihlen had one policy for his endless diplomatic meetings with the British and German envoys, who protested against Norway's neutrality, namely that of being a cunctator – of phlegmatic waiting.[22]

International law included neutrality rules that regulated the rights and duties of states, not of their citizens. Politicians did not have control over private businesses, only over the political frameworks for business. This was one explanation for why the British embargo policy against Germany never entirely succeeded.

Regionally, Sweden, Norway's union partner until 1905, had an almost opposite starting point when war broke out, namely a foreign policy and economic orientation towards Germany, not Britain. Less than ten years after the end of the Swedish-Norwegian union, the first priority was to close the door on the possibility of the two states ending up in opposite camps during the war.

Building a Culturally Neutral Region

The Norwegian-Swedish agreement of 8 August 1914 ruled out the risk of inter-Scandinavian hostilities if the belligerents forced the two countries to join different camps. The agreement was celebrated as proof that the bad feelings resulting from 1905 no longer existed. Scandinavian royal meetings, in Malmø in 1914 and in Kristiania in 1917, were seen as further proofs of Scandinavian harmony. As Michael Jonas has observed, during those royal meetings the Scandinavian states learned "how to speak to one another" after 1905.[23] Upon that basis it has been concluded – after a cultural turn in the study of international relations – that the royal meetings were an important step towards the culture of peaceful conflict resolution that developed in the Scandinavian region in the 20th century.[24] Neutrality became "a keystone of the political culture and society of the North".[25]

Olav Riste has a conflicting view on the 1914 agreement as well as the royal meetings. He believes that the 1914 agreement was initiated by Sweden to recapture its traditional role as the leading state in the region. The negotiations that led to the agreement disclosed suspicion rather than confidence.[26] Therefore, the agreement did not hinder the opposition of neutrality politics. The royal meetings, as well as a number of meetings between prime ministers and foreign ministers during the war, led to some growth in the inter-Nordic exchange of goods and did not harm the forging of neutrality policy, though they also had little or no significant impact on it.

There is, currently, a historiographical consensus that the 1914 agreement and the royal

meetings signalled to the world the image of Scandinavia as a solid European peace region, in contrast to the Balkan region.[27] In accordance with the modern cultural approach of neutral discourse,[28] the meetings can be read and were interpreted as symbols of and expressions of a common Scandinavian determination to remain neutral in the war as well as in future wars. These symbols and expressions forged the branding of Scandinavia as a region with a foreign policy of peace. Such symbols and expressions do develop towards geopolitical realities.

Neutrality as Non-policy

Soon after the war broke out, the Norwegian government introduced a policy of outsourcing its politics towards the belligerents. The British blockade authorities, with their goal of stopping any import from Norway to Germany, requested that sector organisations for the different industries take it upon themselves to negotiate with the British and make statistical surveys on the supplies needed to cover national consumption, thus excluding any room for export to Germany.[29] The Germans complained, accompanied by threats of retaliation against Norwegian transport ships. The British threats were far more serious, since Norway depended on such essentials as oil and coal for the shipping fleet, industry, and the civilian population.

Step by step, the Norwegian government gave up its opposition to British pressure, as a British embargo against Norway would lead to a national catastrophe.

Business was, however, a matter for businesspeople, not for governments. Shipping merchants negotiated individual agreements with the British authorities concerning cargo inspection and the use of recommended routes through the English Channel.[30] A large number of arrangements followed that split the commercial and industrial sectors into a small minority that continued trading with Germany and a large majority that cooperated with the British. In an attempt to stop Norwegian supplies to Germany completely, the British war authorities continued pressing Norway to stop reexporting even Norwegian imported goods to Germany.

