'War on our Minds' War, neutrality and identity in Dutch public debate during the First World War

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Abstract

During the First World War the Netherlands remained neutral. The Dutch did not fight, kill, die, or in any way suffer to the extent the belligerents did. The chief problems and questions raised by the First World War accordingly had a comparatively limited impact on Dutch society. The question remains, however, to what extent a neutral country like the Netherlands *did* experience the First World War.

That question is addressed in this article by looking at Dutch public debate on the war during the period 1914-1919. Despite political and military neutrality the war and the specific Dutch position and identity in relation to this war and its possible outcomes were passionately discussed in public debate. The ways in which this debate developed demonstrate how the Great War, when defined as a *cultural war*, heavily influenced nations that were not militarily involved.

Moreover, this approach shows us how neutrality was (re-)defined in this period, both by neutral countries themselves and by the belligerent powers. These findings thus help us understand ideas about belligerency and neutrality in the period of the two world wars.

Keywords

First world war; neutrality; cultural mobilization; identity; public debate; the Netherlands

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During the First World War the famous Dutch poet Albert Verwey wrote that the war was constantly on his mind and the minds of many others: their thoughts were irresistibly drawn to it, like iron to a magnet.² Although the Netherlands was one of the few remaining neutral countries, Verwey stressed the impact the war had on him, his Dutch contemporaries and their society. The war that started in August 1914 immediately sparked debate in the Netherlands. Not only the causes of its origin and which of the great powers was most to blame for the outbreak of war was heavily discussed, but also the most appropriate reaction of the Dutch people and Dutch state. Notwithstanding the unanimous view that the Netherlands should try to remain neutral, there was much dispute about what the role of the country could and should be.

In this paper I will analyze how public debate on the position and identity of the Netherlands developed in the course of the First World War.³ The Netherlands was one of the very few countries to remain neutral during the entire war period. Until recently the First World War has therefore received comparatively little attention in Dutch historiography. Unlike the Second World War with its devastating impact on Dutch society, its predecessor was defined as 'the war that did not happen', and it was supposed not to have caused any important social or political changes. This view resulted in the idea that in the Netherlands the nineteenth century lasted until 1940 when the country was pulled back into history by the German invader.⁴ It also produced a habit of regarding the decades before 1940 as a 'pre-

² Verwey, A. 'Uit het dagboek van een landbewoner'. *De Beweging* 11, 2 (1915) 98.

³ This article is based on my PhD thesis Tames, I.M. "*Oorlog voor onze gedachten*": *Oorlog, neutraliteit en identiteit in het Nederlandse publieke debat 1914-1918*, Hilversum 2006.

⁴ Brands, M.C. 'The Great War die aan ons voorbijging. De blinde vlek in het historisch bewustzijn van Nederland'. In *Het belang van de Tweede Wereldoorlog. De bijdragen voor het symposium op 22 september 1997 ter gelegenheid van de opening van de nieuwe behuizing van het Rijksinstituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*, M. Berman and J.C.H. Blom (ed.) Den Haag: 1997, 17-18. Boogman, J.C. *The Netherlands in the European scene, 1813-1913* Alphen aan de Rijn: 1978. Dunk, H.W. von der. 'De eerste wereldoorlog. Nederland ten tijde van de eerste wereldoorlog'. In *Algemene geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, D.P. Blok (ed.) Haarlem: 1979, Dunk, H.W. von der. *De verdwijnende hemel: over de cultuur van Europa in de twintigste eeuw* Amsterdam: 2000. Dunk, H.W. von der. *Cultuur en geschiedenis: negen opstellen* Den Haag: 1990, Kossmann, E.H. *De Lage Landen 1780-1980: twee eeuwen Nederland en België*, (5th ed.) Amsterdam: 1986, Oostendorp, Th. 'Duitsland en de Nederlandse neutraliteit, 1914-1918'. *Militaire spectator* 134 (1965), 229-233. Porter, J.J. *Dutch neutrality in two World Wars* [S.l.] 1980. Schuurisma, R.L. *14-18 de Eerste Wereldoorlog* Amsterdam: 1975, Smit, C. *Tien*

history' of the Second World War, which should be analyzed by anachronistically assessing who was 'good' and who was 'bad', much in the same way as the period of 1940-1945.⁵ This approach has distorted not only our understanding of Dutch society, but also of neutrality in general before the Second World War.

Dutch neutrality in 1914 was an uninterrupted legacy from the early nineteenth century and was further enshrined by the Peace Conferences in The Hague in 1899 and 1907. The First World War became its first serious challenge. Neutrality is, in effect, a function of war: international law defines neutrality as the status of third states that, at the outbreak of war, adopt a position of non-belligerency or abstention from hostilities.⁶ States can have various reasons to remain neutral. In this respect small neutral states are distinctly different from neutral great powers: whereas the latter can more or less independently decide whether or not to engage in the war, a small neutral state is in a far more vulnerable position. It can try to balance between the belligerents or seek protection. In the Netherlands the latter option was avoided for fear of a loss of independence. A small neutral state is exposed to the powers of both sides and therefore has to uphold friendly relations with both sides in order to avoid violation of its neutrality.

