

The Netherlands

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Summary

The Netherlands remained neutral during the First World War, but was nevertheless significantly affected by it. Its army remained fully mobilized to counter any possible threat, and its economy felt the strain of both belligerents' attempts to control the world's sea lanes and supplies. Neutrality also created its own unique problems, as the Dutch government had to care for thousands of refugees, detain soldiers who had entered her territory, and attempted to censor a partisan press. In 1917-1918, the government proved unable to deal with the manifold problems created by the next-door war and neutrality, sparking widespread unrest.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 A Small, Neutral Country](#)
 - [2.1 Independent, Political, and Armed Neutrality](#)
 - [2.2 Prepared for the Worst](#)
 - [2.3 Neutral Credentials](#)
- [3 Military Matters](#)
 - [3.1 Army Organisation](#)
 - [3.2 Mobilisation](#)
 - [3.3 Mobilisation Maintained](#)
 - [3.4 Easter Alarm](#)
 - [3.5 Successful Deterrence?](#)
- [4 Balanced Trade](#)
 - [4.1 Economic Neutrality](#)
 - [4.2 Netherlands Oversea Trust Company](#)
 - [4.3 Government Intervention](#)
 - [4.4 Deep Waters](#)
 - [4.5 Changing Gears](#)
- [5 Making Sense of the War](#)
 - [5.1 Reporting the War](#)
 - [5.2 Living with War?](#)
- [6 War's End](#)
 - [6.1 Growing Unease](#)
 - [6.2 Disaster strikes twice](#)

[6.3 An Aborted Revolution](#)

[6.4 The Kaiser and his Men](#)

[7 Conclusion](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

Introduction

The First World War has never had a major place in Dutch historiography. Dutch [neutrality](#) and the overwhelming influence of the Second World War on the country may explain this state of affairs. Moreover, the studies that were written were in Dutch, so their international impact remained limited. Still, we can discern two periods in which the war years of 1914-1918 figure with some prominence: the period following the end of the War, and more recent times since the 1990s.

Dutch academics, historians and jurists in particular, have analysed and interpreted the war since the day it began in many newspapers and journals. They were especially interested in the causes of the war, in [international law](#) and in the way the war affected their own country, both internally and in its international position. After the war, when the first memoirs and documents were published in the former belligerent countries, some Dutch historians came to the fore internationally. Foremost among them was [Nicolas Japikse \(1872-1944\)](#), who, because of the personal impact the war had on him, investigated its causes and the Dutch position during the conflict. He led the Dutch committee for research on the causes of the war and, from October 1921, was a member of the Central Commission for Neutral Investigation of the Causes of the World War founded by the Norwegian jurist and philosopher [Herman Harris Aall \(1871-1957\)](#). In 1921 Japikse published *Die Stellung Hollands im Weltkrieg*.¹ He refused to believe the war was caused solely by [Germany](#). He also stressed how advantageous, both militarily and economically, Dutch neutrality had been for Germany.

Understandably, the Second World War dominated Dutch modern historiography for many decades. Only recently has the position of Holland in 1914-1918 regained interest, following a more general, worldwide “rediscovery” of the First World War. Historians working outside the Netherlands took the lead: [Marc Frey](#) (Germany), Hubert van Tuyll van Serooskerken (US) and [Maartje Abbenhuis](#) (New Zealand). Between 1998 and 2006, they published their major studies on the economic and strategic role of the country as well as on its internal history.² Dutch historians followed suit. [Paul Moeyes](#) wrote the first modern overview of the mobilisation period, [Wim Klinkert](#), whose essays on the military history of the period were

collected in 2013, and the dissertations of Ismee Tames, Nicole Eversdijk and [Samuël Kruizinga](#) deserve mention.³ These studies shed more light on, respectively the intellectual, cultural and economic developments in Holland during the years 1914-1918. In 2014, Klinkert, Kruizinga and Moeyes published a new book on Dutch neutrality during the First World War, the topic to which this article will now turn.⁴

A Small, Neutral Country

Independent, Political, and Armed Neutrality

In August 1914 the Netherlands had been a neutral country for more than sixty years. After the short-lived union with [Belgium](#) (1815-1831) the Dutch had had to rethink their position in Europe and the world at large. As a small European country with sizable colonial possessions, most notably the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, the Netherlands had more to lose than to gain in any future European conflict.

The Netherlands opted for an independent, political and armed neutrality. *Independent* in that, unlike Belgian neutrality, it was neither imposed nor guaranteed by any of the European powers; *political* because, unlike [Swiss neutrality](#), which had been given a permanent status in the country's constitution, Dutch neutrality remained a policy that consecutive governments chose to continue; and *armed* in that the Dutch maintained an army to defend the country against any possible violations of its neutrality. The image that the Dutch presented to the world was that of the *saturated state*; the state that was content with the territory it possessed and whose only interest was the preservation and the protection of the status quo.

The premise underlying Dutch neutrality was a firm belief in the balance of power, both in relation to the homeland and the Dutch East Indies. Dutch political and military thinkers were convinced that Holland's geo-strategic position was so important that none of the European major powers would allow any of their rivals to take possession of the country and the same applied to the Dutch East Indies: [Japan](#) was seen as a potential threat, but it was strongly believed that [Great Britain](#) would never allow this important colony to fall into the hands of its major rival in the area.⁵

Prepared for the Worst

The German unification of 1871 hardened the Dutch in their belief that neutrality was the best means of staying detached from European power politics. Dutch military planners realized that a new war between [France](#) and Germany was more than likely, but after

studying the possible lines of attack they concluded that though in such an event Belgian neutrality would almost certainly be violated, Dutch neutrality stood a good chance of being respected.

