Chapter

1

A Nation Too Small to Commit Great Stupidities:[1] *The Netherlands and Neutrality*

The essence of neutrality is the avoidance of war, namely, the avoidance of involvement in the wars of others. But despite its deceptively simple definition, neutrality is not a homogeneous concept. It has changed meanings over the centuries, reflecting the concerns of states adopting it as their foreign policy and those desiring to challenge its validity. Neutrality has a long history going back as far as the sixth century BC when Milesians abstained from supporting either Ionian Greece or Persia.[2] During the Middle Ages, it was common practice for warring parties to refrain from sinking ships of countries not involved in the conflict.[3] In the fifteenth century, neutrality became a vaguely defined quasi-legal term referring to nations that opted out of a particular war. Neutrals at that time could profess partiality to one side or another and could supply it with all manner of materials, including military goods.[4] Neither contraband regulation nor impartiality were widely observed, although neutral ships were protected from privateering.[5] Napoleon's disregard for the proclaimed non-belligerency of several European countries, including the Netherlands, entailed the death of old-style neutrality, and the birth of neutrality based on international law.[6] Influenced by the American Act of 1794, territorial integrity and impartiality became the cornerstones of neutrality in the 1800s.[7] International conventions, such as those formulated at the Paris Conference of 1856, at Geneva in 1864, in The Hague in 1899 and 1907, and at the London Conference in 1909, aimed to regulate the laws of warfare and the rights and obligations of neutrals in time of conflict and peace. They provided the basis for neutrality in the first half of the twentieth century.

Since 1909, in legal terms, neutrality defines a relationship among nation-states in wartime, namely between those who fight and those who choose not to. Although nations can profess neutrality in peacetime, the conditions of neutrality only apply in time of conflict. International neutrality laws place clear obligations on the behaviour of belligerents and non-participants with regard to each other, and in return guarantee the latter certain rights of territorial integrity, security and unhindered trade (except for contraband). It is an extremely attractive option for states that have little to gain and much to lose by becoming involved in war. Needless to say, neutrality is much more than a definition in international law. Neutrals have to work within the complex web of inter-state relationships, which often do not adhere to the wording of legal documents nor to the arbitrary wishes of countries wanting to remain detached from their neighbours' activities. Hence, in time of war, neutrals tread unsteadily, much like a juggler walking a tightrope. They have to balance themselves

between the demands and concerns of warring sides while attempting to keep their own interests in play. It is all too easy for a juggler to lose his balance, drop the balls, and plummet into the beckoning void.

During the nineteenth century, nations regarded neutrality as a viable foreign policy. Small states were especially attracted to neutrality, as it seemed to guarantee some control over their destinies in an international arena where great powers were growing ever stronger. In real terms, small states could not compete, or even attempt to compete, with the armed might or accumulative resources of their neighbours. Adhering to strict neutrality became an exceedingly appealing option to protect their sovereignty. The move to regulate and define neutrality laws helped to increase these expectations. It was not for nothing, then, that the word *neutraliteit* (neutrality) in the Dutch language has associated connotations of *zelfstandigheid* (independence) and *afzijdigheid* (aloofness).

Yet, the implementation of neutrality as foreign policy was far from straightforward, especially for a small country. Despite attempts at aloofness and the expectation, as H.T. Colenbrander explained in 1920, that it 'was self-evident that nobody would busy themselves with the Netherlands',[8] neutrals were not cocooned from international realities. Neutrality did not guarantee independence in time of war, although it was a way of possibly safeguarding it. Instead, states relied on two vital prerequisites for their neutrality to work: firstly, the means to uphold necessary neutrality regulations and to protect themselves from breaches thereof, and, secondly, the willingness of other states to recognise their neutral status.[9] Neutrality can only work if a country can uphold its security in the face of threats. As Efraim Karsh explained:

> On the face of it, neutrality is the opposite of the 'typical' policy followed by the small state. Given its narrow power base, one would assume a tendency on the part of the small state, particularly while confronting a great power, to try to balance its inherent weakness by drawing on external sources of strength. Neutrality is the opposite situation: one in which the small state, of its own accord, chooses to rely exclusively on internal sources of strength rather than on powerful allies. But if neutrality does not constitute the 'typical' policy of the small state, it clearly and blatantly depicts both the relative weakness of the small state, as well as the room for *manoeuvre* available to it.[10]