During the First World War the Dutch did not fight, kill, die, or in any way suffer to the extent any of the belligerents did. Accordingly, the chief problems and questions raised by the First World War had a comparatively limited impact on Dutch society. The question is to what extent and in which ways a neutral country did 'experience' the world war. In the

studiën betreffende Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog Groningen: 1975. Voorhoeve, J.J.C. *Peace, profits and principles: a study of Dutch foreign policy* Leiden: 1985. Wels, C.B. *Aloofness & neutrality: studies on Dutch foreign relations and policy-making institutions* Utrecht: 1982.

⁵ For instance Smit, C. *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog (1899-1919)*, vol. I. 1899-1914. II. 1914-1917. III. 1917-1919 (Groningen: 1972-1973).

⁶ Karsh, E. *Neutrality and small states* London: 1988. Leonhard, A.T. and N. Mercuro, *Neutrality: changing concepts and practices* Lanham: 1988. Ogle, R. *The theory and practice of neutrality in the twentieth century* London: 1970. Örvik, N. *The decline of neutrality 1914-1941* Oslo: 1953. Schmitt, H.A. *Neutral Europe between war and revolution, 1917-23* Charlottesville, VA: 1988. Vandenbosch, A. *Neutrality and Problems of Peaceful Change* [s.l.] 1936. Vandenbosch, A. *The neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War* Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1927

context of a war the neutrals should not be regarded as non-existent. At the time, the neutrals were viewed in various ways – as part of the international public sphere, as potential friends or enemies, or at least as parties whose moral support could be of help to the belligerents' own war efforts. From this perspective the neutral states no longer appear as the theatres of some of the war's very minor sideshows; they prove to be part of the world in which this war was waged.

This raises the question of how the belligerents regarded neutrality during the First World War. The war years saw a metamorphosis in attitudes towards neutral states. These countries started out as the moral arbiters in questions of truth about the war; by the end of the First World War, however, many of the belligerents regarded neutrality as anachronistic and immoral. This shift had a major impact on how Dutch opinion makers defined their nation's identity.

Identity discussed

In the belligerent states, opinion makers were of major importance to convince the people that the nation's ideals were at stake in this war. In a neutral country like the Netherlands there was a specific form of cultural mobilization, in this case to mobilize the people for neutrality. Because there was no official propaganda organization or censorship, public debate developed into one of the main theatres for Dutch cultural mobilization during the First World War. In terms of intensity and purposes this specific cultural mobilization was obviously very different from its counterparts in neighboring societies. Identifying the specific characteristics of this 'neutral cultural mobilization' is one of the objectives of this paper.⁷

Our main focus is on the discussion of Dutch identity and the Dutch position by opinion makers in the leading periodicals. Opinion makers are defined more broadly than just

⁷ See on cultural mobilization f.i.: Horne, J.N. and A. Kramer, *German atrocities, 1914. A history of denial*. New Haven CT, 2001

intellectuals or journalists: in order to avoid listing the usual suspects, a more promising approach is to start by looking at the relevant articles in the contemporary journals and in this way selecting the writers on the subject that were important at the time. The criterion for selection was the subject discussed in the article, not the name of the writer.

These Dutch opinion makers turn out to have lost their initial self-confidence as defenders of (international) law and justice. During the middle years of the war they were toying with the idea of a specific role for the Dutch nation. In the end they were left with great uncertainty about the Dutch identity: in the last stages of the war not only the Dutch international and economic position, but also Dutch self-confidence with regard to aspirations as a bringer of peace had severely deteriorated. It became widely accepted that the main task of the Dutch was to try to understand the developments in the world and to adjust to them. This is clarified by the way in which further democratization was discussed.

Dutch debate during the First World War can thus be divided into three different parts, each dominated chronologically by a different major issue used by Dutch opinion leaders in their attempts to define the Dutch identity and position in the world: Law and Justice, Peace, and Democracy.

Law and Justice

In the early months of the war the violation of Belgian neutrality was at the heart of Dutch public debate: it shook many people's faith in international law and in Germany. What happened to Belgium could also be the fate of the Netherlands. Dutch journalists only had to cross the border for eyewitness accounts of the war, and soon they also wrote about the flood of Belgian refugees to the Netherlands and recorded their stories.⁸ The Belgian case was literally close to home. And it was close to home in other respects also: Belgium, like the

⁸ Grondijs, L.H., *Een Nederlander in geteisterd België*, Amsterdam 1914. Mokveld, L. *De overweldiging van België: ervaringen, als Nederlandsch journalist opgedaan, tijdens een viermaandelijksch verblijf bij de Duitsche troepen in België*. Rotterdam 1916.

Netherlands, was a small country and a neutral state where a large part of the population spoke Dutch.

These specific conditions made it rather easy for British accounts of German atrocities to enter the debate. Nevertheless most Dutch opinion leaders tried to keep some distance from the information that came from abroad and to adopt what they regarded as a 'genuinely neutral stance'. One of the most influential jurists, the Amsterdam professor of international law A.A.H. Struycken, insisted that the Dutch should not jump to any conclusions before all documents were released and an impartial – in other words: neutral – investigation had taken place in Belgium.⁹ In the meantime the Dutch should try to uphold the values of neutrality such as objectivity, law and justice – in a word: civilization.

