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# Making Sense of the War (The Netherlands)

By Marjet Brolsma

**This article deals with the collective narratives Dutch intellectuals drew upon to make sense of the Great War as well as to explain the role and identity of the Netherlands as a neutral nation. These different narratives, which changed over time, co-existed and partially conflicted with one another. But mainly, they need to be understood in an international context, as their construction was, to a large degree, in response to international debates and foreign cultural propaganda activities, as well as to the changing image of Dutch neutrality in the belligerent states.**

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## Introduction

The First World War was the first serious test of Dutch neutrality since 1870-71. Although the Netherlands remained neutral, the war significantly affected the country in various ways and warfare was fearfully close to home - the heavy gunfire in Flanders was heard in the southern provinces as far as the Dutch seat of government, The Hague. Not only was the Dutch army permanently

mobilized until the end of the war and Dutch overseas trade, agriculture, industry, and fishing severely hampered by the war at sea, the country was also confronted with the influx of Belgian refugees; with the responsibility to intern foreign soldiers; with food and fuel rationing and scarcity in the last years of the war; and with the constant fear of being dragged into combat after all. Not surprisingly, the First World War was prevalent in Dutch public debate. From 1914 to 1918, journalists, intellectuals, artists and academics discussed the origins and nature of the conflict, the appropriate and possible reactions of the Dutch state, as well as the identity of the Netherlands as a neutral nation and its present and future role in the international political arena.

In her dissertation on the Dutch public debate on the war, Ismee Tames has shown that after August 1914 a specific form of cultural mobilization took place in the Netherlands. Obviously, with regard to the scale, intensity, character and goals, this process was very different from the cultural mobilization manifest in the belligerent states. Unlike in Germany, France or Britain, the cultural mobilization in the Netherlands aimed at national survival through generating broad support for neutrality, instead of mobilizing the people to wage war. Moreover, in the Dutch case, cultural mobilization was exclusively a bottom-up process, instigated by opinion-makers and other participants in public debate, rather than by the Dutch state or official propaganda organizations.[1]

Although neutrality served a very pragmatic purpose, namely staying out of the war, it was often legitimized by reference to high ideals, and firmly anchored in essentialist perceptions of Dutch national identity. In the Netherlands, as in other neutral states, there were various co-existing interpretations of what it meant to be a neutral during the years 1914-1918.[2] This regional article explores the five most important intellectual collective narratives aimed at making sense of the war and explaining the role of the Netherlands as a neutral nation. These narratives, which changed over time, co-existed and partially conflicted with each other. It will become clear that they were often informed by pre-war conceptions of neutrality and national identity and in some cases persisted in the interwar period.

## Neutral Judges and Defenders of Objectivity and Reason

The outbreak of the First World War deeply shocked the vast majority of Dutch intellectuals. A sense of relief at being spared involvement in combat, a broad level of support for the neutrality politics of the government, and a heightened sense of national unity went hand in hand with widespread anxiety about the future. Particularly alarming, in the eyes of many Dutch opinion-makers, was Germany's violation of Belgium's neutrality, as it made them realize their country could have met the same fate. In articles, brochures and pamphlets, they denounced the atrocities committed by the German army in Belgium, such as the destruction of Louvain. They voiced their concern both about the Belgian refugees and about the eminent German scholars and novelists who were carried away by nationalist delusions, and justified the invasion of Belgium as part of a fight for German *Kultur*. As a way of channelling this sense of fear and indignation and, simultaneously, of reinforcing Dutch neutrality and claiming international significance, they developed a narrative of the neutral

Netherlands as Europe's last bulwark of international law, reason and objectivity.[3] This self-definition tapped into pre-war conceptions of neutrality and aversion to violence as "typically Dutch" virtues, that had apparently been enhanced by the Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 in The Hague. The military campaigns in Aceh (1873-1900), Bali (1906) and Celebes (1910) did not detract from this sense of moral superiority and were considered to be a "domestic matter".[4]