The Netherlands in the Great War provides a fascinating case of a small weak state with an interest in neutrality as a means of protecting its independence and security. It managed to stay out of the world conflict while its neighbours were dragged into the war. It could easily have suffered the same fate as neutral Belgium. Why did the Netherlands not become a belligerent between August 1914 and November 1918? How did it remain neutral? These two questions are especially pertinent given the well-substantiated claim by Nils Ørvik that the Great War witnessed a decline in the viability of neutrality as a foreign policy option for small states.[11] Nineteenth-century conceptions of neutrality based on international law were not tenable during a general war involving the world's major powers. As Wilhelm Carlgren stated in relation to neutrality in the Second World War (which holds equally true for the Great War):

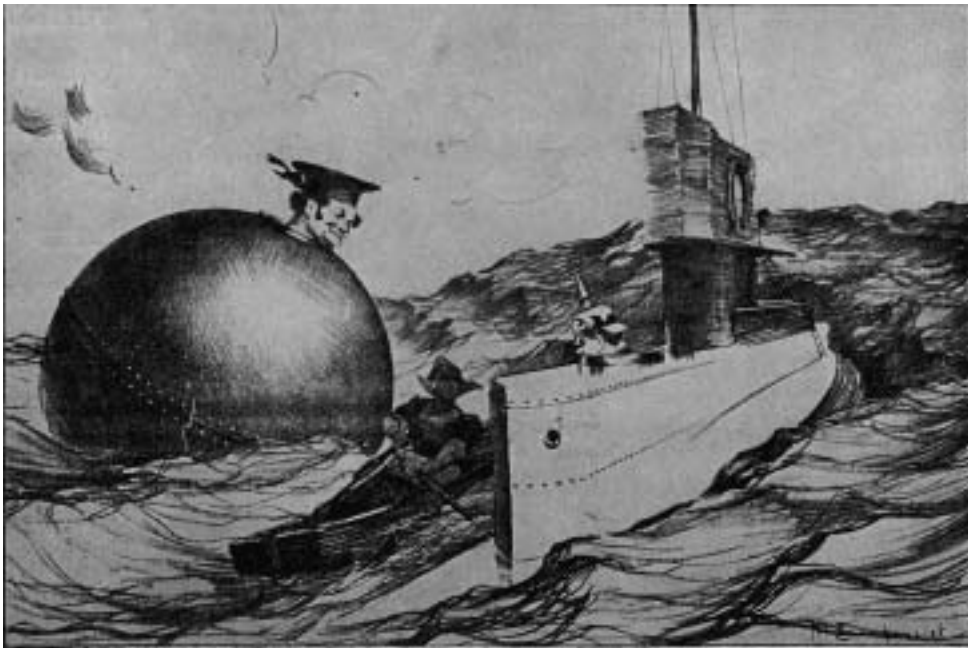
> in the Great Powers' scheme of things... respect for neutrality and the rules of neutrality carried far less weight than regard for their [own] interests. A small country, which wished to live through a World War with its freedom and independence intact, was obliged to adopt in full measure a corresponding scale of values.[12]

This leads to a further question: What value did neutrality have in protecting Dutch security and independence in the face of domineering great power demands? Put simply, very little. Yet when the belligerents perceived some advantage in Dutch neutrality, it could prove immensely fortuitous.

The survival of Dutch neutrality during the Great War relied on many factors. First and foremost, it depended on successful diplomacy and trade negotiations with the warring parties, especially Great Britain, Germany and, after 1917, the United States. Dutch relations with the belligerents have received much, although by no means exhaustive, attention in the historiography of the war.[13] Secondly, how the great powers viewed the advantages and disadvantages of Dutch neutrality was vital to its continued feasibility. Historians have given considerable thought to this aspect of neutrality maintenance as well.[14] Thirdly, what the Dutch did to protect themselves from neutrality violations, to advertise the benefits of neutrality (in the eyes of belligerents) and to diminish its costs, had an equally important bearing on whether they could stay out of the war. It is this third aspect – the domestic requirements of neutrality – that has received far less notice in the study of neutrality or in the history of the Great War. Of course, none of the three elements exist in isolation, nor can they be studied as such, since what a neutral does is closely related to its relations with other states, which, in turn, affects how they view the merits of its neutrality. The choice for the researcher is in deciding from which angle to pursue the issue.