Consecutive Dutch governments took great pains to quash any foreign suspicions about Holland opting for an armed neutrality as a cheap option. In the years leading up to the war, governments spent between 20-30 percent of their budget on defence. They modernized the New Holland Waterline and in 1874 started the construction of the "*Stelling van Amsterdam*" (Fortress Amsterdam), a national redoubt consisting of forty-two fortresses and an inundation system around the nation's capital. This would be the country's last line of defence, far away from the nation's borders, thus illustrating its non-aggressive intentions. The military thinking behind this redoubt was that the Dutch army would be able to hold out against an invading enemy for a maximum of six months, by which time it was hoped (and assumed) that third party military assistance would bring relief. In 1910 a new and expensive coastal-defence bill was introduced. During its discussion in parliament, the government emphasized that it was important that the Dutch should be seen to be taking their national defence seriously. For if the major European powers were not convinced of its commitment towards their own defence, Holland could not expect to be treated with any sympathy and consideration when a peace settlement was negotiated after a future European war.⁶

Neutral Credentials

The Dutch also realized that war plans were devised in peacetime and that there was therefore no time to lose in establishing the nation's neutral credentials. In the years leading up to the First World War Dutch politicians and diplomats worked hard to present the Netherlands as the reliable neutral. "Friendship with all, alliances with none", became the nation's neutrality creed, and the Dutch studiously avoided choosing sides in any conflict involving European powers. The Boer War (1899-1902) was an interesting case in point. Among the Dutch population there was widespread sympathy for the Boer republics, which together with Dutch-speaking Flanders were seen by many as brother nations. But the Dutch government remained aloof and the foreign minister warned the young [Wilhelmina, Queen of the Netherlands \(1880-1962\)](#) not to respond to any pro-Boer petitions: "it seems advisable to avoid any action that may lead to a public evaluation of the relationship between the Dutch and British governments, as this might easily arouse British sensibilities."⁷

The only area in which the Dutch tried to play an active role in European politics was that of [international law](#). They consistently tried to ensure that international conferences on the laws of war also put the legal rights and duties of neutral countries on the agenda. The Dutch were asked to host the [Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907](#). This was seen as international

recognition of the country's neutral status. This reputation was further solidified when delegates at the first Peace Conference selected The Hague as the seat for the new Permanent Court of Arbitration, and acquired a tangible symbol four years later, when [Andrew Carnegie \(1835-1919\)](#), agreed to fund the building of the Peace Palace, which was not officially opened until August 1913.

By that time a new liberal government was about to take office. The incoming Prime Minister, [Pieter Wilhelm Adriaan Cort van der Linden \(1846-1935\)](#), had intended to make national issues on constitutional reform and education its top priorities, but within a year of taking office his government had to respond to the threat of an imminent European war. In the last days of July 1914 the Dutch government was faced with the question on whether to mobilise its armed forces. The dilemma was clear: a full mobilisation would cause a major upheaval and cost the country some 12 million guilders. On the other hand, if the Dutch army was to act as an effective deterrent it was vital that the country should mobilise its forces before any of its neighbours.

Unknown to the Dutch, the future combatants of the First World War had by that time already decided to respect Dutch neutrality. Earlier versions of Germany's war plans had included a march through the southern Limburg province, but these had been scrapped: hopes that a neutral Holland would greatly benefit belligerent Germany were believed to outweigh the tactical advantage of allowing its invasion force to use southern Dutch railroads on their way to France. France and Britain had, prior to the First World War, not seriously entertained the idea of a strike at the German industrial heartland through the Netherlands.⁸

Military Matters

Army Organisation

The primary task of the armed forces (army and navy) was to discourage any belligerent power from incorporating Dutch territory in its military operations or in a worst-case scenario, to try to occupy the Netherlands. Also, theoretically the Dutch army could, in case the country got involved in a war, ally itself with one of the warring parties; at least this was an option that had some advocates in higher military circles.

After the Franco-German War the Dutch military establishment kept a close eye on the German Empire, not only because potentially it was the most dangerous adversary, but also because its military organisation was regarded as an ideal blueprint. The Dutch copied the German General Staff organisation and mobilisation planning and after 1900 developed a mobile field army based on a divisional structure. Germany and [Austria](#) were the main suppliers of modern armaments, as Holland itself had no military production to speak of.

Of course the Dutch army differed significantly from its German counterpart. Firstly, it was only organised for defence, and had neither offensive capabilities nor aggressive intentions. Secondly, the defence was based on two pillars, a field army for the outer provinces and a fortified defence around the western heartland of the country. The field army needed to deter violations of Dutch territory but was not to confront an enemy head on. In case of a major attack, it was to withdraw behind the inundated defence lines. These lines protected the main ports and naval bases on the North Sea, the major cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague) and the country's main industrial complexes. Thirdly, the Dutch army differed from the German in its short period of military training, eight and a half months for an [infantry](#) recruit. This had been a political concession, opposed by most military authorities and one that did not enhance trust in the Dutch army internationally. On the other hand, from 1898 onwards, conscription was modernised following Prussian examples: personal conscription (no substitution) and a Prussian like division between militia (for the field army), *Landweer* (with older conscripts for the fortresses) and *Landstorm* (for local defence and army reserve). Also, reserve officers were introduced, albeit on a small scale. All in all, in 1914 the Dutch could bring 200,000 men to the field when they mobilised militia and *Landweer*, out of a population of 6.5 million.⁹

