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# 'In the interest of peace and quiet in Europe': The military and strategic role of Dutch neutrality, 1890-1940

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/meh](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/meh)**Wim Klinkert**

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**Abstract**

The Netherlands is positioned amidst three major powers and controls the mouths of three main European rivers. Until the First World War, its choice for armed neutrality (1840-1940) seemed to be the most fitting answer to its security problem. After 1918, the Netherlands had difficulties adjusting to modern war, having decreased its defence budget substantially, and lacked a coherent political-military answer to the interwar strategic and operational challenges. Old notions of the Netherlands as a vital element of regional peace and as a country that could influence the behaviour of its large neighbours no longer fitted reality. Neutrality ceased to provide security to the country, thereby also endangering the stability in Western Europe to which the Dutch so wholeheartedly aspired.

**Keywords**

armed neutrality, First World War, Interwar Period, the Netherlands, Second World War

On 1 February 1933, when Dutch defence spending was at a historic low and two days after Hitler had become the new *Reichskanzler*, the commander of the Dutch Field Army, Willem Röell (1873-1958), analysed the military-strategic position of the Netherlands. He pointed out that the geographical position of the country, which was halfway between three major powers and at the mouth of three main European rivers, gave the Dutch defence effort a special role with respect to peace and stability in Western Europe. He predicted a resurgence of Germany as a military power and he could come to no other conclusion than that, as the eastern border of France and Belgium was being heavily fortified, the next West-European war would probably be fought in and around the southern provinces of the Netherlands. This was the obvious march route for both the French and German armies. A strong, credible defence of the Dutch neutral territory was, in his eyes, essential

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if a new war in Western Europe was to be avoided; a war that would, in all probability, ravage the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup>

The general's analysis reflects some interesting aspects of Dutch thinking on neutrality. It stresses the importance of the Dutch geographical position; it shows that in Dutch military opinion, neutrality and a significant military effort go hand in hand; and, finally, it gives Dutch armed neutrality a moral significance: a condition for peace in the region. All of these three elements have a long history in Dutch attitudes to neutrality; however, by 1933, they no longer reflected the whole story. From the early 1930s onwards, the armed neutrality of the Netherlands had become a tangled knot of narratives, hopes and expectations, making a repeat of 1914-1918 highly unlikely when neutrality had passed the test of a European war close to the Dutch borders.

To understand the contradictions and dilemmas of Dutch armed neutrality, one must focus on both the military planning and the highly polarised public debate on defence as well as the main ideas on future war among military and the public at large.<sup>2</sup>

In Dutch historiography, neutrality has been analysed mostly from the perspective of the political and juridical elite. In general, authors distinguish between idealistic and the more realistic aspects of neutrality – according to the latter, a small state with no territorial ambitions but with huge, world-wide commercial and colonial interests is best served by staying out of conflicts. Remaining aloof from power politics, the Dutch could argue that they occupied the moral high ground, demonstrating the way forward to a world that is based on right instead of might.<sup>3</sup> However, this analysis does not explain the complexities of Dutch neutrality satisfactorily. Neither does it explain the utter failure of neutrality in May 1940, when neutrality itself seemed to have caused the country's ruin.<sup>4</sup>

To move forward in understanding neutrality better, two paths have already proven fruitful. The first is a more transnational approach that would allow for a better understanding of the ideas, experiences and practices of neutrality both within the neutral countries and from the perspective of the belligerents. Researchers focusing on the First World War have taken very promising steps of 'writing the neutrals into the war,' as it were. They are no longer the proverbial blank spots on the map.<sup>5</sup> Second, the extensive research on, for instance, Swiss, Dutch, Scandinavian and also South-European neutrality has made clear how multifaceted, complex and dynamic the concept was at the

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1. Memo Commander Field Army to Chief of General Staff, 1 February 1933, National Archives The Hague (NA), archive General Staff, inv. 31.
  2. This also includes the role of intelligence services. See W. Klinkert, 'Espionage is Practised Here on a Vast Scale'. The Neutral Netherlands, 1914-1940', in: F. Baudet (ed.), *On Military Intelligence from the First World War to Mali*, The Hague 2017, 23-54.
  3. Dutch lawyers of international fame and stature were, among others, Pieter van Bemmelen (1828-1892), Tobias Asser (1838-1913), Jan de Louter (1847-1932) and Cornelis van Vollenhoven (1874-1933).
  4. J. Bout, *The Dutch Army in World War I*, Vancouver 1972; J. Voorhoeve, *Peace, Profits and Principles*, The Hague 1979; J. Porter, *Dutch Neutrality in Two World Wars*, Boston 1980; M. de Keizer, 'Dutch Neutrality in the Thirties: Voluntary or Imposed?', in: L. E. Roulet (ed.), *Les états neutres Européens et la seconde guerre mondiale*, Neuchatel, 1985, 177-194; R. Schuurmsma, *Vergeefs onzijdig*, Utrecht 2005; M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918*, Amsterdam, 2006; D. Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, Houten 2014. For the economic dimension, see H. Lademacher, 'Niederlande, zwischen wirtschaftlichem Zwang und politischer Entscheidungsfreiheit', in: E. Forndran (ed.), *Innen- und Außenpolitik unter nationalsozialistischer Bedrohung*, Opladen 1977, 192-215; and M. Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlanden*, Berlin 1998.
  5. J. den Hertog / S. Kruizinga, *Caught in the Middle*, Amsterdam 2011; N. Wylie, *European Neutrals and Non-Belligerents during the Second World War*, Cambridge 2001; H. Amersfoort / W. Klinkert (eds.), *Small Powers in the Age of Total War*, Leiden, Boston 2011; S. Kruizinga, 'Neutrality', in: J. Winter (ed.), *Cambridge History of the First World War*, Cambridge 2014 [<https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/neutrality>] [accessed 10.1.2019]; R. Sanchez, *Shaping Neutrality throughout the First World War*, Seville 2016.

time. From these in-depth studies, focusing on specific neutral states, steps towards a transnational approach are being made.<sup>6</sup>