For the Netherlands, staying neutral was a complex matter given its peculiar situation in Europe and the intense interest of the warring powers in its activities. It had to uphold international laws, maintain impartiality, preserve territorial integrity, protect trade relationships, and reinforce military deterrence. Since the Dutch were unlikely to enter the conflict of their own accord, they could only be forced to join through an openly belligerent act.[14] Everything the Netherlands did, therefore, had the potential to give reason for either the *Entente* or Central Powers to reassess their interests and to invade. What was so peculiar about the Netherlands was that it was so vulnerable: it was surrounded by major military powers (Germany, Great Britain and France); was geographically wide open to invasion; had immense strategic value; ruled a large and virtually undefended empire with numerous natural resources; and relied on foreign sources for military supplies, grain, fertilizers and fuel.[16] More than any other European neutral, except Belgium, the Netherlands seemed to offer every reason for the belligerents to force the country into the war. Yet, its vulnerability also provided the key to the ultimate success of its neutrality. The warring sides could not allow their enemies access to the advantages that the capture of the nation afforded. It was better to have the Netherlands neutral than to have it participating in the war on the other side. Being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea may have been the bane of the Netherlands; in the end, it was also its saving grace.

Illustration 1: Between the devil and the deep blue sea



A contemporary cartoon of the Netherlands (in her rowing boat) perilously caught between the threatening might of Great Britain (sea mine) and Germany (U-boat).

The Allure of Neutrality

The attractions of neutrality for the Dutch were manifold. After the Napoleonic Wars, the Netherlands no longer counted among the influential nations of Europe. It effectively became a third-rate power when Belgium seceded in 1839. Security issues were paramount for the monarchy, but allying with one of its stronger neighbours was difficult since the Netherlands acted as a buffer zone between France and Britain and later between France, Britain and the new German Empire. An alliance with one might provoke the other. The country had strategic merit not only because of its geographic location, but also because it controlled the mouths of three important rivers, namely the Rhine, the Maas (Meuse) and the Schelde (Scheldt). The Rhine linked the North Sea with the German industrial heartland of the Ruhr and stretched into Alsace and Lorraine, provinces repeatedly fought over by the French and Germans. The Maas ran from the Netherlands through Belgium (Namur) and down into France. In turn, the Schelde was the only outlet to the sea for the Belgian city of Antwerp and was considered, like the Maas and Rhine, to be a vital trade route into the continental mainland. Control of one or all three rivers gave considerable territorial advantages in north-west Europe.

In many ways, the Netherlands profited from its geo-strategic position because each of the powers had sufficient reason to keep the others from exerting too much

influence there.[17] This was especially important because the Dutch army and navy stood little chance against the armed forces of its neighbours. Not only were they outmatched by the material superiority of Germany, France, and Britain, geographic considerations made effective defence even more difficult. Unlike another neutral nation, Switzerland, the Netherlands lacked defensible boundaries. While the Swiss could hide relatively securely behind their mountain ranges, the Dutch had no such advantage. Theirs was, and remains, an extremely flat country. The Netherlands' only other natural ally is water. An elaborate inundation network could be brought into play (the *Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie*, New Holland Waterline) with the potential to hold up an attack from the east. However, its success relied on the foreknowledge of an impending invasion as raising water levels took several days. The railway system complicated defence further because the railway lines ran sufficiently close to the border with Germany to require a full-scale mobilisation at least three days before invasion from that direction.[18] Dutch military commanders were under no illusions that defending level territory against a well-organised, well-trained, and much stronger armed force would be extremely difficult.

The advantages of neutrality were obvious. The security of the Netherlands within Europe was complicated, however, by the possession of a large empire outside the continent. For centuries, it had looked abroad for its prestige, status, and commercial strength. The colonies, especially the East Indies, were critical to the economic development of the 'motherland'; moreover, they entitled the Dutch to a measure of international standing.[19] Between 1880 and 1914, during the so-called 'Age of Empire' when European states along with the United States and Japan focussed on the formal and informal domination of the world,[20] the Dutch recognised that their many colonies might become the objects of international rivalry. The issue of empire thus became important to the policy of neutrality at home, as a threat to an overseas possession could result from a conflict within Europe while an imperial dispute could influence a continental war.