It was widely believed by Dutch opinion makers that the belligerents had lost their power of discrimination so that the neutrals had the task to safeguard objectivity and reason. Especially in the early stages of the war, the German colleagues were reproached for having lost their senses. Dutch opinion makers soon complained about the enormous amounts of letters and pamphlets they were receiving from German acquaintances and colleagues, and especially about the style in which the Germans addressed them.¹⁰ They were shocked to see that eminent German scholars simply denied the violation of Belgian neutrality and justified the idea of the necessity of war.¹¹ To the utter horror of Dutch jurists they even used references to international law – Dutch icons of neutrality theory like Hugo Grotius included – to make their point.¹² Apart from this disappointment in German scholarship and science – which had an enormous reputation in the Netherlands – German *Kultur* in general now seemed to be exposed as mere brutality and militarism.

⁹ See the series by Struycken, A.A.H. 'Oorlog en volkenrecht, België'. *Van onzen Tijd* 14 (1914) and Struycken, A.A.H. 'Oorlog en volkenrecht, België'. *Van onzen Tijd* 14 (1914).

¹⁰ Haan, J.I. de. 'De Duitse rechtsgeleerden en de oorlog'. *De Beweging* 10, no. 4 (1914), 'Offener Brief an unsere deutschen Freunde'. *De Amsterdammer* (6.9.14), Cuypers, P.J.H. 'Leuven'. *De Amsterdammer* (13.9.14). Ook Cuypers, P.J.H. 'Naar het verwoeste Leuven'. *Van onzen Tijd* 14 (1914).

¹¹ Ungern Sternberg, J. von, und W. von Ungern Sternberg. *Der Aufruf "An die Kulturwelt!" Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Stuttgart 1996.

¹² Struycken, A.A.H. 'Deutschland's inval in België en Hugo de Groot'. *Van onzen Tijd* 15 (1914).

In contrast to the bewildering letters and pamphlets from Germany, British views of the war were much more easily assimilated by many Dutch opinion makers. They actually copied British concepts, for instance by frequently using the notion of 'Prussianism' or 'Prussian militarism' in the same way their British colleagues did; suddenly they also began speaking of the 'unholy trinity' of Bernhardi, Treitschke and Hegel (or Nietzsche).¹³ Pamphlets written by Dutch authors under secret authority of the British propaganda office were not publicly denounced as propaganda but regarded as genuinely Dutch, whereas publications advocating the German point of view were often denounced, sometimes undeservedly, as secret propaganda.¹⁴ Struycken's articles on the German invasion of Belgium, for instance, were used by British propaganda and translated into English, but the single voice that repudiated Struycken as an 'Allied agent' was ignored because he was regarded as a German agent himself.¹⁵

The similarities between the British and the Dutch discourse thus seem manifest in the early stages of the war. Dutch domestic conditions created a framework in which the above-mentioned concepts could function. Still, they were defined in a completely different context, and British cultural mobilization (and propaganda) increasingly restricted the usefulness of these concepts for Dutch opinion makers.

In Britain, international law, justice, and civilization in general were presented as, and believed to be, the chief reasons why the country was at war. Official British propaganda in the early days of the war was mainly directed towards the neutrals. 'Wellington House'

¹³ For instance Haan, J.I. de. 'De Duitse rechtsgeleerden en de oorlog'. *De Beweging* 1, 11 (1915), 147-160. Also H. Bavinck, *Het probleem van den oorlog*. Kampen 1914, Haan, J.I. de. 'De Duitse rechtsgeleerden en de oorlog'. Hoeven Leonhard, J. van der. *Het belang des vaderlands in verband met het pangermanisme* Amsterdam: 1916.

¹⁴ For instance Manen, C.A. van. *Duitschlands groei en het Pruisische overwicht*. Amsterdam 1915 was supported by the British propaganda service, but she was not suspected of being an 'Allied agent'. See Colenbrander, H.Th. "Bibliographie," *De Gids* 79, no. 3 (1915), 383-385. Also M. Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande: ein neutrales Land im politischen und wirtschaftlichen Kalkül der Kriegsgegner* Berlin: 1998, 284. More in the National Archives London (NAL) Foreign Office (FO) 395.22.

¹⁵ Molenbroek, P. *De oorlog in België. Naar aanleiding van Prof. mr. Struyckens Verspreide opstellen*. 's-Gravenhage 1916. [Batavus] 'De oorlog in België, Het geval Molenbroek', *De Amsterdammer* 20 Feb. 1916, 27 Feb. 1916.

adopted as one of its leading principles that the neutrals were in no way to be given the impression that the British were trying to convert them. They wanted the presentation of facts to be central in their approach: facts accompanied by 'general remarks based on these facts'.¹⁶ This of course does not mean that British propaganda was always based on actual facts. Sometimes it clearly was not, for instance with regard to many stories of atrocities. But by presenting the British point of view as factual and in a factual style, it readily convinced many Dutch opinion makers as this corresponded to their own approach and preferences: Struycken literally asked for 'facts and nothing but the facts'. The values expressed in the concomitant 'general remarks' were also very likely to be accepted in Dutch debate in 1914 and early 1915. Compared to the emotional and mystic outbursts of 'German hysteria' British accounts were perceived as at least 'more dignified'.¹⁷

The Dutch focus on law, civilization, reason and other liberal moral values made Dutch public debate accessible for British propaganda and other elements of British cultural mobilization. This had some important consequences for the way in which Dutch national identity could be defined. One of the effects of the British annexation of law and justice was that it became increasingly difficult for the Dutch to use these concepts to describe their own identity as being neutral. Law and justice became principles of this war, the very reasons why the Allies were fighting. It followed logically that a neutral state simply could not call itself the champion of these principles.