The self-image of the Dutch as impartial defenders of law, justice and rationality was articulated, for instance, by the well-known poet and essayist Albert Verwey (1865-1937), who, in a poem of 1915, put forward an image of his countrymen as a nation "above the nations".[5] Verwey distanced himself from what he saw as the nationalist intoxication of the belligerents – in particular of his good friend, the German poet Stefan George (1868-1933) – and argued that neutrals had to take up their role as "the world's conscience". In his view, it was the neutrals' task to hold a mirror to the warring states, not least by safeguarding the principles of international law.[6] The narrative of the neutral Netherlands as stronghold of justice and reason was also at the root of renewed interest in the idea that the "unselfish" Dutch could play a leading role in establishing an international police force – a measure advocated, for example, by the legal scholar Cornelis van Vollenhoven (1874-1933) – and informed Dutch humanitarian initiatives, such as the provision of medical care at the various war fronts, assistance in the exchange of injured prisoners of war and facilitation of food aid shipments to occupied Belgium.[7] Another illustrative example of the Dutch self-definition as a calm and clear-eyed neutral judge was the open letter to Germany's intellectuals, published in September 1914 in the liberal weekly *De Amsterdammer* and reprinted in several German newspapers, where it sparked a fierce debate. The anonymous author of this letter not only castigated "our German friends" for invading neutral Belgium and mistaking militarism for *Kultur*, but also extolled Dutch objectivity and defence of international law. The tone was set by the first sentence, a quotation from the German Romantic Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805): "But the most terrible of terrors / Is man himself in his wild wrath"[8] (which in its original context had been intended as a denunciation of French Jacobin revolutionary violence).

While the German point of view in the early stages of the war generally attracted criticism among Dutch intellectuals, British accounts of the conflict, which appeared to be more factual, met with a more positive response. As a matter of fact, the British discourse about the war bore a striking resemblance to the narrative of the Dutch as neutral, objective judges. The British too, claimed to defend law, justice and liberal values, such as rationality and civilization. Indeed, they presented them as the very reasons the country was at war. As a consequence, the Dutch public debate was highly susceptible to the influence of British propaganda in the early stages of the war. For instance, Dutch opinion-makers imported frequently used concepts from the British debate, such as "Prussian militarism". They also failed to recognize the secret involvement of the British propaganda services in pro-Allied pamphlets drawn up by Dutch authors, whereas pro-German publications were regularly, and sometimes undeservedly, considered to be German propaganda. However, the British appropriation of the ideals of law, reason and objectivity, meant that their advocation by Dutch

intellectuals soon became problematic. Defining the Dutch national identity in this manner, could easily be explained as sharing sides with the Entente. The British violations of international law at sea, further undermined the credibility of these concepts, and increasingly encouraged Dutch intellectuals to search for alternative and more plausible narratives to make sense of the war.[9]

