

Foreign Policy (The Netherlands)

By [Maartje Abbenhuis](#)

Summary

The Kingdom of the Netherlands upheld a foreign policy of strict neutrality during the First World War. That policy revolved around two main precepts: upholding the requirements associated with neutrality in international law (particularly the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907), and careful management of the country's relationships with the belligerents. By war's end, the Dutch government's ability to defend the Netherlands' neutral rights and sovereign independence had declined significantly.

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Introduction

As it had done in all conflicts (barring its own imperial wars) since 1839, the Kingdom of [the Netherlands](#) upheld a foreign policy of strict [neutrality](#) during the First World War. The government had every expectation that its neutrality would be defensible, even if it worried about the possibility of an invasion by [Germany](#) and (to a lesser degree) [Great Britain](#). The principles and foundations of [neutrality](#) were well grounded in international politics, [international law](#), and in the international system before 1914.¹ Remaining neutral in this war, however, was a particularly fraught exercise, especially for a country that was surrounded by belligerent powers.

At one level, the maintenance of Dutch neutrality depended on the belligerent powers' decisions not to invade the country. For example, Germany sought to maximise the economic advantages of Dutch neutrality in 1914. When these advantages were sufficiently eroded by

the imposition of a [British blockade](#) (in 1916 and 1917), it could no longer afford to open up another war front. For their part, the British considered an invasion of the Netherlands through the mouth of the Schelde River in 1914, but understood all too well that the Germans would respond with a counter-invasion. As Britain had ostensibly [gone to war](#) to protect the rights of neutral [Belgium](#), it could not be seen to invade another neutral country. For the British, keeping the Netherlands neutral was preferable to it falling into Germany's hands.

At another level, the maintenance of Dutch neutrality depended on the ability of the Dutch government to administer the country's neutrality. To that end, it carefully managed its relationships with the belligerents. It upheld the principles of international law on which neutrality was founded and looked to make sure that no reason existed for its great power neighbours to invade. Despite numerous serious crises, the Dutch government played a key role in protecting the country's non-belligerency.

Dutch Neutrality

Since the separation of Belgium from the Kingdom of the Netherlands in the 1830s, the Dutch pursued a policy of voluntary neutrality in international affairs. Nineteenth-century Dutch neutrality aimed at economic security, the maintenance of imperial strength (especially in the Dutch East Indies), and friendly relations with the world's great powers: particularly its near neighbours Great Britain, Germany, and [France](#).² Aside from pursuing a number of military campaigns within their own imperial sphere in the Dutch East Indies, the Dutch declared their neutrality in every conflict since 1839. They aimed at a continuation of neutrality in 1914, although they were aware and increasingly concerned at the possibility that one of their powerful neighbours (most notably Germany, but to some extent Britain as well) might attempt to utilise the advantages of the Netherlands' geo-strategic position and invade: in the case of Germany, across the pan-handle province of Limburg; in the case of Britain, through the mouth of the Schelde River that led to the Belgian city of Antwerp.

At the outbreak of war in August 1914, the Dutch government signalled their intentions to maintain a policy of strict armed neutrality. [Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands \(1880-1962\)](#) issued a neutrality declaration as well as a number of decrees explaining how the Dutch would protect the territorial integrity of their [borders](#) by military means. The country mobilised its armed forces on 1 August 1914 in anticipation of a war involving Germany and France.

On the eve of war, neutrality was a well-established concept in international affairs. Outside the great powers and [Serbia](#), in fact, most of the world's nations declared their neutrality in August 1914. The [Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907](#) and the London Declaration of

1909 defined the rights and obligations of neutrals. Many of these rules privileged a neutral's right to trade in non-military goods and, as long as it did not give undue military or strategic advantage to a belligerent, to remain a non-belligerent in the conflict. The expectation that the belligerents would respect these rights was well established before 1914. The First World War would prove the undoing of many (although not all) of these expectations, as the strains of conducting a [total global war](#) made it impossible to keep the neutrals unaffected.³ In fact, from the outset, neutrality politics defined the parameters of the war. Germany's invasion of Belgium on 3-4 August 1914 was carefully planned to avoid its armies passing through Dutch Limburg. For the [German military planners](#), keeping the Dutch state neutral might protect its own access to global imports, [foodstuffs](#), and monetary investment. The German General [Helmuth von Moltke \(1848-1916\)](#) hoped the neutral Netherlands would be a "windpipe" through which Germany could "breathe".⁴ Within months, however, the ability of the Dutch state to protect its neutral rights by international law became increasingly more difficult.