In the Dutch debate adherence to the principles of law and justice therefore came to mean that one was siding with the Allies. In the course of 1915 it was no longer a convincing way to define a neutral identity. However, these concepts were not only lost because British

¹⁶ *British Propaganda during the First World War*. Imperial War Museum Londen [s.a.]. Reeves, N., *Official British film propaganda during the First World War*. London, 1986, Sanders, M.L. and Ph.M. Taylor, *British propaganda during the First World War, 1914-18*. London, 1982, Koszyk, K. *Deutsche Pressepolitik im Ersten Weltkrieg*. Düsseldorf, 1968, Messinger, G.S. *British propaganda and the State in the First World War*. Manchester/New York, 1992.

¹⁷ *De waan der Duitsers* as it was called in the Netherlands, see Kernkamp, G.W. 'De Europeesche Oorlog, IV, De ziekte der Duitsche geleerden'. *Vragen des tijds*, no. 2 (1914).

discourse effectively took them over, many Dutch opinion makers also started to actually abandon these principles. This was accompanied by a growing disappointment in the Allies when Dutch intellectuals saw the disparity between rhetoric and reality, for instance in the case of Allied violations of international law regarding overseas trade.

All these developments resulted in the loss of law and justice as plausible concepts for describing national identity in the Dutch public debate. Increasingly disappointed, more and more opinion makers stopped stressing international law and neutrality and instead focused on the idea of safeguarding national interests. Neutrality was no longer the value to be defended; now it was national independence.

This development in the early years of the First World War is interesting, since it has long been a commonplace in Dutch historiography that the 'end of nineteenth century legalism' was marked by the German invasion of 1940. The fact that the Dutch minister of foreign affairs H.A. van Karnebeek, who came to office in 1918, changed the official Dutch 'policy of neutrality' (*neutraliteitspolitiek*) into a 'policy of independence' (*zelfstandigheidspolitiek*), was ignored or explained as an act of mere window dressing.¹⁸ This was simply not the case. The opinion makers of the time really changed their ideas on the function of neutrality and international law as well as the self-definition that came with it. This conclusion is also supported by the fact that one of the major opinion leaders, Struycken, who played an important role in this shift of thinking during the First World War, became the minister's chief adviser in 1918.

Peace

Two things happened in the Dutch public debate in the course of 1915. On the one hand the debate became polarized between 'pro-Germans' and 'anti-Germans'; on the other hand many

¹⁸ For instance Schuurisma, R.L. *Vergeefs onzijdig. Nederlands neutraliteit 1919-1940*. Utrecht, 2005.

opinion makers tried to define a new role, not so much for the Dutch as neutrals but as a *nation*. According to this view, the Dutch were especially suited as mediators between the opposing blocks, because of their specific national characteristics. Thus, besides polarization a longing for the restoration of peace and harmony entered Dutch public debate. The latter development made it possible to re-establish contact with Germany.

Polarization

The polarization in Dutch debate included harsh accusations of betrayal of the national interests. In 1915 and 1916 practically all remarks made in the Dutch public debate were interpreted as 'pro-German' or 'anti-German': whatever the statement, both critics and supporters would use the 'pro' and 'anti' labels to interpret it. By and large, an accusation of being 'pro-German' meant one seriously had to defend oneself. Being called 'anti-German' was an accusation that one lacked a sense of nuance. The fact that the largest newspaper, *De Telegraaf*, was both staunchly anti-German and regarded as a lowbrow sensationalist paper influenced this judgment.

In 1915 a pro-German weekly was founded, mainly as a reaction against the perceived imbalance in Dutch debate. It was called *De Toekomst* ('The Future') and claimed an honest intention of informing the Dutch public on the importance of maintaining good relations with all the belligerents.¹⁹ In fact, *De Toekomst* regarded a new Europe under German guidance as a major improvement and used every opportunity to stress the importance of German *Kultur* for the Dutch. *De Toekomst* stressed the 'natural bonds' between the German and the Dutch peoples: as was common in those days, the idea of racial kinship was considered a scientific fact. But *De Toekomst* went further than this mainstream idea for it also maintained that close ethnic affiliation ought to imply the friendliest of relations.