The Netherlands did not have the military or naval strength to protect its overseas dominions. Instead, it looked to consolidate its hold over those colonies that were deemed most important[21] and removed itself from areas that were indefensible or jeopardised relations with other states. It pulled out of the Gold Coast in West Africa in 1871 for these reasons, while furthering its hold over the East Indian archipelago in Bali, Aceh, and Celebes.[22] A related complication was that only British naval power could effectively protect the Dutch empire.[23] As a result, the Netherlands maintained a more than amicable relationship with Britain throughout the nineteenth century despite 'short-lived, if intense, periods of strain'.[24] Some historians have suggested that the British-Dutch relationship included an implicit recognition that Britain would come to the Netherlands' aid if its colonies were threatened. This military aid, they argued, extended beyond the colonies to the Dutch state in Europe as well.[25] Yet, while the Dutch were dependent on British goodwill and naval strength in imperial matters, they also recognised that a formal alliance with Britain could not guarantee security within Europe: Britain's small standing army could not protect the Netherlands from its most likely enemy, Germany. That the Netherlands

Map 1: The Netherlands

Marking major railway lines, important places, and fortified positions (dark grey lines)

had a close trading relationship with Germany necessitated a careful diplomatic balance and an eventual reassessment of its friendship with Britain, especially after Anglo-German relations soured in the beginning of the new century. After 1900, it was no longer feasible to rely on Britain as a 'natural protector'.[26] Queen Wilhelmina publicly addressed this concern in 1905 by declaring that the country needed neutrality now more than ever because none of the great powers could safeguard the Dutch at home or abroad.[27] She further reiterated: 'The Netherlands must arm itself against England, France and Germany'.[28] At any rate, many of the Dutch loathed the idea of an alliance with Britain after the Boer War (1899-1901), a conflict that fomented profound pro-Afrikaner (and anti-British) sentiments.[29] In the careful balance of power wrought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, obvious allies were few and far between.

Neutrality, furthermore, made extremely good business sense. Over the ages, the Netherlands developed as a commercial mediator within and outside Europe. Its economy relied heavily on seaborne trade. In 1914, for example, the Dutch merchant marine was larger than that of the French, Italians, and Spanish. Its merchants were able to capitalise on the country's favourable geographic placement, giving easy access to the seas and useful river and rail routes into Europe. In time of war, this access was endangered, but neutrality allowed markets to be maintained and kept sea routes open, at least in theory. Trade concerns played a significant role in the formulation of foreign policy, which was made even more necessary as the Netherlands had substantial reciprocal trade relationships with both Britain and Germany, where its goods and freight were exchanged for German and British raw materials. The Netherlands could not give up one trading partner for another. This made neutrality, in the case of a war between Germany and Britain, a matter of economic prudence as well as military necessity.

Yet, over time, neutrality became more than a recognised key to independence and profitable trade. By the turn of the century, it was a *raison d'être* for the Dutch national character. Neutrality symbolised Dutch virtue in the popular mind. Its moral quality was closely linked to the ideology of the religious blocs in Dutch society and was tinged with pacifism.[30] Political-religious leaders, such as Abraham Kuyper, proclaimed that their nation fulfilled a missionary role in the world, that it was predestined to preserve international peace and the legal order by means of setting an ethical example.[31] This helped to turn neutrality into an inviolable principle, as much a 'sacred political dogma' as a religious one.[32] But, even the non-religious *zuilen* (literally 'pillars', social blocs) were attached to neutrality, as it was an important aspect of national identity. In some respects, neutrality existed as a unifying theme across the various social ranks, reflecting a commonly held nostalgic view of national history and furthering the country's status as 'a small nation with an impressive past'.[33] Neutrality was seen as the next logical step in a proud tradition of religious freedom and human rights, harking back to the Golden Age of Grotius in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a time when the Netherlands stood at the pinnacle of its economic, artistic, and intellectual prowess.

The remarkable absence of Dutch militaristic ambitions, of the type that held sway in Germany, France, and other European nations around 1900, was closely related to their conceptions of nationalism and neutrality. The Dutch perceived it as unnatural to place the army in a spot of primary importance, a place they reserved for trade, finance, transport, and industry.[34] Furthermore, a neutral state was by definition non-aggressive. As an instrument of aggression, therefore, the armed forces were little admired, despite the fact that Dutch history was sprinkled with great military victories that continued to be celebrated. The Netherlands undertook several long and aggressive military campaigns in the East Indies, especially in Aceh (1873-1900) but also in Bali (1906) and Celebes (1910).[35] Many did not view the Indonesian campaigns as expansionism, but rather as asserting control over territory that the country already 'owned'. They were domestic matters deemed of little concern to the outside world, and bearing no relationship to the Netherlands' neutrali-

ty policy or passivity on the international scene. Yet, there was a latent understanding that a nation desiring greatness, as the Netherlands had been great in the past, needed to use its military resources for this end. Neutrals, on the other hand, could not harbour such ambitions without seriously risking the credibility of their non-belligerent status.

