SUMMARY

For league of nations and peace. The Netherlands and the quest for a peaceful world order, 1919-1946

In 1920 the Netherlands joined the League of Nations. On the one hand this seemed to be a rather obvious step to take. For small and defenceless countries like the Netherlands, the membership of an international organisation which aimed at creating a global system of collective security appeared to offer a great deal of protection. On the other hand membership of the League entailed some quite extraordinary obligations. For instance, Article 10 of the League of Nations Covenant stipulated that ‘(...) the Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve, as against external aggression, the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League.’ Articles 12, 13 and 15 of the Covenant obliged League members to submit their disputes either to arbitration or to enquiry by the League Council. According to Article 16 the members of the League were obliged to impose economic, financial or perhaps even military sanctions on states which had violated the Covenant.

For the Dutch the obligations which the Covenant imposed upon League members meant something quite revolutionary. After all, up until 1919 the predominant aim of Dutch foreign policy had always been to remain aloof from great power diplomacy and international conflicts. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the Dutch were confronted with an important question: Would it be possible for them to combine their traditional foreign policy of relative aloofness and neutrality with the obligations the Covenant imposed upon League members?

After the Great War the Netherlands and the other former neutral countries were invited by the Allied and Associated Powers to join the League of Nations, the international organisation which had been established at the Paris Peace Conference. In the Netherlands many observers were highly critical of the League. Some resented the fact that the Covenant constituted an integral part of the Peace Treaties, since they believed that the Treaties were unjust and would spell disaster for the economic and political future of Europe in general and Germany – the main trading partner of the Netherlands – in particular. Others felt that the League was a political coalition dominated by France and her allies. This particular group of critics believed that the French wanted to abuse the League to perpetuate their military, political and economic predominance in Europe.

The Dutch Foreign Minister, H.A. van Karnebeek, shared many of the objections
raised by the critics of the Covenant. He also acknowledged that League membership implied that the Dutch would have to give up their traditional neutrality. However, Van Karnebeek believed there was no judicial obligation to take part in a concerted military action against aggressor states. This meant that Dutch boys would never have to risk their lives on the plains of Siberia or in the mountains of Bosnia. Van Karnebeek acknowledged that the Covenant as drafted in Paris did not live up to the views that many in the Netherlands had held on the subject of international organisation. This, however, would not necessarily have to lead to the conclusion that the Dutch should reject League membership. According to Van Karnebeek it would be highly detrimental to the national interests of the Dutch if they were to become international outsiders, isolated from the rest of the world community. Van Karnebeek also argued that League membership was fully consistent with the international reputation of the Netherlands, which was, after all, the country of Grotius, the Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, and the Peace Palace in The Hague. Van Karnebeek stated that in future times the League might develop into a genuine international order of law. He felt that the Dutch should join the League and help stimulate this development. Despite their lack of enthusiasm, most Members of Parliament were well aware of the fact that the Netherlands could not afford to remain outside the League. Consequently, both Houses of Parliament passed the bill that provided for League membership with landslide majorities.

In the early 1920s two schools of thought with respect to the role which the Dutch should have to play in the League started to emerge. Some, like Cornelis van Vollenhoven, a professor of international law at the University of Leyden, believed the Netherlands should play an active part in transforming the League into a real international order of law. Van Vollenhoven also urged for the creation of an international police force. His main opponent was A.A.H. Struycken, a professor of law at the University of Amsterdam. The views Struycken held on international relations in general and Dutch influence in the world in particular were much more realistic than those of Van Vollenhoven. Struycken felt that the Netherlands should conduct a very cautious League of Nations policy. It was imperative for the Dutch to cling to their national sovereignty. According to Struycken, this necessarily implied that only the Dutch government could decide whether the Netherlands would take part in a concerted military action against an aggressor. Struycken therefore rejected Van Vollenhoven’s high-flown idealism.

During the early 1920s Dutch League of Nations policy was characterised by caution rather than idealism. Struycken became personal counsel to Van Karnebeek, and together they conceived and conducted Dutch foreign policy in a highly skilful and efficient way. The both of them vehemently rejected proposals which intended to bolster Article 16 of the Covenant by turning the moral obligation to participate in military sanctions into a judicial one. The Treaty of Mutual Assistance of 1923, for instance, was regarded by Van Karnebeek and Struycken as a French scheme to embroil countries like the Netherlands and Britain in an anti-
German alliance. The Geneva Protocol of 1924 was also rejected by Van Karnebeek. He objected to the fact that the Protocol, not unlike the Treaty of Mutual Assistance, invested the Council with the authority to decide whether sanctions would be imposed on aggressor states. Van Karnebeek also feared that incorporation of the Geneva Protocol into the League framework would lead to the militarisation of the League.