The Entente’s blockade developed towards a policy of starving the German population into surrender.[31] Step by step, the Norwegian government participated in this starvation policy by delegating it to business, requiring different sector organisations to adhere it. Foreign Minister Ihlen tacitly approved of the agreements between Britain and the Norwegian sectors. Thereby, the government did not violate neutrality rules. But it lost control over Norway’s foreign relations via “a peaceful [British] economic penetration”, according to the later foreign minister, Arnold Ræstad (1878-1945), in 1916.[32] Norway had been driven into

“dependency” on Britain,[33] only ten years after its establishment as an internationally recognised sovereign kingdom. This was unavoidable in the short term.[34]

Political abdication was inevitable for two specific companies. A huge fertiliser plant, Norsk Hydro, produced the chemical fertiliser that was booming in international food production after the industrial revolution. Fertiliser production, however, was easily converted to explosives, i.e. nitrates, and redirected from farming markets to Entente war fields, as the plant was financed by French (and Swedish) investors.[35] The same applied to the leading Norwegian whaling factory’s by-product, ammonia. The factory was partly owned by the British-Dutch fat production group, “Lever Brothers”.[36] After the war, the British minister to Norway, Sir Mansfeldt de Cardonnel Findlay (1861-1932), estimated that about 30 percent of French nitrate consumption during the war came from Norway.[37] “Of course the Norwegian government was kept informed”, a Hydro historian notes.[38]

In addition to this vast contribution to Entente war power, the Norwegian merchant fleet transported coal over the English Channel, as well as war materials from Britain to Arkhangelsk over Norwegian land territory.[39] The German submarines tried to stop this, and hit Norway hard. But the sinking of unarmed ships also intensified anger towards the barbarian Teutons, while British hunger campaigns against civilians flew under the propaganda radar.[40] This was even the case when newspapers disclosed that German spies tried to kill horses with cyanide in the borderlands near Finland, without explaining that the horses were used for smuggling weapons over Norwegian territory to Russia.[41] The German envoy threatened military retaliation against the traffic of contraband. Ihlen gambled that he was bluffing and did nothing to stop it.

Karl Erik Haug has concluded from his research in German military archives that Germany did not plan to force Norway into the war unless Britain first occupied a Norwegian sea-base.[42] Britain did not rule out the potential need for a naval base on the southwestern Norwegian coast, but never took action in this respect.

Fish, Copper, and the End of Neutrality

In 1916 the British drew Norway to the brink of economic war to stop fish export to Germany. To do so was no easy task.

Around 100,000 fishermen manned more than 20,000 fishing boats along the Norwegian coast. In 1915 Germany started direct purchase from them. The British followed suit. Vast

amounts of rotting fish were stored in harbours.[43] Prices exploded. Britain might, however, halt the supply of the fishing fleet with necessities such as petroleum and coal in order to force the termination of fish exports southwards. In August 1916 the so-called Fish Agreement was signed along these lines. According to the agreement, Norwegian fishery catches equivalent to the percentage of deliveries from the Entente would be exported there, while the percentage of fish that corresponded to the supplies from Germany (15 percent) would be allowed to be sent there. The government introduced export bans.[44]

The Norwegian government had committed the cardinal sin in neutrality theory, namely disrespecting the doctrine of non-discrimination. The German War Ministry was informed. As Riste adds: “From then onwards the tension in German-Norwegian relations increased sharply.”[45]

Simultaneously, minister Findlay protested to Ihlen about the alleged breach of both the fisheries treaty and that on Norwegian export of copper pyrite to Germany.[46] Ihlen lectured him on neutrality law. Findlay threatened to stop supplies. The Norwegians agreed to terminate the export of “cupriferous pyrites” and enhance British copper supplies to cover the need for domestic copper.[47] To the German side, Ihlen promised to continue delivering pyrites “in so far as they contain no copper”.[48] This was written in the concluding copper agreement with Britain of 28/30 August 1916.[49] The British legation soon reported to London the “distinct breach” of the agreement “as all copper is extractable from these low-grade ore”.[50] This launched the most serious crisis with Britain since 1807-1814 as Findlay informed Ihlen that Britain would stop supplying coal to Norway.