Maintaining Neutrality

The key to maintaining Dutch neutrality lay in the intersection of two elements: The Netherlands' relationship with the other powers (foreign and neutral) and its domestic policies to protect the territorial sovereignty and "neutral" face of the Netherlands. In many respects, the Netherlands managed to remain neutral during the war because its great power neighbours did not invade. However, the maintenance of Dutch neutrality required micro-managing by the Dutch government, especially by its Foreign Minister [John Loudon \(1866-1955\)](#), Prime Minister [Pieter Cort van der Linden \(1846-1935\)](#), and Commander-in-Chief of the Dutch armed forces, General [Cornelis Jacobus Snijders \(1852-1939\)](#). Both diplomacy and [military policy](#) aimed at upholding the expectations attached to neutrals in terms of international law and ensuring that the belligerents had no reason to invade.

By international law, the obligations of neutrals revolved around two principles: impartiality (particularly with regards to the supply of military materials by neutrals to belligerents) and territorial integrity (ensuring that a belligerent did not obtain undue military advantage from the neutral). In return for upholding its neutrality obligations, neutrals had a right to trade in non-military (non-contraband) goods with neutrals and belligerents alike and to remain unaffected by the military operations of the belligerents on land and on the open seas. While the prime ambition of the Dutch government was to keep the Netherlands out of the war at almost any cost, Cort van der Linden's government was an ardent advocate for the protection of these neutral rights. It also protested other violations of the international law of war. It facilitated a number of [humanitarian actions](#) as well: Dutch ambulances worked at the war fronts, the Dutch government initiated an exchange programme for injured prisoners of war

between Britain and Germany, and it interned wounded [POWs](#) and enemy civilians on behalf of the belligerents. Such acts aimed at promoting the value of the Netherlands as a neutral power in international affairs and looked to protect neutrality as a viable policy. By war's end, the Dutch government remained wedded to the country's neutral status, although its ability to uphold these international rights had been significantly eroded.

Through the nineteenth century, the expectation that neutral governments would intercede when other states threatened to go to war with each other developed as part of European concert diplomacy. By the turn of the century, formal mechanisms for mediation and arbitration were embedded in the Hague Conventions of 1899. These required neutral parties to do all in their power to alleviate a crisis. During the First World War, the Netherlands' government was involved in a couple of attempts involving other neutral states to urge the belligerents' to consider a speedy end to the conflict. These conciliation attempts were, by and large, unsuccessful. Significantly, while the world's neutrals had obvious interests in common, the Netherlands' government rarely coordinated its neutrality practices with other neutral states. In the case of the [United States](#), which remained the most powerful neutral until 1917, the Netherlands even avoided any negotiations on aligning their neutrality policies.⁵ The complexities of the Netherlands' peculiar relationships with Britain and Germany played a decisive role in these decisions.

Internment

A major requirement of any neutral state in time of war was to protect the territorial integrity of its land, sea, and air borders. To that end, the Hague Conventions required that a neutral prevented belligerents from using neutral territory for military ends, including the [movement of troops](#), the transit of military equipment, or the use of neutral territory to [spy](#) on an enemy. When the Dutch armed forces mobilised on 1 August 1914, a considerable proportion of troops were posted at the country's land borders to enforce these requirements. The Dutch navy also patrolled the Netherlands' territorial waters and monitored the movement of ships. If belligerent troops or their equipment did breach a neutral border, international law required that the Dutch intercept them and (in almost all cases) intern the military personnel in camps and isolate the materials. In all, more than 46,000 foreign soldiers were interned in the Netherlands during the war. As Susanne Wolf argues, the diplomacy surrounding their internment formed a key element of the Netherlands' neutrality politics.⁶