Due to the skilful diplomacy of Struycken and Van Karnebeek the Dutch managed to preserve most of their freedom of action, despite their League membership. Van Karnebeek regarded the League more or less as an international talking shop where representatives of the various nations could gather regularly and on an equal footing. The Dutch Foreign Minister preferred the preventive powers that the League possessed to the repressive clauses of the Covenant. He wanted to remain faithful to the traditional Dutch foreign policy, which was based on such principles as 'no international entanglements' and 'no open ended commitments'. However, Van Karnebeek realised that this 'traditional' foreign policy had to be adjusted to the international circumstances, which had changed drastically. He therefore referred to Dutch foreign policy as a 'policy of independence', rather than a 'policy of neutrality'.

Struycken died in 1923 and Van Karnebeek resigned as Foreign Minister in 1927. Initially, these events did not lead to a drastic change in Dutch policy towards the League. The new Foreign Minister, Frans Beelaerts van Blokland, followed in the footsteps of his predecessor and also steered a conservative course. During the 1927 Assembly, however, Beelaerts lodged a rather controversial resolution. In his resolution Beelaerts stated it was desirable to consider whether the time had not yet come to resume the study of the principles on which the Geneva Protocol of 1924 had been based. The British Foreign Minister, Sir Austen Chamberlain, who headed the British delegation to the 1927 Assembly, was vehemently opposed to this 'absurd and mischievous' proposal, and as a result Beelaerts was forced to modify it.

In the 1930s Japan turned out to be the first country to defy the new international morality that appeared to have emerged since the end of the Great War. In September 1931 Japanese troops invaded Manchuria, a semi-independent province of China. The Chinese brought the dispute before the Council under Article 11 of the Covenant, which did not necessarily imply the imposition of sanctions. This gave the Dutch the opportunity to distance themselves from the Sino-Japanese conflict. Christopher Thorne, the author of the standard work on the Manchurian question, was not entirely mistaken when he referred to Dutch policy as amounting to little more than 'resolute, cryptic and anxious passivity'. The Netherlands refused to take sides in the Sino-Japanese dispute. After all, the Dutch possessed a large colonial empire in the Far East. The Dutch felt that the outbreak of a general war in this region would be disastrous; therefore, the League should try to settle the dispute in a peaceful manner. The Dutch never publicly condemned the Japanese. Neither
did they follow the example set by the Americans, who in January 1932 dispatched a note to Tokyo expressing the American government's refusal to recognise any agreement that was brought about by means contrary to the Pact of Paris of 1928. A few Dutch officials even showed some understanding for the Japanese ('they have no right but they are right'): Japan, after all, had considerable interests in Manchuria. Furthermore, the Chinese government was generally considered as being too weak to exercise authority over backwaters such as Manchuria. An official in the Dutch Foreign Ministry was even more outspoken in his judgement; he believed that Manchuria could serve as a 'débouché' for Japanese energy, which would prevent the Japanese from directing their attention towards the Dutch East Indies.

Beelaerts believed that moral standards which might be applicable in Europe did not necessarily possess much validity in the Far East. He also felt that the Dutch were able to judge the situation in this region with more equanimity than representatives of those countries which were totally unfamiliar with Asian affairs. Therefore, the Dutch were reluctant to associate with countries like Spain and Czechoslovakia, which urged the League to issue a strong condemnation of the Japanese action. Beelaerts, however, also realised it was essential for the prestige of the League that the sanctity of its Covenant would remain intact. This meant that the Dutch had to steer a middle course between upholding the Covenant and protecting their national interests. On the one hand Beelaerts argued that the League members should refrain from recognising the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo. On the other hand he believed Japan and China should both be persuaded to reach a peaceful settlement, which should be concluded under the auspices of the League and on the basis of the report produced by the Lytton Commission. According to the Dutch government it was necessary to reconstruct China so as to reintegrate this country into the international order. Japan should be given a considerable role in this reconstruction process. The conclusions of the Lytton Commission, however, turned out to be totally unacceptable to the Japanese. They decided to walk out of the League, hence dealing the system of collective security with its first serious blow.