## I. The long-term problems of Dutch armed neutrality

When the Dutch Field Army commander wrote his strategic assessment, he did so as a representative of a military elite that considered a mobile field army, modelled on the armies of France and Germany, to be the key element of the country's defence. Dating from around the turn of the century, the four-division Field Army (with approximately 90,000 men) had to act as a deterrent, protecting neutrality, but also be capable of fighting off an invader or entering into a coalition with a major power. Thus, the Field Army performed a triple role: as a defensive shield along the borders to deter surrounding belligerents, as an instrument to militarily oppose a major violation of the country's territorial integrity, and as a credible coalition partner of a major power. In case deterrence failed, and the country was invaded, the Field Army was supposed to retreat slowly towards the Fortress Holland and not to engage in major battle. This was, first of all, to gain time in order to prepare the static defence lines and to coordinate with a possible ally. The triple task made military planning a complex element within a policy of neutrality.<sup>7</sup> Controversy could, and did, arise on at least two fundamental issues. The first of these was the question of when to start coordinating militarily with a possible ally once it became obvious from which side the danger loomed. The military leadership needed time to make joint plans, but that process could be interpreted politically as choosing sides, albeit implicitly and behind the scenes. During 1914-1918, this had formed a major bone of contention between the commander-in-chief and the government. The commander was explicitly forbidden to make any military preparation that could be interpreted as choosing sides. Second, the government was not inclined to ally the country automatically with the opponents of the state that threatened or even invaded the Netherlands. It wanted to hold on to its freedom of action as long as possible. For military planners, it goes without saying that this was a nightmare scenario. Taken together, both problems put armed neutrality beyond a passive deterrence along the borders on par with squaring a circle. This debate influenced the political-military relationship strongly, and was never really resolved. It led to a serious political-military crisis in 1918, and culminated in the dismissal of the commander-in-chief. Equally, the debate seriously hindered the development of military contacts with Britain and France in the late 1930s, when it was clear for all to see which country formed the potential violator of Dutch neutrality.

Two other military problems should also be addressed. First, there is the strategic problem of the two outlying provinces, Zeeland in the southwest and Limburg in the southeast. Both were remote from the fortified centre of the country and were impossible to defend against an invader. However, they were also the two Dutch territories that interested the surrounding major powers the most. Zeeland controlled the deep-sea port of Flushing, but also, more importantly, the entrance to Antwerp, connecting it to the fate of Belgium and possible British assistance to that country. Limburg lay on the main German invasion route towards Belgium and France, given how more southern routes were operationally less attractive because of rivers and hilly, fortified terrain in both countries. The fate of these two areas, both lying outside the Fortress Holland to which the Dutch army would retreat, strategically determined the future of Dutch neutrality. This meant a gap

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6. For the Netherlands, see Abbenhuis, *The Art* and W. Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, Leiden, Boston 2013; for Scandinavia, see P. Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers, 1890-1940*, New York 1997; for Switzerland, see H. R. Fuhrer, *Die Schweizer Armee im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Zurich 1999; R. Rossfeld, *Die Schweiz und der Große Krieg*, Baden 2014.

7. H. Senn, 'Militärische Aspekte der Neutralität', in: L. E. Roulet (ed.), *Les Etats neutres Européens et la seconde guerre mondiale*, Neuchâtel 1985, 69-77.

existed between the Belgian defence around Liege and Antwerp and the core of the Dutch defence effort, and it seemed to pave the way for the German army to both the coast of the North Sea and to Paris. The persistence of these military strategic problems is striking, and influenced the course of two World Wars in Western Europe.

The other military problem was the role of the Dutch army as a credible ally for a major power once the Dutch had chosen sides. The country lacked the means to field armed forces equipped and trained to a level equal to that of the main belligerents. This gap widened as the twentieth century progressed. Although the Dutch military elite did its utmost to keep up with the organisational structure, armament and training of the major continental armies, this ideal was both politically and financially unattainable. This complicated problem will not be addressed here in detail, but it made the Dutch army only remotely attractive as a possible ally, a circumstance which may in the end have tempted other countries to decide on the fate of the Netherlands after a European war.

All of the aforementioned complications were well known to the military leadership, the Dutch General Staff. It was fully aware of the complexity of its task, which it tackled through a combination of detailed planning preparations for an early mobilisation in case of a serious crisis, gathering and exchanging intelligence and, on an individual basis, taking part in press and public discussions on defence matters. What was missing was a serious, in-depth political-military discussion on strategic issues. Only in Parliament did a formal exchange of ideas on neutrality and national defence take place, but, for obvious reasons, it had to steer clear from sensitive issues concerning actual military preparations and plans.

## 2. War experiences, 1914-1918

Before the outbreak of the First World War, some of the almost insurmountable military strategic issues concerning the Netherlands and its neutrality had already surfaced. Dutch planners and their European counterparts realized that the Dutch territory would be of major interest both strategically and economically in case of a Franco-German or a British-German conflict. All surrounding great powers had military attachés in The Hague who were well aware of the most salient characteristics of the Dutch defence effort.<sup>8</sup> They knew that the main Dutch strength was the wet polder terrain that could be inundated when an attack was imminent. The Dutch weakness was the quality and size of their armed forces. The Dutch General Staff hoped that if war began, it would be possible to mobilise its 200,000 men quickly in order to have a credible deterrence in place.

During the war, Dutch neutrality proved to be advantageous for both fighting blocks. Together with the Scandinavian neutrals, the Netherlands protected the German north-western flank militarily, while Germany profited economically from Dutch agricultural goods and livestock, among others. At the same time, the Netherlands proved to be a valuable buffer zone for the gathering and exchange of information and a stepping-stone for sending agents into enemy territory. Moreover, the neutral Dutch performed humanitarian acts, proving their value to both sides. On the other hand, Dutch neutrality denied Germany the use of the port of Antwerp and the Scheldt River. For Britain, Dutch neutrality meant easier control of the North Sea, although the German U-Boot danger always loomed large. It also put the Ruhr area out of reach for aerial bombing. Notwithstanding these strategic disadvantages, neither belligerent had the will or the manpower to change this state of affairs. Militarily, both belligerent blocks concentrated their efforts on the front in France and Belgium. Extending it to the north – into potentially inhospitable, wet terrain – was not in their interest. The fighting in Flanders had provided a dire warning

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8. Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 259-269.

of what could happen in polders. Two examples illustrate that even for major powers, extending the battlefield was not an attractive or even attainable option. In 1916, when the Romanian campaign was in full swing, the German High Command expressed fear of what was at that time the largest neutral army at its borders. It concluded that a peaceful relationship with the Dutch was preferable as long as it had no troops to spare.<sup>9</sup> Equally, two years later, during the German Spring offensive in the West, the Allies, assembled in Versailles, declared that Dutch neutrality had to be maintained at all costs—even at the price of Dutch concessions to German demands for transport to Belgium of building materials that could also be put to military use in Dutch territory. Both Britain and France made it clear that they lacked the military strength to assist the Dutch in the case of a German attack.<sup>10</sup>