¹⁹ 'Aan den lezers'. *De Toekomst: weekblad voor Nederland* 1, no. 1. (April 1915)

Far from reintroducing nuance, *De Toekomst* further polarized Dutch debate. J.A. van Hamel, a professor of criminal law and well-known chief editor of the liberal weekly *De Amsterdammer*, even started a campaign to expose *De Toekomst* as a German propaganda tool. And he was successful: by the middle of 1916 he had convinced the Dutch public that *De Toekomst* had strong personal and financial ties with the Germans.²⁰ This meant a further deterioration of the marginal existence of *De Toekomst*. Evidence from the archives shows that in fact there had been more contact between *De Toekomst* and German propaganda officials than even Van Hamel knew about.²¹

The interesting thing, however, is the way Van Hamel framed his accusations. He not so much criticized German politics, he issued warnings to the Dutch public and politicians. He was urging them to be suspicious of propaganda that would make the Dutch forget their own interests and turn them into a tool in the hands of foreign powers. In this period the belligerents' slogans had already come to be regarded by Dutch opinion makers as deceitful attempts to confuse the Dutch people and persuade them that foreign interests coincided with their own. There were quite a few people who, like Van Hamel, saw such 'evil machinations' especially on the German side. They concluded that whatever one thought of British propaganda, it was plain to see that the true Dutch interests were on their side: balance of power, free trade, and liberal politics were the obvious examples. Van Hamel claimed that this judgment had nothing to do with being anti-German: it was simply common sense for a Dutchman to hope that the Allies would win.²²

²⁰ Hamel, J.A. van. 'Haring of kuit'. *De Amsterdammer* (21.11.15), Hamel, J.A. van. 'Duitsche actie in Nederland'. *De Amsterdammer* (5.12.15).

²¹ Verbeek van Sande aan Radowitz, Berlijn, 8 Jun. 1915. 'R120973 Presse und Nachrichtendienst 3.6.15 - 18.9.16'. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (PAAA), Berlin.

²² Hamel, J.A. van. *Nederland tusschen de mogendheden: de hoofdtrekken van het buitenlandsch beleid en de diplomatieke geschiedenis van ons vaderland sinds deszelfs onafhankelijk volksbestaan onderzocht*. Amsterdam, 1918.

During the course of the war the group around Van Hamel also tried to convince the Dutch public in all sorts of ways that German influence in general had to be counteracted.²³ A big issue, for instance, was the predominant German influence in Dutch universities and on Dutch science in general. But these campaigns generally met with disapproval. They were perceived as attempts to intimidate the public, foster hatred, and discredit the universal character of science and scholarship.²⁴ After 1916 many opinion makers regarded both their pro- and anti-German colleagues as too extreme and mere voices of the belligerents. As shown by the example of Van Hamel, this was indeed true to some extent. In the last stages of the war Van Hamel openly sided with the Allies.

Pacification

The question on which side the Dutch people belonged was a central issue: it meant deciding what kind of peace was in the best interest of the Netherlands. Van Hamel and his associates warned against a 'German peace'. Many Dutch opinion makers shared this fear, looking anxiously at the German plans for Belgium. Even though there was no certainty about what the Germans really had in mind, their ideas about a new Europe, a *Mitteleuropäische Bund* in any variation hardly appealed to the Dutch public. Unlike Van Hamel, many concluded that being exposed to 'British imperialism' would not be much of an improvement either.²⁵ Many Dutch opinion makers began to believe that the war strengthened the dangerous elements in all belligerent societies and politics. They therefore tried in different ways to formulate their best option for a 'peace without victory'.

²³ Hamel, J. A. van. 'De wetenschap-veroveraar'. *De Amsterdammer* (22.7.16). Hoeven Leonhard, J. van der. *Het overheerschend gebruik van Duitsche studieboeken bij ons Hooger Onderwijs en de invloed daarvan op onze taal* Haarlem: 1918. Salverda de Gave, J.J. 'Waarom het genootschap "Nederland-Frankrijk" is opgericht'. *De Gids* 81, 1 (1917). See also S.A. Guest, '3th. Report on the work conducted for the Government at Wellington House, Sept. 1916', NAL Cabinet Papers 37.156.6.

²⁴ Sijmons, B. '"Fransche" en "Duitsche" wetenschap'. *De Gids* 81, 1 (1917). See extensively Tames, I.M. *Oorlog voor onze gedachten. Oorlog, neutraliteit en identiteit in het Nederlandse publieke debat 1914-1918*. Hilversum: 2006, 74-75.

²⁵ The memory of the South African Wars and the treatment of the Boers, regarded as part of Dutch kinship, by the British played an important role in this aversion against 'British Imperialism'.

A rather successful line in this discourse was to define a Dutch role based on its specific national characteristics. The key to the success of this concept lay in the fact that the idea of a special Dutch character that might help pacify the belligerents functioned as a 'third way' option: it was an escape from the polarization at home and abroad. This also meant, however, that discussions with their belligerent colleagues often became subject to misunderstanding and disappointment. This is especially true for discussions between Dutch opinion makers and their British counterparts.²⁶ On the other hand it now seemed possible to re-establish contact with the Germans.