## Patriots and Peace Mediators

From the end of 1915 and throughout 1916 national independence was at the heart of public debate. Since the outbreak of the war, opinion-makers had repeatedly emphasized Dutch national singularity and sovereignty.[10] However, these qualities gained a new urgency as the Netherlands was confronted with the intensified war at sea and the loss of merchant ships, with economic restrictions imposed by both Germany and Britain and with a growing sense of fear and insecurity about German plans to establish a *Mitteleuropaïsche Bund*. Although abstention from combat remained unquestioned, a polarized debate developed on how – and at what price – neutrality could be reconciled with the safeguarding of national independence. This new narrative, that stressed the importance of protecting Dutch sovereignty, also instigated the rise of an anti-German nationalism among a part of Dutch intelligentsia.[11] The leading spokesman of this movement was the professor of law and chief editor of *De Amsterdammer*, Joost Adriaan van Hamel (1880-1964). In 1916, Van Hamel was among the founders of the "*Vaderlandsche Club*" ("Patriotic Club"), an organization aimed at raising Dutch national self-awareness and vigilance vis-á-vis German propaganda initiatives aimed at leading the Dutch to believe that the national interests of Germany and The Netherlands coincided.[12] Exemplary, for this increased anti-German patriotism, is the unexpected success of "*Nederland-Frankrijk*" ("The Netherlands-France"), an organization that was established in 1916 to enhance Franco-Dutch cultural relations. Much to the surprise of French propaganda officials, who secretly supported this initiative, "*Nederland-Frankrijk*" attracted a relatively large number of writers and artists, whereas they had expected the Dutch to be essentially pro-German, due to the economic, linguistic and alleged ethnic affiliations between the two countries. As Tessa Lobbes has pointed out in her research on cultural propaganda in the Netherlands, it was the French cause that resonated most with the Dutch intelligentsia during the Great War. France was considered far less threatening than Germany and Britain, whose reputation as the Great War progressed was compromised by the war at sea, the increased economic restrictions and memories of the Boer War.[13] By the end of 1916 Dutch audiences grew wary of the polarization in public debate and began to consider Van Hamel's anti-German views too extreme. This aversion was partly triggered by the fiercely anti-German and pro-Allied daily *De Telegraaf*, the largest Dutch newspaper and the only one that openly took sides. As *De Telegraaf* was regarded as a sensational, yellow press newspaper, a large part of the intellectual elite increasingly associated an anti-German stance with being unsubtle and short-sighted, or, in other words, with a problematic point of view.[14]

The narrative of national independence and vigilance gradually gave way, then, to a self-perception of the Dutch as peace mediators. This third narrative already had become popular during the course of

1915. It tapped into the pre-war self-definition of the Dutch as a peace-loving and morally superior nation and was reactivated by the political efforts made during the war to reconcile the opposing Calvinist, Roman Catholic, social democratic and liberal segments of Dutch society – a process that eventually would result in the so-called "pillarization", the social and political segregation of society into three or four "pillars". Central to this narrative of the Dutch as "harbingers of peace" was the conviction that the inhabitants of the Netherlands had a special talent for, and long tradition of, tolerance and pluralism. In the popular discourse, the idea gained ground that the Dutch were endowed with the special mission to reconcile Europe's warring states because they had been able to bring about consensus and concordance at home, despite deep religious and social economic cleavages. Many intellectuals believed that the Dutch were even more fit for this self-appointed mediating task, because they had a special relationship with Europe's major powers and shared cultural characteristics with the Germans, French and English. This narrative contributed to the appeal of the relatively large, but very heterogeneous, pacifist movement in the Netherlands and opened the way to a more positive attitude towards Germany and to re-establishing contacts with German scholars and intellectuals.[15] It inspired, for instance, the writer Nico van Suchtelen (1878-1949) to promote a European federation, in which Europe's states would cooperate closely without giving up their national identity and autonomy.[16]

The narrative of the Dutch as international mediators persisted well into the interwar years. It was advocated by, among others, the historian Johan Huizinga (1872-1945), who in a lecture in Berlin elaborated on "Die Mittlerstellung der Niederlande zwischen West- und Mitteleuropa" ("The Netherlands as intermediary between Western and Central Europa", 1933), as well as by the members of the "Herstel-Europa-Comité" (Restore Europe Committee, 1923) – including the educationalist Philip Kohnstamm (1875-1951) – who strove to find a solution for the Ruhr Crisis and for the harsh reparation payments imposed upon Germany by the Versailles Treaty.[17] Moreover, it can be argued that the emphasis on pluralism and message of "unity through diversity" on both a national and an international scale partly explains the relatively detached Dutch response to the rise of Nazism in Germany in the 1930s.[18]