During the war, only two belligerent war plans involving the neutral Netherlands existed. The first was *Fall K*, a German plan dating from 1916 and comprising two distinct elements. Its main feature was an attack launched from occupied Flanders into the Dutch province of Zeeland, thereby opening the port of Antwerp for the German Navy and denying the British Navy the use of Zeeland. As the area was notoriously difficult for combat – given the wide waterways with hazardous currents, treacherous sandbanks and low-lying lands that could be flooded –, the Germans engaged in extensive spying to gain the necessary information. The Dutch were well aware of this; German agents even revealed the plan to the Dutch intelligence service, possibly hoping that it would frighten the Dutch into improving their defence (against a possible British attack). The second part of the plan was more remarkable: an air attack by the German Naval Air Force, stationed on the Frisian Islands in the north, on Dutch bridges and railway yards, in order to hinder troop movements. A fairly detailed target list, analysing the sensitive locations in the Dutch infrastructure, formed the basis of this plan. There is no record of any knowledge on the Dutch side of this German scheme. The plan was only to be executed in case of an imminent British attack on the Dutch coast.<sup>11</sup>

The British plan, Scheme S (for Scheldt), involved sending a brigade and a number of aircraft to Zeeland, in order to assist the Dutch army in its struggle against the Germans. This was, in fact, an update of the older plans of 1907-1910. The British interest was primarily focused on preventing a German occupation of the Dutch coast, and the plan would only be executed in cooperation with the Dutch army. As Dutch neutrality explicitly forbade any combined planning, British attempts to plan together initially came to naught. But from late 1917 onwards, the Dutch General Staff, realizing its predicament in case of a serious attack on its territory, appeared to be willing to open informal talks. They constitute a telling example of the Dutch military interpretation of neutrality in practice. In the summer of 1918, the Dutch military attaché in London held unofficial talks with British army and naval planners to arrange British military support for the Dutch army in the case of a German attack. The Dutch commander-in-chief claimed to the minister of War – who had probably been kept in the dark regarding all the details – that this was still within his commander's authority. At that time, the general and the minister were already embroiled in a serious conflict over national defence and, on top of that, as the government resigned, the question of a possible cooperation with the British remained behind the closed doors of the Staff. Actual British assistance never did materialise.<sup>12</sup>

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9. M. Nebelin, *Ludendorff*, München, 2010, 290.

10. Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 222.

11. W. Klinkert, 'Fall K. German Offensive Plans against the Netherlands, 1916-1918', in: H. Amersfoort (ed.), *Small Powers in the Age of Total War, 1900-1940*, Boston, Leiden 2011, 85-118.

12. Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 222-225.

### 3. Adjusting to new realities

The nightmare scenario of a German invasion via Limburg had not materialized in 1914-1918. This fact had a huge impact on the Dutch military self-image. From 1919 onwards, leading officers and conservative-liberal and protestant politicians repeated again and again that the army had been the saviour of the country. This narrative was in stark contrast with military opinions voiced behind closed doors during the mobilisation itself as well as thereafter, lamenting the poor quality of the army. Now, it was proclaimed publicly that the army had spared the country the terrible fate of Belgium. This was a major argument against budget cuts, as only a strong defence would effectively protect the neutral territory in the future. But in the political arena, this line of argumentation did not prove convincing enough to prevent a rather long period of cuts to the defence budget, step by step undermining the Field Army as a credible military force.

Not only did the narrative of the army as saviour conflict with the opinions voiced indoors by the military elite, it also conflicted with the idea that dominated military planning after 1920, namely that a repeat of 1914 was impossible. The speed of modern warfare and the time that the Dutch would need to mobilise and position their Field Army no longer allowed for a scenario as in August 1914. Moreover, Allied military officials made it clear to the Dutch military Staff that they would no longer support Dutch neutrality in the case of a Franco-German conflict. It would hinder their operations, more so due to the Allied occupation of the Rhineland. Moreover, Belgium and France, cooperating increasingly in military terms, had no faith at all in the Dutch protection of the Limburg appendix. In 1919, the Dutch government even declared, and that was a first, that it would consider any border violation in Limburg a *casus belli*. But even this did not seriously diminish French-Belgian mistrust. Additionally, in several publications, Dutch military pointed out that the German decision of 1914 had been highly advantageous for the Entente, in fact weakening the German advance towards France so severely that it had been one of the causes of the German defeat at the Marne! Dutch military publicists added to this that Belgium had been too weak to defend its entire border along the Meuse River, implying that gratitude for the Dutch effort was more proper than apprehension.<sup>13</sup> So, while the idea that the Field Army needed to stay strong in order to save the country from the horrors of the next war was publicly presented, the actual planning by the General Staff was of a different character. It dealt principally with a German advance through the southern Netherlands (Limburg and North-Brabant), with the exception of the period between 1919 and 1924, when a war with Belgium, supported by France, was also considered possible.<sup>14</sup> From these early post-1918 scenarios, it can be deduced that the Dutch General Staff assumed a rather rapid resurgence of German military strength and aggression. As a result, the military leadership advocated a modernised Field Army that could, in the case of war, fight a coalition war on the side of France (and Belgium).<sup>15</sup>

Although the planning mainly involved protecting the country against a German attack, any concrete evidence that this threat was real was lacking. The only major power that actually made plans involving Dutch territory was France. The occupation of the Rhineland and the fixation on the Rhine as France's easternmost frontier among senior military leadership, especially by Ferdinand Foch (1851-1929), had indeed made the French army in the early 1920s consider possible operations in close cooperation with the Belgians and by using Dutch territory. The Belgian military agreed, but no talks were ever opened with the Dutch to encourage them to fortify the

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13. Among others, see Captain 'Ronduit', 'De manoeuvre om Limburg', *Militaire Spectator*, 1919, 489-511; N. Japikse, *Die Stellung Hollands im Weltkrieg*, The Hague 1921, 45-46 and 110.

14. Strategic planning in case of a war with Belgium. January 1923, NA, archive General Staff, inv. 26.

15. H. Amersfoort, *Een harmonisch leger voor Nederland*, Breda 2007.

Meuse crossings in Limburg. The Belgians wanted to wait until a tripartite pact with Britain had been concluded, but that never materialized. When from 1930 onwards the French troops left the Rhineland, French planners scrapped crossing into the Netherlands in the case of a war with Germany, forming instead a defensive line in northern Belgium.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from budget cuts and a changed strategic-operational environment, from 1923 onwards the military elite had to cope with a deeply polarized debate on the future of national defence. For the first time in Dutch history, almost a quarter of Dutch public opinion supported pacifist alternatives. Was Dutch neutrality better served by disarmament because the next war would be so destructive that any defence effort would be futile? Was armed neutrality in fact nothing more than a sham, only pretending to give security? The proponents of disarmament saw war as tantamount to the utter destruction of civilised life, and even the end of civilisation itself; moreover, war would be so extremely fast and decisive that defence would be impossible. It had in fact ceased to be an option for any sane person. The Dutch recalled 1914-1918 as a period of humiliation by the belligerents and associated it with the demise of the Hague Convention of 1907, which had been the legal basis of neutrality. It was argued that its replacement—collective security based on the League of Nations—could not be considered an improvement as it could drag the Netherlands into a war that it did not want to fight.<sup>17</sup> Left-wing politicians in particular vehemently denied any direct connection between the military effort and the fact that neutrality had been respected in 1914-1918. Moreover, they concluded that the rapid development of warfare made any effective use of that instrument by small states meaningless. Warfare had grown in scale, lethality and costs and, consequently, the use of air fleets and motorization had made the defence of small countries impossible.<sup>18</sup>