Central to this 'third way' approach was the idea that pluralism was the solution for Europe and that the Dutch were in an eminent position to teach others what pluralism meant. The reasoning behind this idea can be found very plainly in the writings of F.C. Gerretson, a poet, civil servant, businessman and conservative protestant politician all in one. Gerretson was an eloquent writer with a large – secret – network. At the end of 1915 he started his own journal that focused on the idea of a 'Greater Netherlands', which was officially a cultural goal aimed at fostering literary contacts with Flanders. Gerretson, however, also had ideas about a Germanic 'Bund', which he wisely kept to himself.²⁷

Gerretson had a clear view of Dutch history and character. Like many others, he identified the key to understanding Dutch character in the central Dutch position between the major European nations: the Dutch were close to the Germans because of their shared Germanic race, they were close to France because of French cultural influences through the

²⁶ Simons, L. 'De uitkomst van den oorlog en de neutrale staten'. *De Nieuwe Gids* 31, 2 (1916). Robertson, J.M. *De neutralen en de oorlog: open brief aan den heer L. Simons, directeur van den "Wereldbibliotheek"* Amsterdam: 1917. Simons, L. *De oorlog en de neutralen: open antwoord aan ... J.M. Robertson, lid van het Engelsche Lagerhuis*. Amsterdam: 1917, 11. Archer, W. *Lood om oud ijzer: een brief aan den Heer L. Simons te 's-Gravenhage* [s.l.]: 1916.

²⁷ Wils, L. *Vlaanderen, België, Groot-Nederland: mythe en geschiedenis*. Leuven 1994. Also Wils, L. 'Gerretson, Geyl en Vos: spanningen tussen de Grootnederlandse beweging en de Vlaams-nationalistische'. 41, *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen* (1982), Wils, L. 'Nog eens: Gerretson, Geyl en Vos'. 42, *Wetenschappelijke tijdingen* (1983).

ages, and they were close to the British character because of the shared overseas orientation and experience.²⁸

It is important, however, that this notion of integrating different cultures had its counterpart in the way these Dutch opinion makers viewed Dutch society – as a society consisting of essentially different and potentially hostile groups. Mass democracy had created what was then called a Calvinist, a Roman-Catholic and a Social Democratic 'segment of the nation' (*volksdeel*); a fourth group consisted of the much more loosely organized liberals. During the war years the process of 'pacification' of these different groups was politically more or less settled. This fostered the peculiar Dutch organization of society and politics into a framework that was later called 'Pillarization' (*Verzuiling*).

The fact that the Dutch seemed to be able to work out some sense of unity in spite of deep religious and social-economic divisions, fostered contemporary ideas that this must be due to a specific Dutch quality. Gerretson himself used to refer to the fact that Dutch culture not only featured Rembrandt but Rubens too, thereby also stressing the unity of Holland and Flanders.²⁹

The specific Dutch quality thus came to be defined as the successful integration of apparently hostile elements. The logic of reasoning adopted by Gerretson and many others suggested that all groups (or nations) should accept each other as fundamentally different and that it was both impossible and undesirable to persuade others to abandon their specific inherited values. The solution was not to force any other nation to adopt values that did not suit its characteristics, since that would only lead to degeneration and war. In Dutch public debate pluralism and tolerance therefore went hand in hand with the acceptance of and a

²⁸ See extensively Gerretson, F.C. *Het Nederlandsche standpunt, Nederlandsche gedachten*. Baarn 1915. Also Havelaar, J. 'Holland. Wezen en waarde van ons karakter'. *De Gids*, 80, 2 (1916), 243-280. Petri, J. *Holland wees u zelf! Een cultuurbeschouwende schets*. Baarn 1915.

²⁹ Gerretson, *Nederlandsche standpunt*. 16.

growing belief in fundamental or even inherited national and ethnic characteristics. This opened up discussions with Germany.

As the war dragged on, Germany's strategy focused on securing victory by weakening the enemy's alliances and seeking separate peace treaties.³⁰ This resulted in appeals for peace negotiations, which caused a change in attitude towards Germany in Dutch public debate: in the eyes of many Dutch opinion makers this was a sign that the Germans were regaining a sense of rationality. The Allied rejection of German peace proposals on the other hand increased their annoyance with these obstinate belligerents. In spite of their suspicions about the German objectives, Dutch opinion makers at the time mostly hoped for a negotiated peace and accordingly wanted the German peace proposals to be taken seriously.

This attitude meant a new chance for German propaganda. German officials and semi-officials with contacts in the Netherlands had increasingly tried to distance themselves from their stigmatized 'friends' who ran *De Toekomst*. Thanks to the slightly changing climate they could now try to convince Dutch intellectuals, politicians and academics by referring to the necessity of re-establishing European peace and international contacts. Of course one of the ideas behind this policy was the German fear of total isolation; but in addition to hard economic reasons, ideas of Dutch-German kinship also played a role.

New forms of rapprochement became possible in this period, as shown by the example of the German professor H. Brinckmann, who had become head of the German propaganda organization in The Hague. Brinckmann gathered some German-friendly colleagues from Dutch universities. In 1917 they started talking about re-establishing international academic contacts, which had been so sadly lost due to the war. Brinckmann proposed that his friends form a small, discreet committee that would arrange the exchange of German and Dutch scholars: some famous scholars from Germany would give public lectures in the Netherlands

³⁰ See Stevenson, D. 'Politics of the two alliances'. In *The Great War and the twentieth century*, J.M. Winter and G. Parker (eds.), New Haven, CT: 2000.

and some of the Dutch colleagues would be invited to come to Germany.³¹ Brinckmann assured them that these visits would have nothing to do with propaganda: science and scholarship should speak for themselves. And after all, in their circles it was considered a scientific truth that a close Dutch-German relationship was only natural, since they shared the same Germanic origins.