Mobilisation

The Dutch mobilization of army and navy on 1 August was remarkable for both the timing and its smooth execution. Already on 25 July, the day [Serbia](#) mobilized, a Dutch General Staff officer had received a telegram from a former Dutch officer in Cologne warning him that war threatened.¹⁰ At the time the Dutch Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General [C.J. Snijders \(1852-1939\)](#) was still on holiday, but he returned immediately. Snijders had worked on the Dutch mobilisation plans since 1910, basing them on one central premise: only if the Dutch army mobilized before the surrounding great powers could it function as a credible deterrent. Snijders thought a German invasion of France, possibly via Dutch territory, the most dangerous war scenario. He knew the Dutch army would, in that eventuality, not be able to confront the Germans directly. If deterrence failed, the Dutch would retreat in a northern direction, to the province of Brabant, and hinder the Germans in their right flank.

On 26 July the Dutch army started preparations for the demolition of bridges and the setting of inundations. Putting areas under water was a complicated, time consuming and very expensive undertaking; it could not be done at the last minute, but inundations were essential for the defence of the Fortress Holland and its inner core, the Fortress Amsterdam. From 28 July the government and Snijders took all necessary steps for the declaration of the general mobilisation on 31 July, a full day before the German mobilisation. From 1 to 3

August the Dutch army and navy positioned itself according to the plans the General Staff had prepared: the fortress lines were manned, inundations prepared but not yet set and the field army spread over the country, ready to concentrate in response to any international developments.¹¹

On 2 August Germany declared it would respect Dutch neutrality. Two days later the German armies poured into Belgium, skirting the Dutch border without ever crossing it. Snijders concentrated the field army in the southern province of Brabant as the war in Belgium developed, but only refugees and wounded soldiers crossed the border.

Not only was the south-eastern part of the country in potential danger, but also the south-west. Antwerp was the main Belgian port and also the country's *reduit nationale*, only accessible to foreign help via the Scheldt Estuary, which lies on Dutch territory. When Britain joined the war, on 4 August, the Dutch closed the Scheldt to any foreign war ships destined for Antwerp. Tension eased quickly when Britain, like Germany, declared to respect Dutch neutrality.¹²

Mobilisation Maintained

In October 1914 the German army besieged the Fortress Antwerp. After heavy bombardments, the Belgian army fled the city. Some 30,000 Belgian soldiers sought refuge in the Netherlands and were interned for the duration of the war. Over 700,000 Flemish civilians also fled to the north. They were housed all over the Netherlands and most returned home after a few weeks. Several tens of thousands [Belgian refugees](#) stayed in the Netherlands during the entire war, mostly in specially erected refugee camps.

The German invasion of Belgium, and especially the widely reported atrocities that went with it, as well as the influx of [refugees](#) alarmed the Dutch military. The fate of Belgium was seen as a shocking example of modern [warfare](#). To prevent the worst excesses in Holland, the civil and military authorities stressed to local authorities that in case of an invasion, the population was to refrain from any *franc-tireur* activities that could result in reprisals by the invader.

The German [occupation of Belgium](#) had serious consequences for the Dutch and posed a potential threat to the country's neutrality. From a military point of view, Dutch neutrality favoured the Germans: it safeguarded their right flank and their logistical lines between the front and the *Heimat*. On the other hand, the Dutch could never rule out the possibility that, should the British want to attack overseas, they would make use of Dutch ports and territory to attack German positions in the rear. Also, Holland was very close to the front in France and

Flanders. Any serious movement, especially a German retreat, could endanger Dutch neutrality. Snijders and his staff were well aware that the Dutch position was strategically precarious. That is why he stressed it was important not to demobilise, not even partially, as other neutrals like [Denmark](#) and [Switzerland](#) did. The government had to balance these military claims with economic and social demands, which in the end led to a rather liberal granting of leave, while a full mobilisation was maintained.¹³

Easter Alarm

The so-called Easter Alarm of 1916 illustrates most clearly the difficult position the Netherlands, wedged between the different blocs, found itself in. On 29 March 1916 the German Foreign Minister reported to the Dutch envoy in Berlin that the Germans had got hold of information suggesting an imminent British attack on Zeeland. He added ominously that, although Berlin valued Dutch neutrality highly, the [German government](#) would do all it deemed necessary to protect its interest. The Dutch government had no evidence whatsoever of British invasion plans, but it knew it had to act to show Germany the continued military value of its neutrality – a decision not unlike that made by its Danish counterpart in August 1914 which led to the mining of the Belt. So, though there was no sign of military danger, the government cancelled all leave, increasing the army's size by 10 percent overnight. This was a big step, as the Easter holiday was coming up. Furthermore, on 1 April the Dutch government informed the Entente governments of its decision to step up military security in response to a potential threat from their governments. The very next day, however, Berlin informed The Hague that their intelligence had been false and Entente invasion was, in fact, not imminent. Interestingly, neither the Dutch parliament – nor the public – was ever informed of the fact that the Easter Alarm had been a false one. They were made to believe there had been a serious threat so that unpopular military measures would be supported in the future. The Germans got what they wanted: the Dutch would act if their North Sea coast, the south-western border province of Zeeland in particular, seemed threatened. That was the crucial German military-strategic interest: no British amphibious operations in the Netherlands which might threaten their possession of the Belgian North Sea coast.¹⁴

This crisis was important for the Dutch political and military leadership for two fundamental reasons. First, it made clear how important it was to present a credible defence of the country's neutrality. Both the Central Powers and the Entente had to be given convincing signals and proof that in no way whatsoever a Dutch lack of vigilance on one of its borders would give the other side a potential military advantage. For the Dutch military leadership this meant both a continuation of full readiness for the army and navy and at the same time

it added to the value of behind-the-scene contacts in The Hague between Dutch leaders and representatives of the warring powers. This was all the more pertinent since Dutch Army Command knew full well that it would not be able to withstand an invasion from either of the belligerents, and in fact worried that its inability to procure adequate supplies or implement the wartime innovations of the belligerents increased its vulnerability ever more. Snijders tried to do the very best with what he had, but sometimes his country was even better served by keeping up appearances.