The core of the conflict lay in Findlay’s claim that there was no such thing as non-cupriferous copper. The disagreement was impossible to resolve simply because of the asymmetric power relationship. Therefore, on 17 February 1917 Britain lifted the embargo, after Norway had stopped any pyrite export to Germany.[51] The German reaction was apparently unlimited submarine warfare. Norway had been forced into a position between Scylla and Charybdis, as Donald Lee Haugen characterises the next and last Norwegian-Entente crisis – the Norse-American food supply negotiations.[52]

The Norwegian-American negotiations of 1917-1918, the “Nansen negotiations”, were a reiteration of the impossible compromise between the Norwegian need for western supplies and for some export to Germany to safeguard neutrality. The western powers still demanded the complete stop of any movement of supplies southwards. The result was harsh western

terms, signed by Norway's envoy, Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930), on 30 April 1918 on behalf of the Norwegian government.

The final farewell to the idea of neutral Norway was made in two steps. First, the "tonnage agreement" of June 1917 stipulated that the merchant fleet be taken over by the Entente, armed, integrated into the war transport service, and combined with Allied supply routes to Norway.[53] The end of neutrality followed when the Norwegian navy, in October 1918, met western demands to complete the mining closure of the North Sea between the Norwegian territorial border and Scotland.[54] A month later the war was over.
Norway's minister to the United States of America, Helmer Halvorsen Bryn (1865-1933), summed up the special relations with the western victors: Norway did contribute to victory: "only, we did not have the uniforms on".[55] The 2,000 dead seamen in Entente cargo illustrated Norway's allied services.

At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919-1920, Norway's envoy to France urged his government to demand "payment" for their services. He reminded the foreign department of a claim from the 1890s on polar expansionism into the Arctic Ocean. In 1920, the peace conference did allocate the sovereignty of Spitsbergen, a territory with rich coal deposits that hitherto had been regarded as terra nullius, to Norway. The "neutral ally" was, thus, included in the circle of the winners of the Great War.[56]

Neutrality, Supplies, and "Trust"

For the Norwegian foreign policy leadership, the starting point as well as the lesson learnt by the war was that neutrality had reached its height of respectability in 1914.[57] It ended some time after 1916 as a result of what the journalist Rolf Thommessen (1879-1939) summed up as: "the relation to England is very simple as it is an arithmetic problem", namely the ability to stop any supplies to Norway quickly and totally.[58]

The Norwegian-British crises of 1916 implied that any ambitions to balance the relationship between Norway and the belligerents were illusory.

However, new research indicates that Norway, as a minor power, could have had more power, which some imagine may have outweighed British predominance. International law included neutrality rules, did count and could not be ignored without time consuming negotiation. The huge Norwegian deliveries of nitrates to the Western Front could have been leveraged, and the Swedish policy of rejecting the use of land territory for the traffic of contraband could have been copied.

One important reason for the Norwegian adaptation policy towards the West was, nevertheless, the feeling of being powerless and forced to cooperate with the British. Another, and probably more important one, was the conclusion Norway drew from the maxim verbalised by Gunnar Knudsen in 1908: “trust” in the British nation. That maxim was the foundation stone of the Norwegian belief system during the war, which survived in a world of mistrusted great powers.

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External Links

- Berg, Roald: Emotions in International Politics: Distrust towards the British in Norwegian Public Life, 1814–1914, in: Scandinavica 58, 2020, pp. 98-114 (Article)
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- Lien, Robin (in Norwegian): Et uforenlig Norden? Nøytralt samarbeid under første verdenskrig, 1914-1918 (An incompatible Nordic? Neutral cooperation during the First World War, 1914-1918), thesis, 2019 (Bergen Open research Archive) (Article)

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Metadata

Regional Section(s)
Western Europe > Norway

Thematic Section(s)
Power

Subjects
Economy > War economy > Industry, other
Economy > War economy > Raw materials
Economy > War economy > Trade
Economy > War economy > Transport
Politics, law > Domestic policy
Politics, law > Institutions > Ministries and departments
Politics, law > International relations > Alliances, alliance systems
Politics, law > International relations > Declarations
Politics, law > International relations > Diplomacy
Politics, law > International relations > Neutrality
Politics, law > International relations > Treaties and agreements, other
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