

Neutrality

By [Samuël Kruizinga](#)

Summary

During the 19th century, neutrality evolved into a set of legal and political tools designed to limit the impact of wars on the international system. This form of neutrality did not survive the first “total war”; remaining neutral was still possible, but only in closely circumscribed conditions.

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Neutrality and Limited Warfare, 1815-1914

Neutrality as it existed in 1914 was shaped first and foremost by its evolution during the “long” 19th century. Recognised as a valuable tool of statecraft by great and small powers alike, neutrality – as old as war itself – was redefined primarily as a set of international legal statutes that bound states to behave in certain ways, thereby regulating the conduct between belligerents and non-belligerents in time of war. It was adopted by states wishing to avoid involvement in costly and unnecessary wars, but also had systemic properties: it ensured European and global stability by limiting wars in scale and scope, and by protecting the increasingly vital connections between the European states and their ([imperial](#)) markets and supplies. The First World War and its “[totalizing logic](#)”, however, robbed neutrality of its systemic value, resulting in enormous pressures being exerted by the warring great powers on (smaller) states that opted for neutrality.¹ However, neutrality managed to retain some of its value – both for belligerents and the neutrals themselves – for strategic, political, economic and cultural reasons.

In 1914, a comprehensive, but by no means complete or undisputed body of [international law](#) was created which defined the neutral states’ parameters of action. It consisted of neutral rights and neutral duties formalised by international agreements such as the 1856 Declaration of Paris and the [1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions](#). For example, Hague Convention V guaranteed that in wartime the territory of neutral states would be inviolable.

This right to territorial integrity also implied a duty to halt belligerent military personnel from traversing neutral territory. Allowing them to pass unhindered would give them a clear military advantage, and would therefore be considered unneutral. The question of what exactly constituted sufficient neutral policing of borders remained an open one, however, illustrating that even during the “golden age” of legal neutrality, its application remained fraught with uncertainties. The system was workable, however, not only because neutrality’s systemic value was widely appreciated, but also because neutrality was never “just” a legal system: it was also shaped by precedence and by national and transnational notions of what a neutral “ought” to do.²

Neutrality and Total War, 1914-1918

The First World War saw breaches of neutrality on an unprecedented scale. Belligerents invaded neutral territory and assumed “belligerent rights” at sea that infringed upon both the spirit of pre-1914 agreements and decades of precedence. Since the stability of the international system was no longer a concern – rather, both belligerent blocs rephrased their war efforts as a fight to change the world for the better – a state’s neutrality had to serve a practical purpose to the belligerents. Sometimes, these purposes were shared by all belligerents – [the Netherlands’](#) neutrality was made possible, amongst other things, by shared unwillingness to open a new front so close to important German and British population centres – but more often than not they were contradictory. Often, only the (real or perceived) economic benefits and the danger of pushing a neutral into the enemy camp served to limit belligerent pressure, something skilled neutral diplomatists could exploit.³

Moreover, in those states that had been permanently neutralised (e.g. [Switzerland](#)) or had been long-time neutrals (e.g. the Netherlands and [Sweden](#)) a connection between national identity and neutrality had been forged during the 19th century that survived the First World War. Other states remained neutral because it was deemed the least divisive option (e.g. in [Spain](#)). These remained in the minority, however. Most states that declared their neutrality at the outbreak of war in July 1914 ended up formally (such as [Bulgaria](#) or [Romania](#)) or informally declaring sides (such as those countries associated with the Allies or the Central Powers, one example of the latter being Uruguay). Their ruling elites felt that national ambitions could seemingly only be realised through active engagement with the war or a seat at the table at the peace conference that would end it. For example, the unification of all Italians in one state, [interventionists](#) successfully argued in early 1915, could only be achieved by forcefully liberating the [irredentist](#) territories. And the American government contended in 1917 that it could not tolerate a global order dictated by the German Kaiser; it therefore fought to make sure the peace settlement would be one in accord with American

values, interests and ambitions.

Neutrality could also be lost due to belligerent infractions: the sovereignty of [Belgium](#) and [Albania](#), for example, were sacrificed simply because the perceived strategic benefits of doing so outweighed the downsides. Only where both a neutral state's own population and the belligerent powers remained convinced that neutrality's benefits outweighed belligerency could neutrality survive the First World War.⁴ The fact that on 11 November 1918 only a handful of states had remained neutral (in Europe: [Norway](#), Sweden, [Denmark](#), the Netherlands, Switzerland and Spain; in South America: Mexico, Chile and Argentina) suggests that the ability to do so during the First World War was the exception rather than the rule.

In addition to neutral states – and citizens self-identifying as neutral – some international organisations and institutions such as the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) and the Holy See also remained neutral throughout the war. Here, too, continued neutrality was dependent on the combination of the continued utility of their services rendered to the belligerents and their perceived self-interest in continued non-involvement in the conflict.

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- [Abbenhuis, Maartje M.: **The Art of Staying Neutral. The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918.** Amsterdam 2006 \(OAPEN\) \(Book\)](#)
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