The failure of the League to prevent the violation of the territorial integrity of one of its members was a disappointment to many in the Netherlands. The collapse of the Disarmament Conference of 1932-1934, however, turned out to have an even more profound impact. The Dutch generally liked to perceive their country as a peaceful nation which already had disarmed considerably. The Dutch government rejected the idea of total unilateral disarmament. It did feel, however, that the former Allies, and France in particular, should live up to the promises they had made at the Peace Conference and support the idea of a general and universal reduction of armaments. The French, however, refused to disarm unless the League provided them with at least some guarantees for their national safety. They suggested either a re-enforcement of Article 16 or the creation of an international police force. The Germans on their part demanded equality of treatment with the former Allies.
Although the Netherlands did not want to take sides in the conflict between France and Germany, the opinions of the Dutch on disarmament often converged with those of the Germans. For instance, Beelaerts once stated that a great power like Germany could not be kept in a state of submission forever. Neither did the Dutch like ideas launched by France to re-enforce the sanctions provisions of the League Covenant, since such re-enforcement would obviously interfere with the Dutch policy of 'no open-ended commitments'.

The first few months of the Disarmament Conference yielded no results whatsoever. Eventually, the Dutch came to support the idea that the great powers should try to reach a common agreement on matters concerning disarmament and security; the result of their deliberations should be submitted to the judgement of the other countries represented at the Disarmament Conference. The Dutch themselves wanted to remain aloof. They were not too keen on collaborating with other small countries in presenting disarmament schemes to the Conference. After all, the Netherlands was a colonial power whose interests did not always coincided with those of countries like Norway, Belgium, and Switzerland. The Dutch government also made it clear that, if Britain would refuse to take part in a general European treaty of mutual assistance, the Dutch would refuse as well. The Disarmament Conference failed, largely because the differences between France on the one hand and Germany on the other were irreconcilable. After Adolf Hitler seized power in Germany, the rift between the great powers even widened; eventually, Germany walked out of both the Conference and the League. The small countries appeared to have insufficient influence, moral or otherwise, to bridge the gap between the great powers.

In April 1933 Beelaerts was succeeded as Foreign Minister by A.C.D. de Graeff. The new Foreign Minister seemed to hold a more idealistic view on international relations than his immediate predecessors. De Graeff repeatedly made it clear in public that he regarded himself a staunch and enthusiastic supporter of the League and of the concept of collective security. De Graeff’s enthusiasm for the League became apparent in December 1934, when the British government asked its Dutch counterpart to participate in the international police force intended to supervise the plebiscite in the Saar of January 1935. After it became clear that Britain would decline to contribute troops to this ‘Saarforce’ unless one or two neutral countries would be willing to participate as well, the Dutch government decided to send a contingent to the Saar. De Graeff felt that Dutch participation was consistent with the obligations as stated in the Covenant. He also believed it would suit the interests of the Dutch if the Saar plebiscite would go off smoothly; this, he argued, would preserve order in Western Europe as well as bolster the system of collective security. Consequently, the Dutch government agreed to send 250 marines to the Saar to participate in what one might call an international peace-keeping force. The Saar plebiscite turned out a huge success for Hitler; a landslide majority of the Saarlanders wanted their country to become part of the Reich again. However,
most Dutch observers hailed the result of the plebiscite as a first step towards the normalisation of international relations in Europe.

Dutch loyalty to the League was seriously strained as a result of the Ethiopian crisis of 1935-1936. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia shook the Dutch profoundly. The Netherlands itself was a small and vulnerable country, which possessed a large colonial empire in the Far East. Most of the Dutch believed that if Italy would be allowed to annex Ethiopia, this would set a precedent; the Japanese might be tempted to think that they could seize the Dutch East Indies and get away with it. Some, including the Dutch Labour party, argued that if the League would manage to nip Italian aggression in the bud, such an event would serve as a warning to the Third Reich. The Dutch government decided to take part in the economic sanctions which were imposed upon Italy. The Dutch believed that Britain was determined to stop Italian aggression, if necessary by force, and were prepared to follow the British lead. The Hoare-Laval Plan of December 1935, however, would shatter many of their illusions. De Graeff felt that the authority of the League would suffer considerably if the organisation were to accept the idea of rewarding the Italians for their aggression by allowing them to seize parts of Ethiopia.