Apart from the size of its empire, by the turn of the nineteenth century, the Netherlands' only claim to international significance was its neutrality. For the Dutch, involvement in the legalisation of neutrality carried with it cultural self-esteem. Neutrals did not resort to violence (except within their own colonial sphere), but rather to rights and obligations set down in international law. A people who could place themselves above power politics and military ambitions were morally superior: more learned, more cosmopolitan, and more unselfish, or so they thought.[36] By holding the Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 in The Hague, and building the Carnegie Peace Palace in the same city, the Dutch enhanced this self-portrait: the Netherlands was a nation unlike others; it had outgrown political and military ambitions and was concerned only with peaceful trade. Such perceptions of neutrality were entrenched in Dutch identity by 1914. Of course, the perceptions themselves did not greatly influence foreign policy choices made during or after the war, but they did legitimise non-involvement among the population. The chosen path was clearly to remain aloof from any war as long as Europe allowed.

The Cornerstone of Northwest Europe[37]

The Netherlands held a strong position in the balance of power in nineteenth-century Europe. In 1815, at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the great powers sanctioned the creation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, a territory that included Belgium and Luxembourg. The united Low Countries acted as a buffer zone between France, Great Britain, and Germany. Neutrality was attractive because siding with any of the large states would have upset the equilibrium. Even combined, Belgium and the Netherlands were not large enough to exert significant influence in international affairs; they were, in the words of one commentator, 'too large for a napkin but too small for a tablecloth'.[38] This would remain a major stumbling block to closer Dutch-Belgian relations after Belgium declared its independence in 1830. Once Belgium officially seceded in 1839, its geo-strategic importance was heightened, since it bordered both France and Germany and provided a territorial barrier between Britain and France. For almost entirely this reason alone, Europe's major powers (Britain, France, Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Russia) imposed a state of permanent neutrality on Belgium, guaranteeing that they would come to its rescue if it were attacked.[39] The Netherlands did not have its neutrality guaranteed, principally because it was not as pivotal to separating the west European nations. Yet the conditions that forced neutrality on Belgium made it equally attractive as a voluntary foreign policy for the Netherlands.

With the rise of Germany/Prussia as a major power in Europe and the creation of Bismarck's complicated system of alliances (1862-1890), the leanings of particu-

lar states, however small, became increasingly important. Countries like the Netherlands had the potential to upset the Bismarckian balance drastically and, as a result, small European states gained significance far beyond their size.[40] By remaining neutral, the Netherlands helped to maintain the status quo. To a certain degree, the Dutch were aware of their ability to tip the balance and believed that their neighbours would respect the nation's neutrality for the same reason. It reinforced the idea that neutrality was not only sacred to themselves but to other Europeans as well.[41] This belief was borne out by the Franco-Prussian War, when the French and Germans upheld the neutrality of the Netherlands and Belgium.

In the dozen or so years leading up to the outbreak of the Great War, two increasingly antagonistic camps replaced Bismarck's carefully constructed balance-of-power system. Germany and its ally Austria-Hungary found themselves surrounded by a loose alliance of Russia, France, and Great Britain. In the atmosphere of tension and rivalry that pervaded these years, the neutrality of certain states took on a different relevance. As the likelihood of conflict became more a question of 'when' than 'if', neutrals could not simply hope that their sovereignty would be recognised by the two powerful factions. The range of advantages and shortcomings of neutrality now came into sharp focus, affecting the options open to the major powers as well as the likelihood of neutral nations being forced into a war. It was no longer a question of neutrals helping to keep Europe at peace, but rather of avoiding becoming involved in war themselves. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the Netherlands, like many other small European states, embarked on improving its armed forces and defences from 1899 onwards.

Whether a small state entered the Great War was principally decided by the policies of the most powerful belligerents. Hence, Belgium was invaded by Germany in August 1914 because it provided the easiest route into France for the German armies. Neutral Italy and Romania decided to join the Allied war effort in May 1915 and August 1916 respectively because the potential gains, if the Allies were victorious, were too great to pass up. With similar justifications but from the other side, Bulgaria joined the Central Powers in September 1915.[42] The Netherlands did not follow suit. An important reason for Dutch neutrality during the war, and one often stressed by historians, was the reluctance of key belligerents, especially Great Britain and Germany, to force the Netherlands' hand or to invade. Germany's original Schlieffen Plan (1905) had provided plans for German armies to move across the Dutch province of Limburg then through Belgium to sweep around Paris and so defeat France. Its architect, Chief of the German General Staff, Field Marshal Count Alfred von Schlieffen, believed it provided the most direct and useful route to France, a goal worthy enough to justify the violation of the acknowledged neutrality of both Low Countries.