The opponents of disarmament argued that a credible defence was still militarily possible and, additionally, identified the fate of the Netherlands with that of Western Europe as a whole. The advocates of a serious defence effort stressed the duty that the Dutch had towards themselves, and towards international law, to defend neutrality and independence as strongly as possible.<sup>19</sup> In 1925, the first national pressure group was formed, the Committee against Unilateral Disarmament, and was supported by officers, industrialists, politicians and university professors.<sup>20</sup> It tried to educate the population on the dangers of severe cuts in defence spending, but its media strategy failed to attract a substantial following. Its successor would do a better job in 1934.

A meaningful discussion on these themes did not take place. For the military and the conservative-centre political majority, the idea of unilateral disarmament amounted to nothing less than high treason. Left-wing liberals and social democrats were distrusted and kept far from government power. Agreement, though, did exist on the premise that modern war was fast and destructive; it would use gas and aerial bombardments even against civilians. The conclusions drawn from this premise were diametrically opposed to one another.

16. Dossiers on French-Belgian defence cooperation 1920-1923; Service Historique de l'Armée de Terre, Vincennes (SHAT) inv. 7N2733; J. Helmreich, 'The Negotiation of the Franco-Belgian Military Accord of 1920', in: *French Historical Studies* 3 (1964) 3, 360-378, 364-371; N. Fleurier, 'Entre partenariat et alliance: rapports diplomatique et militaires de la Belgique avec la France en 1920', in: *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 139 (1999), 23-38, 25; D. W. Alexander, 'Repercussions of the Breda Variant', in: *French Historical Studies* 8 (1974) 3, 459-488.

17. Henri Marchant in the Lower Chamber of Parliament, 12 December 1929, 1054; 16 December 1930, 1287.

18. See the speeches by the social democratic leader Pieter Troelstra and the left-wing liberal leader Henri Marchant in Proceedings of Parliament, Lower Chamber, 31 January 1918, 18; 20 February 1919; 8-9 June 1921. In 1923, this discussion reached a climax when the progressive liberal economist, and member of the Upper Chamber, David van Embden, through all possible media, very eloquently pointed out how destructive modern war was.

19. H. Beunders, *Weg met de vlootwet!*, Bergen 1984, 75, 153-156.

20. P. Kamphuis, 'Het Comité tot Waarschuwing tegen Eenzijdige Ontwapening', in: *Militaire Spectator*, 1984, 358-368.



So, when the commander of the Field Army wrote his memo, he did so knowing that the next war would probably make coalition warfare for the Dutch inevitable, but had to express his faith in armed neutrality based on unproven assumptions that the Dutch defence effort could deter major powers, and that a repeat of 1914 was possible.

From 1930, the General Staff was confronted with yet another – and new – expression of public opinion: the likelihood of a strategic assault (*attaque brusquée*) on the Netherlands and the vulnerability of the southern provinces, which were left undefended by the weak Field Army, almost inviting either France or Germany to take advantage of it. In the commander's memo of 1933, the echoes of this strong pressure group could be heard.

#### 4. 1930: Beginnings of change

Already in 1931, the Catholic daily *De Tijd* published the headline 'The Southern Netherlands trampled,' referring to French-Belgian defence cooperation, on the one hand, and Dutch defeatism, as the paper called it, and disregard for the duty to protect the entire territory, on the other. If the Dutch stayed idle, the paper predicted a massive battle between the French and German arch enemies on Dutch territory in the foreseeable future. Similar articles in other newspapers would follow, sounding ever more urgent as the Disarmament conference in Geneva failed and the Belgians started to fortify their eastern border, making war on Dutch territory even more plausible. In November 1933, Parliament discussed the Belgian fortifications along its north-eastern border that made a German march route through the southern Netherlands again more likely. From this and a growing regional self-awareness in the southern provinces vis-à-vis the traditional Holland-centric orientation of the Dutch governmental apparatus, a coalition emerged of industrialists, academics, local politicians and military, all Catholics as well. They founded a Committee for National Security, which in the spring of 1934 started an extensive national publicity campaign. Their alarming message of war ravaging the southern Netherlands did not fall on deaf ears. They focused on spreading awareness of the fact that the army in its present state would be unable to repeat its success of 1914. Deterrence had to be credible again to ensure neutrality. The committee also emphasized national unity and endorsed the view that upholding neutrality was both a duty towards the country itself and towards Europe. Prominent politicians and generals expressed their support.

Simultaneously, alarming foreign reports received wide media attention. Uproar was caused for instance by the remark made by British Prime Minister Baldwin on 30 July 1934 in the House of Commons: 'When you think of the defence of England you no longer think of the chalk cliffs of Dover; you think of the Rhine. That is where our frontier lies.'<sup>21</sup> He referred to the fact that the German air force had to be prevented from using Dutch territory that it would need in order to attack London. Apparently, Dutch neutrality would not scare the Germans off. Later that year, British Minister of War, Viscount Hailsham (1872-1950), reiterated the concern, saying that Germany had to be prevented from using Dutch territory for aerial attacks against Britain at all costs.<sup>22</sup> In diplomatic circles, the uncertainty of how to interpret these British statements lingered on for a few months, and it was even connected to rumours that Britain would assist in defending Dutch colonies in exchange for facilities in the Netherlands against a German military threat.

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21. Discussed in the Dutch Upper Chamber 25 March 1936; Dutch Minister for Foreign Affairs to all main Dutch legations November 1934 in B. J. G. de Graaff, *Documenten betreffende de Buitenlandse politiek van Nederland 1931-1940*, vol. 4, The Hague 1996.

22. *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 16 November 1934.