Secondly, and at the same time, the Easter Alarm made painfully clear that Dutch neutrality had, in practice if not in theory, significantly changed character. The army was no longer the tool the government wielded to defend its sovereignty, but an element in an intricate game of power politics. In fact, some of the country's sovereignty had to be yielded in order to protect its neutrality.¹⁵

Parallel to deterrence, the army had other, new and demanding tasks: the housing of refugees and the internment of troops from the belligerent states. In addition it had to prevent smuggling along the borders. For this reason these areas were placed in a "state of siege", which shifted power to the military authorities. They introduced [censorship](#), restrictions on the movements of people, the monitoring of aliens and suspected spies, and the tracing of illegal radiotelegraphy.¹⁶

Successful Deterrence?

For Snijders, military deterrence was the main pillar of Dutch neutrality on which the army should focus most prominently. That is why he insisted on the Dutch army being maintained at full strength. But decisive for the preservation of Dutch neutrality, from a military point of view, were also the belligerents' strategic advantages in keeping Holland neutral, be it as flank protection or to keep the enemy away from the North Sea coast. Moreover, neither Entente nor Central Powers were keen on a longer frontline, positioned in an uninviting, wet and muddy terrain. It was this shared interest in Dutch neutrality, albeit for different motives, that kept Holland out of the war.

Balanced Trade

Economic Neutrality

Pre-war Dutch neutrality seemed justified not only from a political and military, but also from an economic standpoint. From the 1870s onwards, the Netherlands had quickly developed into an open economy, heavily dependent on foreign trade. Dutch agricultural produce, for example, found its way mainly to German and British markets. Rotterdam had become a

major European trading hub, connecting the German industrial heartland with its overseas trading partners. The other major Dutch port, Amsterdam, was significantly smaller, but housed the country's colonial and financial elite. Here, [coffee](#), tea, and tobacco from the Dutch East Indies found their way to buyers all over Europe. Finally, as the Netherlands was poor in natural resources and its industrial sector was relatively small, basic foodstuffs, [raw materials](#), machine tools and fuel all had to be imported, mainly from Germany.

The Netherlands depended economically on both belligerent blocs, and according to international law a neutral state was allowed to continue trading with both sides in wartime. However, soon after August 1914, the [British government](#) grew concerned that Germany, whose own ports were blockaded by the Royal Navy, would use Rotterdam as a base for carrying on its overseas trade. They ordered all ships on their way to Rotterdam and other Dutch ports to be stopped and searched, and any contraband articles found on board seized, unless the Dutch government expressly promised that these would not be transported to Germany. This the Cort van der Linden government could not do, as banning transit trade on behest of Britain would be an un-neutral act. Holland was also bound by the 1868 Rhine Navigation Convention, which expressly forbade contracting parties, which included both Germany and the Netherlands, to put any legal obstacles in the way of the free flow of goods on the river connecting the Ruhr via Rotterdam with the North Sea, unless in cases of extreme emergency.^{[17](#)}

Netherlands Oversea Trust Company

So, Cort van der Linden and his ministers found themselves caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Giving in to Britain might mean war with Germany, but refusing London's demands might cause the ruin of the Dutch economy, which could not survive without the many imports from overseas, such as grain, now classified as contraband by the Allies. On 17 August, the Minister for Agriculture, Industry and Trade [Marie Willem Frederik Treub \(1858-1931\)](#) warned that stocks for domestic consumption would run out in twenty days. As a precautionary countermeasure, he therefore created the "Grain Bureau", a government monopoly which purchased grain and distributed it to bakeries and millers. Treub explicitly offered Britain guarantees that any grain purchases would be for Dutch consumption only.^{[18](#)}

Berlin accepted this only because the Dutch government stressed that famine threatened if it did not act, but warned that any further encroachments on the Rhine Navigation Convention would be unacceptable. The Liberal Dutch government harboured no such intentions: regulating the entire economy ran contrary to its free-trade ideals. Instead, Treub developed an alternative plan: a new company would be founded to act as a clearing house for Dutch goods, offering Britain guarantees that goods so imported would not be sold to Germany.

Foreign minister [John Loudon \(1866-1955\)](#) agreed on the express condition that there be no explicit ties between this new company and the government, as giving assurances that assisted the British blockade were fundamentally un-neutral. When [Francis Oppenheimer \(1870-1961\)](#), the British Commercial Attaché in The Hague, got wind of the plan, he pushed for its acceptance in London as a potential solution to the Anglo-Dutch political quagmire over transit trade, but he insisted that the Dutch Government remain involved with the new company, as this would not be incompatible with its neutral stance. In December 1914, Loudon and Oppenheimer reached a compromise on this point: they signed a (secret) covenant whereby the Dutch Government assured its British counterpart of the “standing and good faith” of the directors of the new *Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij* ([Netherlands Oversea Trust Company](#), NOT), a rather vague statement in which each contracting party could read as much (or as little) as she wanted.¹⁹