Nevertheless, Schlieffen's successor, Helmuth von Moltke, made a drastic change to the plan in 1908, avoiding Dutch territory entirely and squeezing his armies through the small section of the German-Belgian border instead. He had good reason for doing so. While crossing Limburg made sense in logistical terms, allowing the German armies to avoid the heavily defended fortifications at Liège (Luik) and

offering five more railway lines into Belgium,[43] it also meant that the Netherlands would be dragged into the war. The 200,000-man Dutch army – by no means a negligible number – would have to be defeated before troops could concentrate their attentions southwards towards France.[44] It might fatally delay the advance and undermine the ultimate purpose of the plan: to conquer France as quickly as possible so that Germany could then concentrate its forces on the eastern frontier against France's ally Russia. The extra time and resources freed up by avoiding the Netherlands were crucial. At the same time, in acknowledgement of Britain's interest in the mouths of the Schelde, a German invasion of the Netherlands through Limburg could precipitate an attack by Britain on the Schelde towards Antwerp, thereby throwing the rapid defeat of France further into disarray.[45]

A second pressing reason for keeping the neutral Netherlands out of any future war involved economics.[46] For Von Moltke, the potential strangulation of Germany's economy through a blockade by Britain's Royal Navy figured prominently in his thinking. Neutral countries could supply foodstuffs and other materials, offsetting the disadvantages of a blockade. The port of Rotterdam was already the second most valuable gateway for overseas goods imported by Germany.[47] As well, the sourcing of raw materials from the Dutch East Indies (especially quinine, rubber, tin, and petroleum)[48] could not be ignored. Dutch entry into the war would see this trade go entirely to the *Entente Cordiale*.[49] It was much better, therefore, to keep the Netherlands neutral so that it could remain the economic 'windpipe' through which Germany could 'breathe',[50] at least until Germany had defeated Russia.

When Germany invaded Belgium during the night of 3 August 1914, it had the economic value of Dutch neutrality very much in mind. The day before, the German government officially recognised the neutrality of the Netherlands, although it was quick to request that its Dutch counterpart give it benevolent (*wohlwollend*) treatment.[51] At least until late 1916, the impact of the Netherlands as a source of foodstuffs for Germany cannot be underestimated. The million tonnes received by Germany in 1915 and 1916 accounted for 50 per cent of Germany's agricultural imports.[52] German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg even asserted that his country could continue fighting on two fronts until the end of 1916 because of this trade.[53] There were other pressing reasons for supporting Dutch neutrality in the first few war years: the Netherlands provided flank cover against a possible amphibious assault by the Allies on Germany's western frontier[54] and granted credit for Germany's foreign purchases.

During 1917, the situation changed. The Allied blockade became more successful after the United States entered the war, and neutral countries relied almost exclusively on their domestic produce to feed themselves. This reduced the volume of goods available for trade with Germany, which decreased further after the Allies negotiated a series of agricultural agreements, forcing the Dutch to export half their surpluses across the Channel. Even smugglers had fewer goods to move across the eastern border. The attraction of Dutch neutrality, therefore, dimmed for Germany. In recognition, the German leadership had fewer qualms about demanding more comprehensive concessions from the Dutch and the threat of war increased consider-

Map 2: The Netherlands and the Schlieffen Plan, 1905 and 1908

ably. Although Germany verged on declaring war on several occasions after February 1917, it never did so, mainly because it had more urgent war aims. Admittedly, strong reasons for invading the Netherlands did exist – among which the use of the territory as an Allied spy base must not be underestimated – but they were definitely less important than the defeat of the Russians in the east and the rest of the Allies and associated powers in the west. For Germany at least, continued Dutch neutrality remained preferable to opening up another front.