Furthermore, from early 1934 onwards, newspaper articles appeared on a secret German plan to invade Holland, either as a prelude to an invasion of France, or in order to gain control of the North Sea coast. The German army would deploy huge numbers of motorised vehicles and airplanes. This plan had first been revealed by a German émigré in Prague and later in Paris.<sup>23</sup> The alleged author of the plan was Franz von Epp (1868-1947), the Nazi leader of Bavaria and propagandist for a new German colonial empire.<sup>24</sup> These reports coincided with the publication of Ewald Banse's *Raum und Volk in Weltkrieg*, which was quickly translated into English as *Germany Prepares for War*. Although the German government distanced itself from both the military plan and the book, the damage had been done, and unrest among the Dutch public had indeed increased. Not only did Banse, quite accurately, describe the German plans with regard to the Dutch coast during 1914-1918, he also advised the German planners not to repeat the mistakes from that war, but to take actual possession of the Dutch coast in order to dominate Britain.<sup>25</sup> In August 1935, the story of von Epp's war plans resurfaced after new publications in the French press. Apparently, the German General Staff took the plan seriously this time since Hitler himself had supposedly ordered Werner von Blomberg (1878-1946) to study a fast, massive, motorized attack on the Netherlands. Most newspapers concluded that the Netherlands would not be able to withstand such an attack, and discussing it might invite Britain and France to act pre-emptively. For the first time, maps were published in the Dutch daily press that indicated possible German invasion routes. Similar reports on German war preparations by American journalists – such as Edgar Mowrer (1892-1977) from the *Chicago Daily News* – lent the story added news value.

A German *attaque brusquée* on the Low Countries was featured in the British military discussions as well. In the winter of 1933-1934, the Defence Requirements Committee<sup>26</sup> started analysing the steps that Britain should take in the case of German aggression against the Low Countries.<sup>27</sup> From the spring of 1934 onwards, official British military documents emphasized the strategic importance of the Netherlands in case of a war with Germany. On top of that, Germany was seen as the 'ultimate potential enemy,' endangering traditional British strategic interests: the balance of power in Western Europe and the independence of the Low Countries. Their occupation by Germany was seen as 'a special menace to British security.' The resemblance with statements going back to 1907 that also stressed the major importance of Dutch independence for British national security is remarkable.<sup>28</sup> The Committee of Imperial Defence thought an attack on the Low Countries was highly likely in case of a German invasion of France, and the Air Staff pointed out how dangerous a German occupation of the Netherlands would be, as it would surely be used for aerial attacks against Britain. In fact, a British occupation and defence of the Netherlands would be the best way to protect London! The British planners also referred back to ideas from before the First World War of sending a British army to the Netherlands to stop a German advance at the Waterline (Fortress Holland) together with the Dutch army. This British defence in depth was considered even more necessary now than it had

23. First in *Die Wahrheit* (Prague) and later in *Journal des Débats*, *Revue de France* and *l'Ordre* (Paris). The source was Helmut Klotz (1894-1943).

24. The Dutch press frequently mentioned von Epp as the likely successor of Hindenburg.

25. *Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*, 11 April 1934. On Banse as propagandist of Nazi German-expansionism, see a memo by Robert Vansittart April 1934, National Archives London (NAL), inv. CAB 24/248.

26. Since 1927, the joint planning sub-committee prepared the strategic analyses of the General Staff to present to the government.

27. Essential to this process was the role of Maurice Hankey (1877-1963), who chaired the committee that coordinated measures to be taken in the case of a German invasion of the Low Countries. In 1904, he had been active in planning operations by the Royal Navy to blockade the north German ports.

28. Klinkert, *Defending Neutrality*, 43-44.

been in 1910. The draft report of the defence requirements that was sent to the cabinet pointed this out. The fate of the Netherlands must be considered of major strategic interest for the security of Great Britain, and it was deemed necessary that British-Dutch contacts should be established to prevent a German dominance of the North Sea coast and the establishment of German air bases in Holland within the foreseeable future. The British diplomats and politicians, on the other hand, were well aware of the fact that Dutch neutrality would preclude any Dutch military or security request to Britain. Its position was very different from Belgium, a signatory of the Locarno Pact.<sup>29</sup> Another assumption that British planners made in 1935-1936 was that the speed of a German advance into the Netherlands would probably have German air bases established there before British troops could arrive. Meanwhile, in October 1935, the first plan for a war against Germany was produced. It assumed a 'wide sweep' of the German army through Holland and Belgium, while the BEF (British Expeditionary Force) would keep airfields and ports of the Low Countries open. As a BEF had not been formed yet, the October 1936 assessment focused more on the threat of a strategic air attack by Germany on Britain.<sup>30</sup>

The French General Staff had recognised the possible danger of a German attack through the southern Netherlands as well. In 1934 and 1935, talks between French and Belgian staffs were held in Paris to coordinate against a German attack through Holland. Maurice Gamelin (1872-1958) stressed the need for close French-Belgian cooperation, especially for the vulnerable northern Belgian border, which lay completely open if the Dutch Field Army was sent northwards into the Fortress Holland. The French saw the Albert Canal in northern Belgium as the main defence line. When Belgium in October 1936 opted for a return to full neutrality, the French were not amused. Some military contacts on French deployment in Belgium remained, but combined planning ended. Belgium formally left the Locarno system in April 1937.<sup>31</sup>

The Dutch military reaction to the threat of an *attaque brusquée* and the possible consequences for armed neutrality is interesting. It began early 1935 when, at the request of the Minister of War and the Dutch chief of the General Staff, Izaäk Reijnders (1879-1966) presented his first assessments on the issue. His conclusion was in line with the Dutch military thinking from 1919 onwards: Germany was a threat, although not imminent, and a repetition of 1914 was highly unlikely. The German attack could take place over a wide front or could be a concentrated *attaque brusquée*, which overwhelmed the country even before it had mobilised. Both the minister and the commander of the Field Army agreed with this analysis.<sup>32</sup> Measures, which were announced in general terms in September 1935, were made public in November that year and approved by Parliament in January 1936. They included modest fortifications near bridges on routes from the eastern border inland, and were intended to delay a sudden attack and more anti-aircraft artillery. Although this might appear as a new, one-sided orientation on an *attaque brusquée*, it was not. In fact, the Dutch General Staff never even used such a scenario for its strategic exercises, neither with troops in the field nor on the map.<sup>33</sup> Instead of the *attaque brusquée*, both

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29. Memos of December 1934 and January 1935, NAL, inv. CAB 24/251, 24/253, and 27/510.

30. W. K. Wark, *The Ultimate Enemy. British Intelligence and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939*, London 1985, 28-32, 188-195. At the end of March and in early April 1936, the House of Commons debated the role of the Low Countries in British strategic policy. Memos October 1935, NAL, inv. CAB 24/260 and 53/25.