The NOT started its operations in January 1915, announcing in all major newspapers that importers could use its offices to import contraband goods, provided they signed a contract promising not to re-export to Germany. The new company soon became a major success and Dutch trade was revitalized. However, when on 1 March 1915 Allied reprisals against unrestricted [submarine warfare](#) forbade *all* German trade, not just that of contraband articles, it was necessary to renegotiate the original Anglo-NOT agreement. The NOT was wont to bow to British pressure instead of putting up a fight, fearing that any disagreements would result in delays in shipping or even incorporation of the Netherlands in the [Allied blockade](#), with disastrous consequences for the Dutch economy and the stock portfolios of the NOT directors.²⁰

The founding of the NOT was illustrative of the Dutch government’s intentions to minimise its involvement in economic matters. Not only were these particularly thorny for a neutral state caught in the frontlines of economic warfare, they were also incompatible with the liberal economic view of both the Cort van der Linden cabinet and the majority in the Dutch Lower House.

Government Intervention

Despite the governments’ initial misgivings, [Folkert E. Posthuma \(1874-1943\)](#), who had succeeded Treub as Minister for Agriculture, Industry and Trade in November 1914, was quickly forced to make ever greater interventions in the country’s economy. At first, they were mostly geared at combating price rises. These were caused by the rapidly rising costs of transporting [food](#) and agricultural supplies overseas to the Netherlands. In 1915, Posthuma attempted to create a subsidising scheme for cheap foods, particularly wheat bread, for those that could not afford them. This scheme floundered due to the combined opposition of

the city councils, ill-equipped to handle – let alone finance – the subsidy scheme, and the liberal and Christian parties in the cabinet who felt the scheme interfered with the economy's "invisible hand". The socialist party meanwhile, criticised the minister for not taking the scheme further.

Frustrated, Posthuma devised a solution which would, ideally, placate both the Left and the Right and would not cost either the central or local governments any money. Noting that Dutch farmers took advantage of the war by selling their agricultural produce to blockaded Germany at great profit, he stipulated that they could only continue to do so if they simultaneously provided the home market with adequate supplies, to be sold at government-set prices. The fatal flaw in Posthuma's system was that he left the farmers themselves in charge of determining which percentage of the crop would be set aside for the home market. As this percentage was consistently underestimated in order to maximise profits, prices on the home market continued to rise. Moreover, the NOT protested Posthuma's insistence on continued massive exports to Germany, fearing British reprisals against Dutch overseas trade. Simultaneously, unrest in parliament and in the streets regarding the price hikes and Posthuma's supposedly "anti-consumer/pro-farmer" stance increased.

In response, in the summer 1916 the minister expanded the government bureaucracy to divide agricultural exports equally between Britain and Germany, which proved enough to appease both belligerents, and increase its control over food production and distribution. Partly as a nod to liberal sentiments, partly to appease the farmers, he left the day-to-day control over this expanded bureaucracy to trade mogul [Anthony George Kröller \(1862-1941\)](#). Under his reign, millions of guilders had to be spent to subsidise food. Not only was this caused by the continued mass export of food to Germany (and now to Britain as well) which, Posthuma argued, were necessary to maintain economic neutrality. However, three problems seriously undermined the effectiveness of the new bureaucracy. Posthuma and Kröller relied too much on the voluntary assistance of Dutch producers and consumers, creating massive opportunities for fraud and war profiteering. Moreover, as the Dutch government was forced by necessity to close the borders to the export of urgently-needed goods, smugglers attempted in various, often highly creative ways, to circumvent border controls and sell to Germany, where the price level was higher than in Holland. But the third, and most serious, spoke in their wheel was the fact that the ships urgently needed to supply the Netherlands were simply unavailable.

The war had put a premium on shipping space, which caused transport costs to skyrocket. As the war progressed, Dutch ships were sunk by sea-mines or German torpedoes, further diminishing the amount of tonnage available for Dutch trade. After February 1917, the Dutch shipping problem exacerbated, as almost no Dutch ships dared to leave port for fear of either

German torpedoes or seizure by the Royal Navy. The branches of Dutch industry that were most dependent on imported raw materials – textiles, diamond cutting, paper, and a large part of the food industry – were hit the hardest, but agriculture and the services declined as well. This threatened to undo the economic progress the Dutch – who had profited from the sudden elimination of foreign competition and the extension of market outlets in nearby belligerent countries – had made since 1914.^{[21](#)}

Deep Waters

As the Dutch merchant fleet was too small to provide the country with the overseas imports the economy needed, the Dutch government foresaw that prices would continue to rise. From late 1916 onwards, it therefore planned both the introduction of bread rationing and to take control of most of the merchant fleet in order to dictate transport costs. From February 1917 onwards, government-controlled ships would bring in strategic supplies, in quantities determined by the government, to be sold at fixed prices to end-users.

However, Germany's resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare on 1 February 1917 complicated matters. The NOT's Agreement with Britain forced Dutch ship owners to make a voluntary stop in Britain on both their outward and homeward journeys. As Germany threatened to sink all ships in the waters surrounding the British Isles, the NOT had to renegotiate its Agreement.^{[22](#)}

Year	Number of Ships	Net tonnage
1913	16,996	18,197,783
1914	12,454	13,540,051
1915	6,851	6,621,478
1916	5,114	4,681,117
1917	2,184	1,858,951
1918	1,779	1,663,093

Table 1: Ships entering Dutch Ports 1913-1918

The NOT, supported by Treub, frantically tried to negotiate a new agreement with the British, allowing Dutch ships to bypass the German “danger zone” in return for a sizable portion of

the Dutch merchant fleet, but Posthuma and Kröller did not agree with either diminishing the Dutch shipping pool or coming to such a far-reaching agreement with one belligerent power. Complicating efforts to reach a compromise was the fact that, although abandoning neutrality and formally joining one of the belligerent blocs was never on the table, each side vehemently disagreed on how to best protect and further Dutch economic interests and how to combat the ever-increasing economic hardship, and thus on what shape and form the various economic agreements with the belligerent powers should take.

