



Prime Minister Attlee visiting the severely damaged shipyard *De Schelde* in Vlissingen in 1945. In the background, yard number 214 as an image of the perseverance of the shipyard during the war. Photo W. v.d. Poll (Source: National Archive, The Hague, 2.24.03.01, 900-2351)

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## Surviving in abnormal times. Dutch Shipbuilding 1914-1945

### PhD Candidate Economic History

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The year was 1913. The Dutch shipyard *De Schelde* in Vlissingen had finally managed to get back in step with international competitors after so many decades of decline. However, in 1914, the Great War abruptly put an end to all the new plans for the shipyard and new strategies for survival had to be developed. Despite the difficult circumstances in this period of political and financial upheaval, the enterprise managed to do fairly well. In fact, it even became possible to expand the shipyard and build bigger ships with profits made during the war. This helped the company get through the depression of the early 1920s. After a few stable years, the world was struck by a severe financial crisis in 1929 and the newly built ships were no longer wanted as the international trade market collapsed. Again the managers had to work hard to keep the company afloat. However, they were creative and started building smaller vessels. They also took up other construction work and even started to build planes. Unfortunately, the shipyard was forced to let go over 1500 of its employees and other shipyards were even forced to close their gates. Then, in the mid 1930s, prospects become more optimistic. Even though the reason for this was the preparation for another possible war, it meant that *De Schelde* had better perspectives for growth. However, general faith in the neutral position of the Netherlands was crushed by the German invasion of 1940. A week after the invasion, on 18 May, German officers of the *Kriegsmarine* inspected the shipyard and the management of *De Schelde* found itself in a completely different situation of managing the company. Dilemmas crossed its path and the choice to build for the enemy was both judged as economic collaboration and honoured as serving the interest of the company and its employees after the war. Through the five years of World War II, *De Schelde* and Vlissingen suffered heavy destruction. However, the hull of yard number 214, ordered shortly before the outbreak of the war, survived and was seen as the symbol of the perseverance of the shipyard and its employees. In 1946

the ship was launched as the *Willem Ruys*, named after the manager of the Rotterdamse Lloyd who was killed by the Germans in 1942.

How did the Dutch shipbuilding industry survive this period of war and crisis? To what extent can innovation be seen as a feature of its competitiveness? This research aims to unravel the decision-making processes concerning innovation within the Dutch shipbuilding industry and its interaction with the surrounding network between 1914 and 1945 at the local, regional and national level. The focal point will lie on the importance of accessibility to knowledge, as well as its production and sharing. This will be linked to the industry's innovativeness, meaning both the capacity and willingness of the shipbuilding industry to innovate. Inspired by the field of business history and social-economic history, this perspective adds a new dimension to the research into the developments of Dutch industry, in particular the Dutch shipbuilding industry. This was an industry that was strongly affected by the slow industrialisation in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century, an industry that endeavoured to remain competitive in a period struck by war and crisis in which normal economic conditions, away from protectionism and cartelisation, did not exist. Despite investing heavily between 1914 and 1945, Dutch shipbuilding still appeared to be mainly conservative and therefore possibly lagged behind in innovation. Furthermore, this research will be supported by case studies that consist of archival research into three large shipyards in the region of Rotterdam and Zeeland: the *NV Koninklijke Maatschappij De Schelde* in Vlissingen, the *Rotterdamsche Droogdok Maatschappij NV*, and *Wilton-Feijenoord* in Schiedam. These three shipyards, mainly builders of large sea vessels, grew into important regional economic centres for the Dutch shipbuilding industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Questions posed include: how open were the shipyards to new ideas? What innovations can be seen on the shipyard? What was the motivation behind these innovations (e.g. company culture, investments) and did they succeed? What did the shipyards' network consist of? What was the impact of the political and financial circumstances on the decision-making process, particularly concerning innovation? These last two questions bring this research from the local to the regional and the national level. The focus here lies on the encounters of the shipyards with different actors.

Regionally, this research mainly looks at the interactions between shipyards and their suppliers and customers, most importantly shipping companies and the Royal Navy. On the national level regulatory organisations, specifically classification societies and the Dutch government, play an important role. For instance in terms of influence on the design process of the ships and subsidies for shipping companies.

By unravelling the encounters surrounding the shipbuilding industry that took place on various levels, this research will give an insight into how an industry and its network evolved and how they tried to remain competitive in a period in which 'normal' economic conditions, away from protectionism and cartelisation, hardly existed.

#### Further reading

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