31. M. S. Alexander, *The Republic in Danger*, Cambridge 1992, 193-196.

32. T. van Gent, *Het falen van de Nederlandse neutraliteit*, Amsterdam 2009, 32-35.

33. The Dutch military attaché in Brussels did mention the Belgian manoeuvres of early October 1936 that simulated a massive German motorised attack on the Meuse crossing at Liege, but the Dutch Staff showed little interest. Dossier foreign armies, October 1936, NA, archives General Staff, inv. 1568 and *Bredasche Courant*, 3 October 1936.

Reijders and Prime Minister Hendrikus Colijn (1869-1944), in the spring of 1936, just after the re-militarisation of the Rhineland, agreed behind closed doors that the Fortress Holland was to remain the core element of the Dutch effort, even at the expense of the Field Army operating in the southern provinces.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, during the following years, the Dutch planners would abandon the vulnerable southern areas more and more, in spite of their verbal support for the Committee of National Defence as well as their realization that this would complicate possible joint operations with the Belgian, French and even British army.<sup>35</sup> In July 1936, the government also declared that it no longer felt in any way obliged to follow appeals by the League of Nations to participate in sanctions or acts of collective security. The country had returned to its traditional neutrality, but now with only one potential enemy in mind. In addition, this neutrality was no longer based on a strong mobile Field Army, but on a much more concentrated defence effort around the western provinces. This made coalition warfare increasingly difficult, and contradicted both the idea that the Dutch territory needed to be protected everywhere in order to help secure European peace as well as the idea that 1914 could be repeated.<sup>36</sup> Military planning and public narratives now began to form a gap of unprecedented width.

Another remarkable Dutch initiative was Prime Minister Colijn's communication with the British government in 1936.<sup>37</sup> The Committee of Imperial Defence, although recognising the strategic value of both the Dutch East Indies and Holland, was not prepared to give any guarantees of British assistance as that would probably make the Dutch less eager to invest in their own defence. It was only willing to have the Joint Planning Sub-Committee work together with the Dutch to advise them on improvements to their defence.<sup>38</sup> No formal commitments were expressed. If and how these contacts worked out in practice is unclear, but Colijn's visits to London marked a temporary shift in Dutch diplomacy.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Britain at the time did not even possess a field army to send to the continent. Nevertheless, in early 1937 the British military leadership assessed the chance that the Netherlands would be invaded by Germany when it attacked France as 'probable.'<sup>40</sup> Colijn reported confidentially that Britain and the Netherlands would inform each other on war preparations and in the future, if that day came, fight on the same side.

34. Van Gent, *falen*, 40; and Amersfoort, *harmonisch leger*, 25-26, 55: Amersfoort figured that of the twenty main strategic exercises by the General Staff in the period 1920-1939, 80 per cent included coalition warfare and 60 per cent focussed on the southern provinces (even after 1936). Surprisingly, all exercises assumed that the Dutch army would be mobilized in time.

35. Van Gent, *falen*, 41.

36. J. Gunsburg, 'La Grande Illusion: Belgian and Dutch Strategy Facing Germany, 1919-1940', in: *Journal of Military History* 78 (2014), 101.

37. His visit of February 1934 was widely reported in the Dutch press; in 1917, he had also visited London. His business interests (Royal Dutch Shell) had given him many contacts in Britain. In 1919, the British government had officially praised Colijn for his valuable contributions to the British war effort in 1914-1918, file on Colijn, NAL, inv. FO 383/537.

38. Together with the Joint Intelligence Committee, these inter-service committees advised the Chief of Staff. Correspondence on the Netherlands 1936, NAL, inv. FO 371/20507; Naval war preparations 1936, NAL, inv. ADM 116/3862; H. Langeveld, *Hendrikus Colijn 1869-1944*, Amsterdam 2004, 428-435; L. de Jong, *Voorspel*, The Hague 1969, 605; N. Taling, 'A Vital British Interest', in: *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (1978), 180-218; R. van Diepen, 'Britain and Dutch Security Policy, 1933-1938', in: N. Ashton (ed.), *Unspoken Allies. Anglo-Dutch Relations since 1780*, Amsterdam 2001, 121-136; van Gent, *falen*, 45.

39. Memo on defence problems of the Netherlands July 1936, NAL, inv. CAB 24/263. It only came out into the open when in the House of Commons on 8 February 1939 the British government mentioned the contacts as 'normal interchanges of information on technical points connected with defence matters'.

40. Memo on the role of the British Army, January 1937, NAL, inv. CAB 24/267.

## 5. 1936-1940: Neutrality as an illusion

From 1936 onwards, after freeing itself from any League of Nations obligations and seriously reducing the role of the Field Army in neutrality protection, the Netherlands fell back on nineteenth-century notions of neutrality protection. This was despite the fact that they possessed a thorough knowledge of the dimensions of modern war in speed and size, which would make small states more vulnerable than ever. Withdrawing to the Fortress Holland would leave a dangerous gap between the Belgian–French defence south of the country and the Dutch army. This gap, leading through Limburg to the coastal provinces – Zeeland, among others – would be very advantageous for the Germans. It even resembled their pre-1907 *Aufmarschpläne* – and was consequently dangerous for Britain. This made Dutch military planning of major interest to all surrounding powers. Compared to 1914, this choice would make the army extremely static and isolated from potential allies. On the other hand, it was considered to be the only way to secure the heart of the country for some time. It was completely contrary to what the General Staff had been propagating since 1918: an active, mobile defence, with the almost certainty of coalition warfare. The policy after 1936 was also at odds with the still publicly expressed idea of a repeat of 1914 and of a regional security role, focusing on the southern provinces. But 1936 lacked similarities with 1914 in many respects. The mobilisation of the entire army would take longer, while an enemy invasion could take the form of a *Blitzkrieg*, a word used in the Dutch Parliament for the first time in February 1937.<sup>41</sup> Another difference was that there was no uncertainty about the enemy. Neutrality now *de facto* meant one-sided military preparations against Germany.

The Committee on National Defence had made re-armament a public issue since 1934. From 1937 onwards, no main political party pleaded against it anymore, and it was taken to hand.<sup>42</sup> Large public events were held, stressing the need for a strong army and a well-prepared civil defence. In 1936, for instance, the Army Days were reintroduced that dated from 1916 to 1918. One city after another held military parades and demonstrations for the general public. Already in October 1933 the first local black-out exercise had been held, simulating an air and gas attack. Many would follow. Even larger events were the Air Defence days, the first of which was held in The Hague in August 1937.<sup>43</sup>

When war approached, from early 1939 onwards, it was the surrounding powers that showed a huge increase in interest in the defence of the Netherlands. The Dutch reactions to that interest are very telling: while aware that war would not spare the country as it did in 1914, the political-military leadership fell into a kind of paralysis, using outdated narratives and lacking the power to develop imaginative political-military alternatives.