This created a new conflict between the Trust Company, who had found an ally in Finance minister Treub, and Posthuma, now supported by Kröller. The Allies demanded the use of part of the Dutch merchant fleet as quid pro quo, and the NOT were quite ready to negotiate on that basis. Posthuma, however, refused to diminish the Netherlands' seaborne transport capacity. Complicating matters were the personal and business rivalries that existed between NOT chairman [Cornelis Johannes Karel van Aalst \(1866-1939\)](#) and his supporters, consisting of the cream of the crop of Dutch financial, maritime and colonial interests, and Kröller and his allies, mostly based around Rotterdam and closely connected with German trade interests. The former argued for a closer orientation with those powers controlling the sea lanes to the Americas and the Indies, whilst the latter advocated that the Netherlands align itself economically with Germany.

As Dutch seaborne trade suffered the twin blows of German submarine warfare and the practical suspension of the NOT agreement during 1917-1918, the government was forced enact ever more draconian methods to conserve food. Food rationing covered fifty-five different articles of food and raw material by September 1918, but Posthuma continued to maintain that food exports remained a political and an economic necessary. When in 1917 he was forced to export potatoes to both Britain and Germany in exchange for coal to fuel transportation and factories, heavy rioting in Amsterdam signalled that many were just about fed up with what they saw as ineffectual government meddling. As economic forecasts worsened and crops failed in 1917 and 1918, the Netherlands faced the prospect of famine for the first time in centuries.²³

Year	GNP growth since previous year (%)	Index of GNP (1913=100)	Unemployment (% of workforce)
1913	5,0	100	1,0
1914	-1,5	99	5,4
1915	-4,5	94	6,2

1916	-1,3	93	5,0
1917	-9,1	84	4,6
1918	-4,0	81	5,2
1919	9,1	88	5,8
1920	13,4	100	4,4

Table 2: Dutch GNP, 1913-1920

Changing Gears

Under these dire circumstances, a new government took office in September 1918. It quickly disbanded or severely curtailed the independence of most of the business committees (such as the NOT and Kröller's "Assistance Committee" at Posthuma's agricultural ministry) that had helped keep the Netherlands neutral and prosperous during the first two years of the war, but had since descended into anarchy. The new Foreign Minister, [Herman Adriaan van Karnebeek \(1874-1942\)](#) created a special subsection of his ministry that would henceforth oversee all economic negotiations with the belligerents, effectively making the NOT the executive arm of the government, subordinate to its control.

Thus the strife that had characterized much of the institutional landscape was ended, and as the war was simultaneously coming to a close, the cabinet decreed that the Dutch should negotiate with the soon-to-be victorious Allies and their American associates for a general economic agreement, whereby Dutch-German trade would be severely reduced in return for a resumption of overseas imports. Negotiations began in early November 1918 but were interrupted by revolutionary stirrings in the Netherlands on the eve of the Armistice. Fearing that continued food shortages would exacerbate the revolutionary mood, the Allies quickly released important stores of grain. The final agreement was signed on 25 November 1918, two weeks after war's end, by the Dutch government on the one hand, and the Allied and Associated Powers on the other.

The Dutch government's signature on this agreement is indicative of the U-turn Dutch economic neutrality took during the war. Initially, the constraints of neutrality and the dominant liberal free-trade ideology prevented the government from directly interfering with the country's economic arrangements with the belligerents. However, the autonomy afforded to the businessmen's committees of business experts created two problems which reinforced each other: these committees confused their own interests with the common good and the operational boundaries between them were left undefined. The power struggles that ensued

led to deadlock, which threatened both the country's economic survival, and its neutrality as the belligerents' continued frustration with Dutch inability to come to a decision created ever-growing political tensions. The government had no choice but to reverse its position. That new political leadership was necessary to implement this change is telling: in effect, the experience of the First World War had created a new, more interventionist paradigm in relations between the state, the economy and international trade.²⁴

In other ways, too, the new Dutch government could profit from lessons learned. The war had shown that the Dutch economy was particularly vulnerable in the areas of raw materials and communication. Therefore, the government – in close cooperation with the tycoons of Dutch business with which she had interacted during the war – established basic industries, most notably blast furnaces, salt and coal mines, and promoted the establishment of the Royal Dutch Airlines and wireless telegraph connections to the East Indies.

However, the war did not only teach the Dutch painful lessons. They were also reminded of the profitability of neutrality. Although the Dutch economy sustained some damage, this was only in rare cases irreparable. Moreover, the war had offered opportunities for expansion in both the home and the export markets.