In general, internment did not pose a great diplomatic risk to the Netherlands. It was only when those rules were difficult to uphold or complications arose that the Dutch government had to be particularly wary. This was especially significant when, in the early stages of the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914, locals reported that a unit of German soldiers

crossed neutral Dutch territory near the town of Vaals and were not detained by Dutch border guards. Whether the Germans actually crossed Dutch territory on 5 August remains open to debate. Paul Moeyes certainly offers a compelling case that they did.⁷ At the time, however, the Dutch and German governments claimed that the incident had not happened. The French, British, and Belgians, however, mounted a concerted public relations campaign saying it had. Given that neither Britain nor France had officially recognised the Netherlands' neutrality declaration (they would do so on 6 August), the Dutch government was hard pressed to deny the claim. They did everything in their power, in fact, to prove that the incident did not occur. But as late as 1932, the controversy still complicated the Netherlands' relations with Britain and France.⁸

That the Netherlands took responsibility for internees was a requirement of international law. The belligerents, however, were responsible for paying the Dutch government for the upkeep of their military personnel. When in December 1914, the internees at the Belgian camp in Zeist mutinied in protest at the inadequate state of their accommodation, the Netherlands' legitimacy as a neutral power was at stake. International [Red Cross](#) workers inspected the camp, while the Dutch military authorities undertook a formal enquiry, which found that more could be done to make the lives of internees palatable. As a result, greater freedoms were offered to all internees along with education programmes and work opportunities. Diplomatic tensions about internment also arose when the Dutch interned foreign naval vessels that entered Dutch waters, including four German [U-boats](#), or shot down foreign aeroplanes that crossed into Dutch air space. In all these internment cases, what was at risk was the Netherlands' ability to maintain its neutrality. The Dutch government was all too aware that any neutrality violation might provide an excuse for one of the belligerents to invade.

Transit

The greatest danger to the Netherlands' neutrality came in the spring of 1918. As it had before 1914, after the outbreak of war, Germany continued to use the Netherlands as a transit zone for the movement of goods. The potential advantages of Dutch neutrality to help protect Germany's war economy were a major consideration in sustaining Germany's willingness to protect that neutrality.⁹ At first, Germany was able to gain major advantages from the Netherlands' trade connections. It also sought dispensation from using Dutch railway lines and canals to transport goods from Germany to Belgium. By international law, the transit of belligerent materials across neutral territory was permissible as long as the goods were of a non-military nature. Given the [German occupation of Belgium](#), however, much of what travelled from Germany aimed at the sustenance of the German war effort on the [Western Front](#). The Dutch thus had to be extra vigilant in checking the movement of

these goods into Belgium for fear of violating their neutrality.

Until 1917, by means of careful negotiation with the British and Germans, the Dutch were able to allow the transit of a certain amount of German goods into Belgium, including sand and grit (a major ingredient in the construction of pill boxes on the front but also of roads and infrastructure). After the United States' entry into the war, however, the Netherlands' ability to negotiate feasible agreements dried up. Not only was the Netherlands dependent on the United States for a considerable amount of its own food and fertilizer needs, it could not accommodate the requests from the Allied Powers that it decrease its exports of foodstuffs to Germany and prevent further transit of questionable German military materials. For their part, the Germans complained that the United States required that the Dutch release their merchant ships stationed in American ports for the transit of American goods to Britain and France. The Germans (quite rightly) argued that if the Dutch could not allow the transit of belligerent military goods across their land borders, they certainly could not allow their merchant fleet to carry contraband materials on the open seas. The crisis came to a head in March 1918 when the British and Americans seized 137 Dutch merchant vessels (a third of The Netherlands' merchant marine) utilising an ancient international law (the law of angary) to justify the action. Germany responded that unless the Dutch now allowed unlimited access to Germany to transit military materials (and even troops) across the country, it would declare war. In the end, it was only by an extraordinary compromise that war was avoided. Ultimately, it was only because neither Germany nor the Allied Powers could afford to invade the neutral at this late stage that the Dutch remained non-belligerents.