1939 began with an invasion scare in Britain. Rumours of an imminent German attack on the Low Countries spread quickly and caused unrest. The Dutch remained silent and as the BEF was not on the continent yet, Britain felt very limited in its options. As a result, British-French military talks began in March, and the Dutch Foreign Minister discussed the situation with Lord Halifax (1881-1959), his British counterpart. When Prime Minister Colijn heard Britain was considering proclaiming a German attack on Holland as *casus belli*, he refused to discuss the topic and ended the talks. He feared Germany would interpret such a step as a breach of Dutch neutrality.<sup>44</sup> This did not stop the British Air Force from identifying possible targets, mostly bridges, in case of a German

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41. Proceedings of the Lower Chamber of Parliament, 1936-1937, 1506.

42. Van Gent, *falen*, 246-265.

43. Extensively reported by all Dutch daily newspapers on 22 and 23 August 1937.

44. General correspondence on Dutch neutrality, NAL inv. FO 371/23124; van Gent, *falen*, 48-53.

advance through the southern Netherlands. The Meuse crossings were considered the most essential.<sup>45</sup> British-French planning for bombing Dutch infrastructure began in earnest in April, developing into more detailed planning and coordination in October.<sup>46</sup> It focussed on the southern provinces, and in order to gather more information, the British military attaché even privately visited the Dutch defence lines by motorcar in mid-August. He concluded they ‘have a certain delaying effect,’ but that was the most that could be said of them.<sup>47</sup>

During the summer of 1939, the BEF was taking up its positions in northern France. Then war broke out, precipitating a quick succession of events on the Western front. British interest in German military preparations east of the Dutch border increased considerably from September onwards, although bombing remained the only option that the British had in the case of an attack. Furthermore, the Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee began making an inventory of all resources and raw materials in the Netherlands that could be of use to the German war effort.<sup>48</sup> Already on 9 October, the War Cabinet presented a plan of short-term measures regarding the Netherlands: the transport of oil and gold to Britain, the destruction of trains and infrastructure by the Dutch themselves when Germany actually invaded; and, finally, the prevention of the German use of ports and airfields. The British contribution would be bombing raids on German columns and Dutch infrastructure,<sup>49</sup> demolition of Dutch harbour facilities and destruction of oil stocks. The British government hoped the Dutch, like the Belgians, would be prepared to discuss this, but feared, correctly so, that the Dutch would refuse, predictably claiming it would constitute a breach of neutrality. Nevertheless, in the same month British officers were secretly sent to Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Flushing, the most important Dutch ports, to gather intelligence to prepare destruction the moment the Germans invaded. This was the so-called Binney Plan (ordered by the War Cabinet on 9 October 1939) that led to Operation XD, executed on 10 May 1940.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, talks took place with the KLM for securing the air fleet, and the evacuation of the Dutch Air Force to France was planned without Dutch knowledge.<sup>51</sup> The British discussed the gold reserves with the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which, the British minister learnt, had already been partly dispatched to the US and South Africa. Finally, the Dutch made it clear that they did not share the British sense of urgency for these preparations.<sup>52</sup> This did not stop the British planning process, though, especially since British trust in Dutch defensive power remained very limited. On 1 November, the British attaché in The Hague could inform his superiors about the Dutch troop positions, pointing out that a five-day delay of a German advance on the eastern front of Fortress Holland and on a defence line in the south should be possible. In doing so, he was probably quoting a Dutch estimate. Britain could not do much more than bomb the Ruhr area and fly reconnaissance missions to detect German troop movements. But the War Office wanted more, and on 10 November proposed a military mission to prepare Dutch-British cooperation in case of war.<sup>53</sup> On 13 November, the War Cabinet even agreed ‘in the last resort’ to grant asylum to both Queen Wilhelmina and the former German Emperor, who were still living in exile in the

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45. Planning air operations in the Low Countries 1939, NAL inv. AIR 2/2888; Correspondence on a possible German invasion on the Netherlands October–November 1939, NAL inv. WO 32/9625.

46. Use of bombers in case of a German advance into the Low Countries, NLA, inv. AIR 35/341.

47. Dossier on Dutch military intelligence 1939–1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1643.

48. Measures to be taken in the event of an invasion by Germany of the Low Countries October 1939–January 1940, NLA inv. WO 197/22; Military intelligence on the Netherlands February–March 1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1643.

49. Approved by the War Cabinet on 13 October 1939.

50. Planning of the XD Operations October 1939–May 1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1603, 106/1669, 106/1671. Named after Vice-Admiral Hugh Binney (1883–1953).

51. Evacuation measures in case of a German invasion of the Low Countries 1939–1940, NAL, inv. CAB 21/1311.

52. Correspondence on the Netherlands September–October 1939, NAL inv. FO 371/23095.

53. Planning XD Operations, NAL inv. WO 106/1671.

Netherlands, if the country was overrun.<sup>54</sup> Communications remained scanty. The only reliable contact concerning military affairs was between the British military attaché in The Hague, W. L. Gibson and Jacobus van der Plassche (1888-1961), the second-in-command of Dutch military intelligence. They spoke informally and rather openly, ensuring the British authorities understood that the Dutch army would defend the Fortress Holland, but not Limburg, and that it would not coordinate its defence strategy with Belgium. Van der Plassche repeated the estimate that the eastern front of the Fortress Holland would delay a German attack for five days.<sup>55</sup> The British in turn conveyed the message that Belgian-Dutch military cooperation was deemed essential and that no British troops of any significance would be available to assist the Dutch against a German invasion. The British would fight in France and Belgium.<sup>56</sup> Concurrently, the British learned from some Dutch-British naval contacts that 'the Dutch are not expected to be capable of prolonged resistance.'<sup>57</sup> All in all, the British became rather frustrated by the Dutch neutral position, which the British minister in The Hague, Neville Bland (1886-1972), attributed to Dutch fear of German retaliations, as German espionage in Holland was massive.<sup>58</sup> Gibson was more outspoken in April 1940 when he accused the Dutch of 'a blind adherence to out-of-date ideas, [which] was suicidal.'<sup>59</sup> This frustration was widespread among British civil servants.<sup>60</sup>

French experiences were not very different. In October 1939, French overtures to the Dutch government had met with no response.<sup>61</sup> It became apparent that Zeeland and Brabant would not be defended in earnest by the Dutch army, leaving a dangerous gap. As a consequence, the French military planners started to include these provinces in their northward advance from November 1939 onwards.<sup>62</sup> This even persuaded the British to undertake a renewed military study of Zeeland.<sup>63</sup> The Dutch attaché in Paris was informed of these plans.<sup>64</sup> In the end, this resulted in Gamelin's *variante Breda*, which was formally included in the French planning of early 1940.<sup>65</sup>

Neither were Dutch-Belgian communications very fruitful. In October 1939, the Belgian military attaché visited the Dutch defence lines in Brabant, and assessed them as fairly weak. Simultaneous communication between Dutch and Belgian attachés posted in Berlin and The Hague confirmed this view.<sup>66</sup> Although regular Dutch-Belgian military communication on the topic of closer cohesion between the two defence systems developed, focusing on the southern Netherlands, results were meagre to say the least.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, the attachés of the two small neutrals had informed each other of German troop movements and preparations for a major attack in the West.