## "Selfish" and "Powerless" Neutrality versus Redemption by War

Although the idea that the Netherlands was destined to foster peace and international rapprochement continued after 1918, the narrative of the Dutch as superior neutral arbiters of law and justice had lost much of its credibility by the end of the war. In the last two years of the conflict the Netherlands was increasingly forced to compromise its neutrality. In order to stay out of the war, the country had to sacrifice much of its sovereignty and to accept economic hardship. This caused a growing feeling of powerlessness and discontent with the Dutch identity as a neutral nation, that was further exacerbated by the loss of the most powerful "neutral ally", the USA, who entered the war in 1917. In the last stages of the war, Dutch neutrality had lost much of its initial appeal, not only to the Dutch themselves, but also in the eyes of the warring nations. As the costs of war and the number of

casualties increased, unselfishness and the willingness to make sacrifices became central to the war propaganda of the belligerents. Neutrals were increasingly regarded by them as non-belligerents, or even as war-profiteers, who were devoid of suffering, sacrifice, morality and a true sense of solidarity. This changing hetero-image of the Netherlands as a neutral nation was internalized in the Dutch self-image and contributed to the narrative of a "selfish", "passive", "inglorious", "powerless" and "outdated" neutrality.[19] This fourth narrative fostered, for instance, the widely shared contempt in Dutch public debate of "OW'ers" or "*oorlogswinstmakers*" ("war profiteers"), who, benefiting from the prevailing scarcity, had quickly amassed a fortune through smuggling or trade.[20] This narrative went hand in hand with a stronger focus on domestic issues, and frustration about the imposed role of the Netherlands as a passive observer who had no other option than to comply with the whims of the great powers.[21]

Some Dutch artists and novelists combined the notion of a "feeble", "egotistical" and "unheroic" neutrality with the belief that the war could lead to redemption and a clear preference for one of the warring parties. Like most of the artists, scholars and writers in the belligerent states, these Dutch intellectuals interpreted the First World War as a cultural conflict which held out the prospect of renewal. In their view, neutrality was an anachronistic obstacle that prevented the Dutch from benefitting from the regenerative possibilities of the war and to enter the envisaged "new era". They believed that European culture was at stake in the war, and that its outcome, therefore, concerned both the warring and the neutral states. Among them were, for instance, the composer Alphons Diepenbrock (1862-1921), the journalist Pieter van der Meer de Walcheren (1880-1970) and the feminist Cécile van Beek en Donk (1866-1944), who already in 1914 were overwhelmed with enthusiasm for the war, and all came to support the French cause.[22] Although an interest in modern weapons and violence was commonly shared in Dutch society, this war fever was not widespread and remained the preserve of a small part of the intellectual elite. According to historian Conny Kristel, Dutch curiosity about modern industrial warfare was regularly accompanied by a strong aversion to actual bloodshed, and should be understood as an attempt to grasp – and somehow partake in, albeit from a safe distance – the events that were apparently changing the face of the world.[23] The British propaganda film *The Battle of the Somme*, that was screened in cinemas in the four major cities of the Netherlands in the autumn of 1916, for example, met with both fascination and abhorrence, and was first and foremost interpreted by the Dutch audience as a plea for pacifism.[24]

After the Armistice, the narrative of a selfish and powerless neutrality persisted. Looking back at "the Dutch war mind" in 1920, the reporter Cornelis Karel Elout (1870-1947) concluded that, although the Great War had not inflicted much material damage, it had caused an unparalleled level of "moral disruption" in the Netherlands. This moral decay, exemplified in particular by the Dutch war profiteers, was triggered because the country had missed the "war's incitement to national unity" which, in Elout's view, had manifested itself vigorously in the belligerent states.[25] Through its membership of the League of Nations in 1920, the Netherlands became more involved in international political affairs. Against this backdrop, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Herman van

Karnebeek (1874-1942), suggested in 1923 that the term “policy of neutrality” should be replaced by the term “policy of independence”. While neutrality was associated with a “passive attitude”, Van Karnebeek argued, independence allowed more room for an “active element”, which Europe’s present-day political circumstances seemed to demand.[26]