For Great Britain (the other major potential threat to the Netherlands), there was one compelling reason why it would not violate its neutrality in 1914, however much it may have wanted to do so. It simply could not infringe the rights of a neutral when it had ostensibly entered the war in the name of protecting those of 'little Belgium'.[55] Hence, on 5 August, the British government announced it would respect Dutch neutrality as long as it received the same rights as the Central Powers.[56] In terms of blockading Germany, the irony of the situation was that it would have been

much better for Britain if the Netherlands had entered the war on either side. For the same reason that Germany valued Dutch neutrality – to circumvent a blockade – the Allies despised it. As a report of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) concluded in December 1912:

> In order to bring the greatest possible pressure to bear upon Germany, it is essential that the Netherlands... should either be entirely friendly to this country, in which case we should limit their overseas trade, or that they should be definitely hostile, in which case we should extend the blockade to their ports.[57]

Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, reinforced the strategic advantages of a belligerent Netherlands in September 1914:

> From a purely naval point of view, war with Holland [sic] would be better for us than neutrality. Their reinforcement of German naval forces would be puny, and the closing of the Rhine, which we could accomplish without the slightest additional effort, is almost vital to the efficiency of the naval blockade.[58]

It is little wonder then that Britain and its allies had few reservations about restricting Dutch shipping. Along with Germany's U-boat attacks on neutral ships, the Allied blockade of neutrals presented one of the most blatant contraventions of neutrality laws during the Great War.

In practical terms, however, even if it had wanted to seize Dutch territory, Great Britain had few realistic chances of doing so. Germany would not have allowed it, and it was highly unlikely that an amphibious assault by the Allies could succeed before the Kaiser's armies captured the Netherlands' heartland. Despite the CID's assertions in 1912, Britain did not wish to see Germany controlling the Netherlands. It would not only have opened up ports on the North Sea and Channel, from which the Germans could launch naval operations, it would also have provided airfields close enough to bomb the British Isles.[59] Likewise, enemy control over the mouths of the Rhine, Maas, and Schelde had to be avoided. Moreover, the potential long-term consequences of German dominance over the Netherlands frightened British policymakers:

> Practically [they] recognized that while Germany had a very great interest in keeping Holland [sic] neutral in an Anglo-German war, as this would assure her a flow of goods through the Dutch neutral ports in spite of a British blockade, the British had an almost equal interest in a neutral Holland, for the moment Holland ceased to be neutral she would be overrun by Germany and though Britain would then be able to block the traffic over Holland, the end of the war would probably find the Germans so strongly entrenched in that country that some sort of close, permanent relations between the two countries would have to be acquiesced in.[60]

In such a scenario, the only real benefit would have been the capture of resources in the Dutch East Indies, but this was definitely a minor victory if Germany already controlled northwest Europe.

If it was preferable to have the Dutch on the Allied side rather than neutral, it was certainly preferable to have them neutral than occupied by Germany. Neutrality at least allowed the Allies the use of the Netherlands as a base from which to obtain intelligence from Germany and occupied Belgium, and enabled Belgians to escape and join the Allied armies.[61] In fact, the Head of the British Imperial General Staff acknowledged that had it not been for its intelligence operations in the Netherlands, its entire secret service would have collapsed during the war.[62] As we shall see, Germany was also gravely concerned about Allied intelligence operations, so much so that in 1915, it went to the huge expense and effort to erect a lethal electric fence along 300 kilometres of the Belgian-Dutch land border.

Dutch neutrality remained an on-going problem for Britain during the war. While the Allies remained in a precarious military position, they could not afford to have the Netherlands join Germany. This meant that right up until September 1918, when the tide on the western front finally turned in favour of the Allies, they had to prevent the Dutch from participating in the war. It meant that while they pressured the Netherlands into all manner of economic concessions, when it came to the crunch, Dutch independence had to be accorded higher priority. As a result, through 1917 and 1918, the Allies had little choice but to let the Netherlands compromise its neutrality in favour of the Central Powers. With the increased pressures placed on the Dutch by the Germans, neutrality ceased being as attractive as it might have been for the Allies, yet they could not afford to violate it themselves. Thus, it was the balance of conflicting great power interests in the Netherlands that was chiefly responsible for keeping the country out of the war.[63]

Dutch Neutrality During the Great War

While the major belligerents had much to do with the continued non-participation of the Netherlands in the Great War, this would have been impossible had it not done everything in its power to make neutrality attractive to them. Because the neutrality stakes were so high, how ably the country exercised its obligations and agreements was central to its continued non-belligerency. As a result, the Dutch had to uphold the strictest standards of impartiality; they also did their utmost to abide as closely as possible by relevant international laws. Next to the United States, before it became a belligerent, the Netherlands was the most vocal neutral in its protests against neutrality violations.[64] But when protests and recourse to international law failed, only flexibility and compromise could take their place. Neutrality may have had idealistic connotations in the public mind, but its preservation had a clear pragmatic end: to stay out of the war at whatever cost.[65]