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54. Correspondence on the Netherlands November 1939, NAL inv. FO 371/23106.

55. Dossiers on Dutch military intelligence 1939-1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1643. Van der Plassche was also in close contact with the Belgian attaché Diepenrijcks; Van Gent, *falen*, 267.

56. Correspondence on the Netherlands November 1939, NAL, inv. FO 371/23106.

57. Meeting Directorate of Plan 31 January 1940, NAL inv. ADM 1/10568; April 1940 dossiers on Dutch military intelligence, NAL, inv. WO 106/1643. Van der Plassche communicated the Dutch defence plan verbally to Gibson, De Booy told the War Office that the Dutch would offer very little resistance in the southern provinces.

58. Letter to Halifax 16 January 1940, NAL, inv. FO 371/24458.

59. Political and military correspondence on the Netherlands 1940, NAL, inv. FO 371/24458 FO 371/24458.

60. *Ibid.*; and van Gent *falen*, 201-202, 205-206.

61. Van Gent, *falen*, 291.

62. DMO, planning for France and the Low Countries, NLA inv. WO 106/1680; Dossier on Dutch military intelligence 1939-1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1643.

63. Dossier on Dutch military intelligence 1939-1940, NAL inv. WO 106/1643.

64. Van Gent, *falen*, 291.

65. For a comparative overview of Western European war planning, see M. Jacobsen (ed.), *Contingency Plans for War in Western Europe 1920-1940*, Santa Monica 1985.

66. Van Gent, *falen*, 227 and 190.

67. *Ibid.*, 190.

Both the Dutch attaché in Paris and his colleague in Berlin had extremely useful and accurate German informants, enabling them to make solid estimates of German intentions right up to May 1940. Furthermore, in November the Dutch deposited their operational plans at their legations in London and Paris, and they named liaison officers for future military cooperation with the Allies. Never before had steps like these been taken, but all information would only become available to the British and the French after the German attack had commenced. It is telling that Dutch PM Dirk de Geer (1870-1960) on 30 November 1939 declared in Parliament ‘that any neutral country [...] is a beacon of light in these dark times, shining towards salvation [...] Our neutrality serves our self-interest, but it means more, it is [...] a European interest [...] and a means to bring peace to the continent.’ As he uttered these words, echoing a past that was no longer relevant, the Dutch were very well aware of the Germans’ war planning, which had by this time fully developed. On 27 September 1939, Hitler had for the first time explicitly ordered an attack on the West (shortly later formalized in *Weisung 6*), pointing out the Netherlands as essential for both the protection of the Ruhr area and future aerial warfare with Britain. The German Army was very well informed about Dutch military preparations and correctly assumed a weak defence in the southern provinces. One of the main axes of *Fall Gelb* exploited just that.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, the German planners saw Dutch neutrality as a liability: the Netherlands was just too weak to defend itself and, instead of providing stable protection for Germany, as it had done in 1914, was considered to be dangerously exposed to an Allied (pre-emptive) invasion and thus formed a threat to German security. Besides, Hitler himself saw neutrality as a form of cowardice, weakness and opportunistic behaviour.<sup>69</sup> This was in line with earlier German opinions on neutral Holland, expressed by von Bernhardi and Banse.<sup>70</sup> This German view on neutrality could not have been more different from the Dutch self-image. On 10 May 1940, it was obvious that neutrality, which the Dutch had never seriously considered an alternative for a century, had neither saved the Netherlands nor contributed to peace in Europe.

## 6. Concluding remarks

For the Netherlands, neutrality was much more than a question of military calculations. It had moral and idealistic elements intricately intertwined with questions of international politics, international law, self-preservation and self-image. Military planning, an important pillar of armed neutrality, grew in importance as political and military tension in Western Europe rose from 1900 onwards. As the conduct of warfare changed in speed and size, this neutral crossroads of Franco-German and Anglo-German rivalry increased in importance for the surrounding powers. The ‘realistic’ answer – that of a strong Dutch defence as a guarantee for Dutch independence and a deterrent for violations by those surrounding major powers, as well as one that would provide regional security – was, in fact, an inadequate and unfeasible answer. The Netherlands was simply not strong enough to put forth armed forces that were seen by the great powers as a credible deterrent. But the Dutch military establishment kept this narrative alive, based on a misinterpretation of the ‘success’ of 1914-1918, that its military effort had a regional beneficial effect. In fact, it turned an older argument – namely that envy among the great powers provided the best security for the Netherlands – and a post-1918 argument – that only one-sided disarmament would lead to peace in Europe – upside down. The military leadership justified its course by using a classic Dutch combination of realistic and

68. On 15 November, *Weisung 6* further developed into the *Holland Weisung*. Van Gent, *falen*, 81-84.

69. *Ibid.*, 117.

70. F. von Bernhardi, *Deutschland und der nächste Krieg*, Stuttgart 1912, 119; *idem*, *Vom heutigen Krieg*, Berlin 1912, 196; *idem*, *Vom Kriege der Zukunft*, Berlin 1920, 153; E. Banse, *Germany Prepares for War*, New York 1934, 80-81, 289, 307-309.



idealistic arguments, emphasizing one or the other, depending the circumstances. But behind the scenes, military planning changed radically after 1918, in the end abandoning the so dearly cherished Field Army in its complex role as deterrent and fighting force. This was a realistic choice in the sense that it recognised the limited Dutch military potential and the formal political interpretation of neutrality. It was, however, less realistic when one considers the nature of the strategic threats surrounding the Netherlands, of which the Dutch Staff was well aware.

The political elite continued to adhere to a strict, legal interpretation of neutrality, as it had done in 1914-1918. The army needed to stress its supposedly successful role in 1914-1918 in order to counter budget cuts, but the General Staff knew full well that the next war would no longer spare Dutch territory. It could not prepare the country sufficiently as international military arrangements were prohibited, although the political elite after 1936 had no doubt as to which country would be the future enemy. Never once since the early days of Dutch neutrality had the strategic threat been so unambiguous. But it was not enough to initiate an in-depth political-strategic discussion on the fundamental principles of armed neutrality. The military and political establishments had somehow drifted too far apart, with each establishment believing that its own solution was capable of saving the country.

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