Therefore, as soon as the war had ended and imports could enter the country again, manufacturing and services picked up and experienced such a rapid growth that, according to the latest estimates, the Dutch economy showed a real per capita growth between 1913 and 1921 of 2.4 percent, higher than either the western Allies, Germany, or, interestingly, either Denmark, [Norway](#), [Sweden](#), [Finland](#), and [Switzerland](#).²⁵

Making Sense of the War

Reporting the War

During the 1907 Peace Conference it had been decided that neutral states were not responsible for the attitude and behaviour of their citizens. However, the Dutch government was determined to take no chances. In August 1914 the Dutch newspapers had been warned not to be biased in their war reporting. The [press](#) willingly complied, with one important exception. The Amsterdam-based *Telegraaf*, a national newspaper that had never shunned a populist approach, decided to steer a pro-Allied and increasingly anti-German course. The war cartoons by the paper's artist [Louis Raemaekers \(1869-1956\)](#) were particularly controversial. For the British, he was "more than cartoonist, he is teacher and preacher, with the vision, faith, and intensity of a St. Francis, a Luther, or a Joan of Arc."²⁶ For the Germans he was a pain and a pest whose [cartoons](#) were a powerful tool in the allied [propaganda](#) war

against the Central powers. For the Dutch government Raemaekers and the *Telegraaf* became a major embarrassment that was regarded as a potential threat to Dutch neutrality. The Dutch Foreign Minister, John Loudon, was repeatedly visited by German diplomats who warned him about the negative effects the paper's publications were having on Dutch-German relations. In his replies Loudon always defended the Dutch free press, but behind the scenes the government did try to take steps to put an end to the paper's un-neutral activities. However, even the boldest step of all, the arrest and prosecution of the paper's chief-editor in December 1915, did not have the desired effect.

A successful prosecution depended on the courts' interpretation of the Penal Code's article 100, which referred to actions that "jeopardized Dutch neutrality", and this rather vague description proved an insurmountable stumbling block. In all major cases brought by the government the court decided that as long as Holland's neutrality remained intact, it could not be proven that it had been jeopardized. And so, after numerous appeals procedures, the chief-editor of the *Telegraaf* was finally acquitted by the highest court in the land in October 1917.

The virulently anti-German tone of the *Telegraaf* is an exception, however. Generally speaking the Dutch press was keenly aware of its neutral responsibilities, and although foreign agents did try to influence reports in the press by offering money to Dutch newspaper editors and journalists, these concerned no more than isolated incidents, so that it could not be said that any paper had effectively been "bought". The only other exception to this rule was *De Toekomst (The Future)*, a weekly that was first published in 1915 and entirely funded with German money. The magazine was almost immediately discredited when its financial sources were exposed, so that from the start it was never considered to be part of the free, and neutral, Dutch press.^{[27](#)}

The national newspapers and illustrated magazines generally offered a reasonably balanced view in their reports on the war. Foreign news items listed the press agency which had supplied the news, and in addition the papers used contributions from their own foreign correspondents. Illustrated magazines were careful to print pictures from all opposing sides. The news analysis was provided by the paper's own editorial staff and military specialists. In addition there was a flourishing public debate, conducted either in the press or in pamphlet form.^{[28](#)}

Living with War?

Four years of neutrality meant that the war remained a foreign and somewhat remote affair. Men might be serving in the army, feeling miserable during the cold, wet winters and bored

throughout the year, but their loved ones at home did not have to fear the arrival of the dreaded War Office telegram. For the vast majority of the Dutch population, the war was a prolonged nuisance rather than a life shattering tragedy. The total number of Dutch war fatalities is estimated to run into the hundreds, mostly fishermen and sailors who fell victim to U-boot attacks or sea-[mines](#).

The remoteness of the war is reflected in the [literature](#) of the period: there too the war was a no more than a distant rumbling, a useful plot device or a vague but powerful monster that threatened human civilization. Unlike belligerent nations, many of whose artists and writers could use their own front-line experiences to explore the topic, their Dutch counterparts lacked any first-hand experience. Dutch readers relied on translations, which publishers rapidly provided: a Dutch translation of [Henri Barbusse's \(1873-1935\) *Le Feu*](#) (1916) appeared in June 1918, while the Dutch version of [Erich Maria Remarque's \(1898-1970\) *Im Westen Nichts Neues*](#) was published in April 1929, three months after the first German book edition.²⁹

War's End

Growing Unease

By 1917 a nation-wide dissatisfaction was growing. The Dutch remained firmly in favour of their neutral status, but the government was increasingly held responsible for its practical consequences. As there was no immediate threat of war, there were calls for a partial demobilisation. The Minister for Agriculture, Trade and Industry and not the allied blockade or the German U-boot war was blamed for the poor food and fuel distribution. Many felt the minister's policies did little to curb the prices of foodstuffs (although current research suggests that he managed to effect a price drop of about 10 percent) nor stop the farmers from selling their much-needed produce to Germany at great profit. Members of parliament began to complain about being kept in the dark about all matters pertaining to foreign affairs or national defence. And Queen Wilhelmina grew more and more impatient with her own ministers, whom she considered too compliant and weak-kneed under foreign pressure.

Still the government tried to remain consistent. In its dealings with the belligerents it felt itself bound by the letter of international law and that of the Dutch neutrality proclamation of August 1914, but its overriding conviction was that Holland should not be dragged into the war. When foreign demands were thought unreasonable, it would object, it would protest, but it would never threaten to relinquish Holland's neutral position.

Disaster strikes twice

Things came to a head in March 1918, when the Americans and British requisitioned all the Dutch merchant vessels that were laid up in their ports. The Dutch parliament, papers and people were all outraged by this action, and the queen called it a “theft”. The government protested vigorously, but left it at that. The danger of war flared up as Germany demanded compensation for this un-neutral leniency towards the Allies. It was Holland’s darkest hour, as the Dutch government felt it could not give in to those demands making war with the Germans seemingly unavoidable. When negotiations were about to break down, they were saved by the Allies, who had decided that they did not want Holland in the war at this late stage and therefore allowed them to submit to German pressure.