To this end, the Dutch placed a strong emphasis on humanitarian activities. They sent ambulances to the various war fronts in eastern and western Europe,[66] facilitated food shipments to occupied Belgium,[67] enabled the exchange of injured prisoners of war between Britain and Germany (at the expense of the neutral government), and offered to intern prisoners of war as well as enemy civilians within their own borders. They also tried to facilitate peace negotiations, albeit unsuccessfully,

again with the hope of being seen as indispensable. Likewise, Dutch diplomatic staff looked after the interests of citizens of various belligerent nations who resided in enemy territory: they represented Turkish, Austria-Hungarian and German civilians in the *Entente*-friendly states of China, Brazil, Greece, and Siam (now Thailand) and did the same for Allied expatriates in Germany, occupied Belgium, Bulgaria, and Turkey.[68]

Apart from humanitarian activities, everything was done within their own borders to dissuade would-be invaders. The mobilised army and navy manned the frontiers, patrolled territorial waters, and sought to increase the size and strength of their forces and defences. Military deterrence was a central component of neutrality: other states might think twice about invading if the costs involved were deemed too great. While the Netherlands could never compete on anything like equal terms with the armed might of Germany, Britain or France, it could, or so it hoped, increase its military strength sufficiently to be seen as a nuisance. The armed forces were equally important for the practical aspects of neutrality maintenance: by preventing border violations, whether they came in the form of foreign troops, smuggled goods, spies, or aeroplanes. These tasks were essential, firstly, because they signalled that the country had the right intentions and was prepared to do its utmost to protect itself, and, secondly, because they warranted that the belligerents had no legal reason to invade.

Naturally, both sides tried to gain the maximum advantage out of Dutch neutrality and endeavoured to minimise the benefits for their opponents. Initially, their demands were relatively easy to accommodate and the compromises made did not interfere too drastically with the strictures of international law nor with the well-being of the country. After the first year of conflict, as the costs of war increased, the number of casualties rose, and the stalemate on the western front deepened, the belligerents used the neutrals to claim advantage over their opponents in other ways. By late 1915, economic warfare among the belligerents intensified by means of blockades and the indiscriminate sinking of enemy merchant ships. Increasingly, neutral nations became the victims of these attacks and the Netherlands was no exception. Through 1916, economic restrictions imposed by Great Britain and Germany made the Netherlands' position increasingly difficult and upholding strict neutrality ultimately untenable. Finding compromises took far greater diplomatic skill than ever before and, once the United States entered the war in April 1917, it was nigh impossible to steer a middle course. During the last two years of the war, the Netherlands' situation became perilous. In attempting to stay out of the war at whatever cost, it lost much of its sovereign independence and its domestic economy suffered.

By 1917, many of the advantages of keeping the Netherlands neutral had been lost to the *Entente* and Central Powers. Furthermore, the deterrence value of the Netherlands' armed forces had decreased significantly. On all grounds – diplomatic, economic, and military – neutrality had been severely circumscribed. What kept the Netherlands out of the war at this point was not its strict adherence to law or its abidance by impartiality standards, both of which had to be renegotiated with the combatants. Nor was continued non-belligerency dependent on the same reasons that Great Britain and Germany had respected in August 1914. Instead, it would

seem that neither Britain and its allies nor Germany and its allies were willing to force the Netherlands into the war. They did not have the resources available to divert troops to another field of battle. Instead, the combatants forced as many concessions out of the Dutch who, in turn, tried to accommodate them wherever possible.

The following pages will take up the story of how the allure of neutrality, which gleamed so brightly for an entire century (1815-1914), could be dulled in a period of a little over four years. It does so by analysing the mechanics involved in staying neutral during a world war: What does a country have to do within its borders to uphold neutrality and keep invaders away? Specifically, the role played by the armed forces, the so-called 'police force' of neutrality, will be evaluated. Of all the resources and institutions at its disposal, the Dutch government relied on the military, especially the army, to protect the territorial integrity, sovereign existence, and security of the country. How successful it was in undertaking these tasks will be assessed, as will the difficulty of keeping hundreds of thousands of conscripted men mobilised for such a long time without ever entering into battle. Above all, what the next eleven chapters illustrate is how hazardous walking the tightrope between peace and war actually was, let alone juggling the various interests along the way.