## The Great War as the Tragic Result of Europe’s Cultural Crisis

While war enthusiasm found resonance only among a select group of avant-garde artists and writers, the assumption that the First World War was the tragic result of the crisis of modernity for which the whole of Europe, including neutral states such as the Netherlands, could be held accountable was shared in much wider circles, and was, for instance, a recurring theme in Calvinist sermons.[27] This fifth narrative, that had gained ground since 1914 and peaked in the immediate aftermath of the war, was grounded in the belief that the prevailing rationalism and materialism of modern capitalist society had paved the way for the uncontrolled national egoism that had plunged Europe into the trenches. It entailed the idea that the crisis of civilization was a pan-European problem whose roots – as well as consequences – were manifest throughout Europe; and was often accompanied by the optimistic expectation that the misery of war would eventually lead to a cultural and moral regeneration.[28]

In the eyes of the majority of Dutch intellectuals, religion was the preferred remedy to Europe’s cultural crisis. As a consequence, this narrative facilitated more orthodox interpretations of Christianity, and contributed for instance to the popularity of Swiss theologian Karl Barth’s *Römerbrief* (1919), which emphasized the chasm between God and man – among Protestant students in the 1920s.[29] However, the need for a cultural regeneration was most strongly propagated by left-leaning, humanist intellectuals – including religious socialists, religious anarchists, Hegelians, adherents of *Lebensphilosophie* and admirers of the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) – who felt the need to revise “conventional” Christianity. All aimed for a more humane, peaceful world and a rejuvenation of European culture through a spiritual revolution.[30] Among them were for instance the leading art critic Dirk Coster (1887-1956) and the “Red” minister Willem Banning (1888-1971). While Coster embraced literature, and in particular the works of Dostoevsky, as an important gateway to the salutary “life force” that could save Europe from cultural decay, Banning advocated a synthesis of religion and socialism as the only solution to the spiritual crisis that in his view had culminated in the collective violence of the Great War. The urge for a cultural renewal and a European reconciliation also inspired the founders of the International School of Philosophy in Amersfoort, who believed that philosophy was the perfect antidote to the “brutal egoism” that had surfaced in 1914. They envisaged their school, that was established in 1916, as an international meeting place for European intellectuals to exchange thoughts and as a “centre of spiritual deepening” that, by raising philosophical awareness, could enhance a sense of human solidarity during the “horrible times” of the First World War.[31]

## Conclusion

Recent studies focusing on cultural aspects of the history of the Netherlands during the First World War have queried the tenacious perception in historiography that the Netherlands were culturally and mentally isolated from the rest of Europe, emphasizing instead the transnational connections and foreign influences during 1914-1918.[32] I hope to have shown in this article that the various narratives about the Netherlands and the Great War should also be understood in an international context, because they were to a large extent constructed in response to international debates and foreign cultural propaganda activities, as well as to the changing hetero-image of Dutch neutrality in the belligerent states. It is remarkable that in the last two years of the war the self-image of the Dutch as neutral judges gave way to the negative notion of a “selfish” and “powerless” neutrality that co-existed with the narratives of the Dutch as mediators and of the Great War as the tragic result of Europe’s cultural crisis, whereas in Sweden the narrative of a beneficial and moral superior neutrality came to the fore in the last stages of the war and persisted well into the interwar years.[33] In November 1918, the Dutch were grateful they had stayed out of the war, but the price they had paid to remain neutral was high, causing them to rethink their identity as a neutral nation and to search for alternative narratives to make sense of the war.

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Section Editors: Samuël Kruizinga; Wim Klinkert

### Notes

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8. ↑ “Jedoch der schrecklichste der Schrecken, das ist der Mensch in seinem Wahn”, Offener Brief an unsere deutschen Freunde, in: De Amsterdammer, 6 September 1914, p. 1. It is not clear whether the open letter directly inspired the authors of the *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt* that was drawn up in September and published in October 1914. However, many of the accusations that were made in this letter (e.g. about the brutal destruction of Louvain and the violation of international law) were addressed and countered in the Manifesto of the Ninety-Three.
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20. ↑ Abbenhuis, The Art of Staying Neutral 2016, p. 194.
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