The Dutch professors he appealed to proved easy to persuade: Brinckmann's words suited their framework of internationalism and impartiality and they were naturally flattered to be treated as their famous German colleagues' equals. In the first months of 1918 some prominent German academics actually visited the Netherlands, among them Hans Delbrück, Hermann Oncken and Lujo Brentano. The whole scheme had been kept a secret and in Dutch reviews the lectures were highly praised and welcomed. Brinckmann wrote to his superiors in Berlin that even the 'anti-German' professor Niermeijer was excited after hearing Delbrück's lecture.³²

In this report, however, Brinckmann also set out his hidden agenda which he had not even revealed to his Dutch friends: the creation of closer relations with fellow Germanic peoples in order to advance Germanic co-operation.³³ His purpose was to put the Dutch at ease and to prevent any impression of coercion or being regarded as unimportant. That was why some Dutch scholars were also invited to come to Germany. It was merely a gesture, witness the ample correspondence in the archives on the troubling issue of how to find a public willing to attend these lectures: nobody in Germany had ever heard of the Dutch professors.³⁴

³¹ For instance 'Account Brinckmann' in Rosen to Hertling, Den Haag, 8 Jan. 1918, 'R901 71888 Bund deutsche Gelehrter und Künstler Jan. 1918 - Sept. 1918'. Bundes Archiv Berlin Lichterfelde (BABL) or 'Account Brinckmann' in Rosen to Hertling, Den Haag, 10 April 1918, 'R71885-71886 Vortragspropaganda innerhalb Hollands 1918-1921'. BABL.

³² 'Account Brinckmann', Den Haag, 10 April 1918, 'R71885-71886'. BABL.

³³ 'Account Brinckmann', Den Haag, 8 Jan. 1918, 'R901 71888'. BABL.

³⁴ Gleichen (Bund deutsche Gelehrter und Künstler) to Vizekonsul Dehn Schmidt, Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, 22 Jan. 1918, 'R901 71888'. BABL.

Thus the self-definition of the Dutch as ethnically related to Germany and therefore able to pacify European antagonisms was a persuasive idea in the Dutch public debate in the later years of the war. But it could also create a blind spot with regard to German *Machtspolitik*. The almost hysterical warnings from intellectuals like Van Hamel had resulted in a growing weariness of intimidation and the Dutch public had begun to yearn for something positive. The idea of mediation was made even more attractive by its link with domestic appeasement in politics.

This development may indeed prove to have been of major importance for the Dutch attitude towards Germany during the interwar period. Contrary to dominant ideas in Dutch historiography it may very well be that Dutch views of Germany in the 1920s and 1930s were not shaped by 'nineteenth century naïveté', but by a notion of pluralism that contained a belief in the impossibility and undesirability of changing the characteristics of other 'segments' or nations.

This also sheds new light on how the Dutch saw their country's position within Europe. The idea that Dutch interests were similar to those of the Western powers was not predominant, nor can it be regarded retrospectively as the 'true' or 'good' conviction. That Dutch foreign politics should be oriented towards the West is a view that only became dominant because of the Second World War, and it was only then that it was construed and accepted as the 'true tradition'.³⁵ People like Van Hamel became the true patriots because of the Second World War experience and it was only by way of anachronistic reasoning that they came to be seen as the true patriots of the First World War period as well.³⁶ The development of Dutch public debate towards both pluralism and a form of essentialism also sheds new light

³⁵ Hamel, J.A. van. *De vaste koers voor Nederland's schip van staat*. [Amsterdam] 1918.

³⁶ Interestingly enough after the Second World War Van Hamel was very skeptical about the new Dutch orientation towards the United States and the NATO. See Tames, I.M. '“Waarlijk niet voor theoretisch twistgesprek”: J.A. van Hamel en de Nederlandse neutraliteit'. In *Wankel evenwicht: neutraal Nederland en de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, edited by M. Kraaijenstein and P. Schulten, 62-84, Soesterberg, 2007.

on the ideas that dominated views on the last major theme of Dutch public debate during the war years: domestic organization.

Democracy

Many moderate opinion makers in the Netherlands regained some hope after the revolution in Russia in February 1917. The war suddenly acquired a new meaning and was now seen as a truly ideological conflict. When the United States entered the war, feelings were more mixed. On the one hand the idea that this war was indeed waged 'to make the world safe for democracy' gained new force, but on the other hand the Dutch felt abandoned now that they had to do without their most important 'neutral ally'.³⁷ When the United States also imposed harsh restraints on Dutch trade, many were disappointed in US president Wilson. Dutch feelings were a mix of hope for democracy and fear of total chaos and destruction.