Economic Diplomacy

In the end, it was the economic conduct of the war that posed the most difficulties for The Netherlands' neutrality diplomacy. With the imposition of the British and French blockades from 1915 on and the rejection of the principles of the Declaration of London 1909 (in 1916), the Netherlands' ability to sustain its domestic economy and connections with its [empire](#) were at risk. The situation worsened as Germany responded to these blockade measures by requiring greater access to Dutch goods and imports. The declaration of unrestricted U-boat warfare in 1915 (and again in 1917) by Germany had a corresponding impact on Dutch shipping. By 1918, tonnage cleared in Dutch ports had reduced to a mere 11 percent of its 1914 levels (and an astounding 5.5 percent of the 1913 levels).^{[10](#)}

Given these stark economic realities, the Dutch government had no choice but to negotiate viable compromises between the Germans and British (and with the United States after February 1917). It did so not by upholding the international law of neutrality as much as it managed the demands and expectations of the belligerents with bilateral agreements.

[Economic management](#) included the creation of a private company, the Netherlands' Overseas Trust Company (*Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij*, NOT), to offer importation certificates to Dutch merchants crossing the North Sea, which guaranteed their cargo would not be exported on to the Central Powers (for more see The Netherlands Overseas Trust Company).¹¹ In return, the Dutch offered Germany access to essential products, including foodstuffs, and the right to transit certain contraband materials if they were only used for civilian purposes in Belgium.

After the United States' entry into the war in 1917, however, the NOT was unable to continue its indirect and informal diplomacy on behalf of Dutch merchants and the government. A new organisation, the Netherlands' Export Company (*Nederlandsche Uitvoer Maatschappij*, NUM), was created with full governmental involvement which aimed at protecting the rights of Dutch merchants and full access to the open seas as well as negotiating manageable export quotas between the two sets of belligerents. Nevertheless, the NUM's freedom of action was severely curtailed by the demands of the belligerents on both sides. By late 1917, the warring powers effectively regulated the Dutch export market and Dutch farmers could no longer determine to whom they could sell their produce or even what produce they might grow.

Like most of the northern European neutrals, the Netherlands was a key player in the conduct of the economic war. This reality ensured that the Dutch government's ability to maintain the economic security of its borders was paramount. If it could not show that its economic agreements were maintained, its neutrality was at threat. Smuggling posed the greatest threat to the Netherlands' relationship with the Allied Powers. Nevertheless, smuggling out of the Netherlands was rife. The British and French pushed the Dutch to do everything in their power to minimise smuggling – and the Dutch complied. To that end, their government heightened border security by mobilising more soldiers to the frontier zone with Germany and Belgium. It also imposed strict regulations to monitor the movement of people and goods into and out of these border regions. It checked the movement of ships into and out of ports and harbours both in Europe and in its empire. It utilised the extraordinary powers of military jurisdiction afforded by the declaration of a “state of war” and “state of siege” in border regions (which, by 1917 covered two-thirds of the country), to manage many of these economic measures. While smuggling continued unabated and the Dutch economy and people suffered considerably from food and fuel shortages from 1916 on, these anti-smuggling activities helped to persuade the Entente that the Netherlands was taking its economic obligations to the belligerents seriously.¹²

Conclusion

1918 was a year of crisis for the Dutch state and its people. The country faced renewed threats of war and a potential invasion by Britain and Germany (after the “angary” incident). It also had to contend with numerous political and [social crises](#) caused by the severely strained domestic economy and the inadequate provisioning of food and fuel stuffs. When [Russia](#) cancelled all foreign debts that year, many investors in the Netherlands were financially ruined. Combined with the impact of the [Spanish Flu pandemic](#) and growing war weariness among the Dutch public, the end of the war came none too soon.

The terms of the Armistice Agreement and the [Treaty of Versailles](#) necessitated a rethink of Dutch neutrality policies, particularly in the face of the creation of the [League of Nations](#) and the rise of the principle of collective security. Still, the Dutch showed remarkable loyalty to the policy of neutrality in the 1920s and 1930s. Neutrality had, after all, vouchsafed their security during the war. Their “independence policy” (*zelfstandigheidspolitiek*) in the inter-war years manoeuvred around neutrality. In the next global conflagration, however, being neutral was no guarantee for the country’s safety.

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Notes

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External Links

- [Abbenhuis, Maartje M.: The Art of Staying Neutral. The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918, Amsterdam 2006 \(OAPEN\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Certificate issued by the Netherlands Overseas Trust Board, vouching for a ship's goods \(Maritiem Digitaal\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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