But when, in April 1918, the Dutch government tried to shore up its tarnished self-esteem by organising an armed convoy to the Dutch East-Indies, the British were adamant: neutrals would not be allowed to send armed convoys. Although the news had already been announced in the Dutch press, the government had to back down. It was a final humiliation: the minister responsible resigned, the Queen was disgusted, and everybody looked forward to the upcoming general elections of 3 July 1918.³⁰

An Aborted Revolution

The liberals lost heavily in that election and the new government that took office on 9 September 1918, consisted of conservative Christian-democrats, led by [Charles Ruys de Beerenbrouck \(1873-1936\)](#). The new government was immediately confronted with the hectic last weeks of the war. A major fear was that the left-wing [revolutionary](#) ideals brewing in [Russia](#) and [Germany](#) might find favour with the population of [urban centres](#), who had been hit the hardest by rising prices and could not afford to complement their meagre bread rations. When a few isolated riots broke out in the army, the socialist leader [Pieter Jelles Troelstra \(1860-1930\)](#) demanded that power be handed over to his party.

However, the government responded promptly and effectively: the Commander-in-Chief Snijders was forced to resign, a major reorganisation of the army was announced in parliament, a speedy demobilisation was promised, food rations were increased and troops known to be loyal were brought in to secure key positions in the land. On 15 November, three days after Troelstra had announced the revolution, his deputy informed parliament that his leader had broken down and that the revolution had never been a realistic option.³¹

The Kaiser and his Men

The government did not only have to contend with national issues. On 10 November the by

then ex-Kaiser [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) arrived at the border post in Eijsden (Limburg) to ask for political asylum for himself and his sizable entourage. Two days later his son, the former Crown Prince [Wilhelm, Crown Prince of Germany \(1882-1951\)](#), followed suit. Neither guest was particularly welcome, as the Dutch government realized that offering shelter would meet with Allied disapproval, but it was decided that asylum would be granted and that requests for extradition would be refused. A specially appointed committee of legal experts confirmed this decision.

More controversial was the decision of the new Foreign Minister van Karnebeek to allow 70,000 German troops in northern Belgium to cross Dutch territory on their way back to Germany. The troops were disarmed, but according to international law, which the previous government had observed so rigorously, they should have been interned in Holland. The minister had felt that a speedy return to Germany was in the interest of the German authorities and the population of northern Belgium, where food and fuel were already scarce. The Allies accused the Dutch of violating international law and interfering with their military plans, although the British Foreign Secretary dismissed the matter as a “technical error”.³²

Conclusion

Looking back of four years of neutrality, the first thing that stands out is the contrast between the reluctance of Cort van der Linden’s liberal government to adopt a more hands-on approach, even during the latter part of the war, and its successor’s willingness to do so. Cort van der Linden and his ministers attempted to delegate the twin tasks of regulating the economy and dealing with the demands made by belligerents to others. The conservative government which took office in the last months of the war, seemed better suited to the demands of the time, pushing through interventionist policies and showing a remarkable willingness to engage in bilateral bargaining with belligerent nations seemed better suited to the demands of the times. Liberalism went into decline after 1918, a process caused or at the very least greatly accelerated by the war: this European-wide phenomenon also touched the Netherlands.

The [change of government](#) in the last months of the war and the Belgian annexation claims at the [Paris peace conference](#) had the unfortunate consequence that relatively little reflection took place on the lessons that could be learned from the 1914-1918 experience. Partly in response to post-war austerity measures and the rise of antimilitarist sentiments, the Dutch military and most politicians insisted that the army had proved an effective deterrent, but that claim was at best a gross simplification. There had been other, arguably more important motives: moral ones for Britain, and economic and strategic ones for both Germany and the Allies.

The Dutch government had tried to protect its interests by building its policies on international law, but in war-time that law had proven to be no match for the “might-is-right” tendencies of the belligerents. This showed that for the Dutch, neutrality could not be synonymous with aloofness: no matter how keen the Dutch were to pretend that the war had nothing to do with them, the grand strategies that were employed in modern warfare made equally clear that that was an untenable position. A small neutral country in the immediate vicinity of the war zone became a kind of no man’s land where belligerents fought a mostly silent and often secret battle for domination.

Although the national coat of arms included two lions rampant, during the war it had been jokingly suggested that for neutral Holland the hedgehog would perhaps be a more suitable national symbol, as it stayed immobile, raised its spikes and rolled up into a tight ball when threatened.³³ However, in March 1920 Holland did decide to give up its isolationist position – but not its neutrality – by joining the [League of Nations](#). From the start, though, it lived in fear of the international and military obligations that this step might entail. For though Holland had not been able to isolate itself from the war, the fate of war-torn Belgium had shown that the Dutch had every reason to be grateful for four years of strict neutrality.

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Regional Section(s)

[Western Europe](#) > [The Netherlands](#)

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[Media](#)

[Post-war](#)

[Power](#)

[Pre-war](#)

[Violence](#)

Subjects

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Agriculture](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Food and nutrition](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Raw materials](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Trade](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Transport](#)

[Memory and historiography](#) > [Historiography](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Domestic policy](#) > [Domestic mobilisation](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Institutions](#) > [Governments](#)
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[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Colonialism, imperialism](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Neutrality](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [International relations](#) > [Origins of war](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Law and legislation](#) > [International law](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Post-war politics](#) > [Demobilisation](#)
[Politics, law](#) > [Resistance and revolutions](#) > [Riots, political](#)
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[The media](#) > [Propaganda](#) > [Propaganda, domestic](#)

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