Not only the Netherlands, but also some of the other small nations were distressed by the policies pursued by both France and Britain. During the spring of 1936, representatives of the former European neutrals (i.e. the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Spain and Switzerland) and Finland would gather regularly to discuss their attitude towards League matters in general and the Italo-Ethiopian conflict in particular. Initially, De Graeff took a much more radical stand than his colleagues. During one of the meetings with his colleagues, De Graeff insisted that Italy be expelled from the League. He also claimed that the Dutch would feel obliged to provide the British with military assistance if the British fleet in the Mediterranean were to be attacked by the Italians. De Graeff, however, had already been severely criticised by some Dutch Members of Parliament for his 'too active' League policy. He had even been accused of abandoning the 'policy of independence' and following a 'pro-Entente' course instead. As a matter of fact, De Graeff was quickly losing ground, not only within the Dutch government, but also within the Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, the other small powers did not only want to end the sanctions against the Italians – who had annexed Ethiopia anyhow – but were also bent on abandoning the sanctions system altogether. De Graeff finally gave in; on 1 July 1936, during a special session of the League Assembly summoned to end the sanctions against Italy, the former European neutrals and Finland declared they would henceforth regard the sanctions provisions of Article 16 as optional rather than mandatory. This was a watershed in the history of Dutch foreign policy, albeit a moderate one, given the fact that the Dutch had always felt somewhat uncomfortable about the sanctions provisions.

In an Assembly speech De Graeff declared that the system of collective security had proved to be a failure; rather than protecting the small powers it had become
a threat to their interests. The League had to be reformed to allow for the entry of those who had remained outside the League (i.e. the United States) and those who had left the organisation. According to De Graeff, this was the only way to transform the League into a truly universal collective security organisation; it was a matter of ‘replier pour mieux sauter’.

The Ethiopian conflict turned out to be the ‘coup de grâce’ for collective security. Although the Dutch did not leave the League, the organisation no longer played an important part in Dutch foreign policy. In the mid 1930s the Dutch slowly started to realise that Germany had become a potential menace to their security. However, the Dutch government also had to take the Japanese threat in the Far East into account. Hendrikus Colijn, the Dutch Prime Minister, believed the Japanese were bound to attack the Dutch East Indies, whereas Germany could be reintegrated into the European order if her grievances against the ‘unjust’ Versailles Treaty would be removed. Therefore, Colijn – and, for that matter, most Dutch observers – agreed with British attempts to reach a ‘general settlement’ with Germany.

The Dutch government did not only share the desire of the British to reach a settlement with Germany; it also supported Neville Chamberlain’s attempts to strike a deal with Italy. In the fall of 1937, the Dutch Foreign Minister of the day, J.A.N. Patijn, suggested to some other small countries that they should try to persuade Britain and France to recognise the Italian king as Emperor of Ethiopia. Patijn’s proposal was meant to remain a secret, but it was somehow leaked to the press. A Dutch magazine spilled the beans, generating a host of indignant reactions. Patijn defended his proposal by claiming that an improvement of Anglo-Italian relations would serve the interests of the Netherlands. Both Patijn and Colijn believed that, if Britain and Italy would restore their former entente, Germany would be forced to steer a less aggressive course.

In the meantime, the Dutch slowly distanced themselves from the League. The Dutch government acknowledged that the League had failed to create an efficient system of collective security. In the summer of 1938, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Scandinavian countries issued the so-called Declaration of Copenhagen, in which they again stated that they regarded the sanctions provisions of Article 16 as optional. Dutch foreign policy was based on the assumption that the Netherlands enjoyed some kind of a ‘informal alliance’ with Britain. In the event of an European war the Dutch would try to remain neutral as long as possible. If the Germans would invade, the Dutch government expected that the Netherlands could rely on British military assistance. The League of Nations did not play any part whatsoever in this scheme. However, the Dutch government believed that the League should be maintained as a functional organisation until relations in Europe were pacified.

After the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939, the Dutch government declared that the Netherlands would remain neutral. Many in the Netherlands resented remarks made by Winston Churchill, the British First Lord of the
Admiralty, that by not joining the Allies the small European nations were forsaking their obligations as members of the League. Some Members of Parliament even claimed that not only Italy, Japan and Germany, but also Britain and France were to blame for the collapse of the League.

In May 1940 Germany invaded the Netherlands; the Dutch government fled to London. The Dutch, however, never gave up their League membership. The Netherlands belonged to those countries who sent a delegation to the ‘death session’ of the League, which was held at the Palais des Nations in April 1946.