During this same period, democracy had also become the key issue in Dutch debates about domestic reform. In 1917 the issue of universal suffrage was settled at long last; it was an issue that had dominated political debate since the nineteenth century, as it had in many other European countries. During the war years the question no longer was whether to be for or against democracy: opinion makers from all religious or ideological segments in Dutch society now claimed to be 'real democrats'. So when universal (male) suffrage was introduced, it had already ceased to be disputed. The new issue Dutch debate focused upon was what the next necessary reform would be. The world seemed to be heading towards a new era and the Dutch tried to compensate their inability to influence the outcome of the war by urging domestic reforms. Their ideas produced the outlines of the emergent 'Pillarization'. So

³⁷ For instance Byvanck, W.G.C. 'Vrede!'. *De Amsterdammer* (31.8.18), Hamel, J.A. van. 'Amerika beheerst de situatie'. *De Amsterdammer* (14.7.17).

instead of regarding this process of 'Pillarization' as evidence of Dutch isolation, it might be a better and more helpful idea to study this phenomenon in the context of the world war.³⁸

In discussions about democratic reform a new kind of critique on democracy emerged. This critique bears a striking resemblance to what is usually called Dutch *interwar* critique of democracy, which is also an indication that the war shaped Dutch thinking.³⁹ The main features of the critique expressed in Dutch public debate centered on the idea that the government at the time had failed. The government was regarded old-fashioned, undemocratic, secretive and sacrificing national interests to the needs of the belligerents. This critique was a response to economic hardship and an increasing state influence that was not accompanied by a revamping of the structures of accountability. Dutch opinion makers felt that the country's fate was in the hands of a few incompetent old men who were incapable of reading the signs of the times. They wanted new statesmen and new structures to prepare their country for the world that was being created by the war.⁴⁰

Many opinion makers made their own plans and drew up schemes for decentralization and bottom-up organization.⁴¹ These concepts were, in different ways, traditionally important in Calvinist, Roman Catholic and Social Democratic social thinking. They were in line with the dominant idea that fundamentally different groups should be given maximum autonomy. On the whole one might say that these opinion leaders proposed a kind of corporatist organization that was believed to combine true democracy *and* political and social-economic harmony. This new organization was also supposed to increase government accountability.

³⁸ Tames, I.M. 'Voorbereid op nieuwe tijden: de Nederlandse discussie over de 'ware democratie' tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog'. In *Moderniteit, modernisme en massacultuur in Nederland 1914-1940. Jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie*. Edited by M. de Keizer and S. Tates, 47-62, 376-377. Zutphen, 2004.

³⁹ For instance Jonge, A.A. de. *Crisis en critiek der democratie: anti-democratische stromingen en de daarin levende denkbeelden over de staat in Nederland tussen de wereldoorlogen*. Assen, 1968.

⁴⁰ Struycken, A.A.H. 'De Crisis en hare Oplossing'. *Van onzen Tijd* 18 (1917-1918), Hamel, J.A. van. 'Nullo-Kratie'. *De Amsterdammer* (31.8.18).

⁴¹ Among others: Raalte, E. van. 'Naar den Komenden Staatsvorm'. *De Beweging* 14, 4 (1918). Kranenburg, R. 'Staatsrechtelijke vooruitzichten'. *Vragen des Tijds* 1 (1918). Ritsema van Eck, S. *Historische democratie* Amsterdam: 1915.

In effect this discussion raised the question of political legitimacy. Unlike the belligerent governments the Dutch cabinet never really tried to secure its own legitimacy, nor set up a propaganda organization. The counterpart of the state's abstention from intervention in public debate was a growing habit of preventing public debate – or even parliament! – from interfering with politics. Since there was no military war effort the Dutch political elite could get away with this. But the harsh critique in public debate shows that even relatively modest economic and political problems caused by the war could provoke a serious decline in trust. From the point of view of Dutch government it might have been wiser to initiate some sort of state-led cultural mobilization.

Conclusion: a shaken self image

Dutch public debate during the First World War was highly receptive and responsive to the spin-off from cultural mobilization in the belligerent societies. All the same, Dutch opinion makers were trying to uphold a strong sense of Dutch identity. Concepts such as law and justice were largely lost, but the focus on pluralism and on tolerance of supposedly fundamental differences seems to have been a fairly successful alternative way of describing Dutch identity – at least in the domestic discussion, where it merged with ideas regarding democratization.

But in the international public sphere the identity of a neutral state had changed as well: the neutral was no longer regarded as the moral judge who had to be won over. Since the war had developed into a war of attrition, sacrifice determined the meaning of the war. Neutrals were no longer neutrals, but non-belligerents: they did not sacrifice and thus had no say with regard to the moral values in this war, let alone about peace conditions.

Dutch public debate showed features of a process of cultural self-mobilization – from the cries for national unity with their various concomitant visions of the nation to the building

of new alliances and pressure groups. It had the features of a mobilization that was not geared towards supporting the war effort, but towards sustaining national and cultural survival. The degradation from 'neutral judge' to 'selfish non-combatant' did not stop Dutch opinion makers from writing articles, pamphlets and open letters and discussing their country's position in Europe. They felt the times and dangers were such that they had no choice.

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