

'Everything was ready at The Hague'. The Netherlands as a neutral peacemaker during the Great War – JOHAN DEN HERTOOG

FU Berlin

j.den.hertog@let.leidenuniv.nl

During the Great War several people thought about ways to make peace. Many initiatives came from pacifist organizations, but also the Pope and governments of neutrals like the USA and Spain launched peace-initiatives. The Netherlands ranks among these powers too. My contribution will explain the motives behind this small neutral countries' initiatives and the significance of these initiatives for its international relations and status as a neutral.

Many Dutch specialists on international law thought the Netherlands was called upon to act as peacemaker, since the Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907 took place in the Hague. The third Hague Conference of 1915 was cancelled indeed, but yet its organization could be picked up again, reshaped as the conference ending the war. The Dutch Prime Minister shared this idea, not just because of high ideals about international law, but because boosting international law seemed in the interest of small powers.

The Dutch government did what it could to play a role as peacemaker. The Prime Minister started by cooperating with the Pope. However, the Dutch were soon aware that other countries, especially Spain, wanted to be the peacemaker too. It is surprising that the Dutch envoy managed to get the Pope's promise that he preferred The Hague as the seat for the peace conference. Nothing came of the Pope's initiatives, but this policy shows the Dutch eagerness to act.

At the start of 1917, the Dutch thought their time had come. German *Reichskanzler* Von Bethmann Hollweg had shown his willingness to make peace in December. The Dutch thought they were well prepared to support Bethmann, who clashed with the German war-minded army. According to the Dutch Prime Minister a catastrophe could occur if Bethmann lost this battle, since the German army would probably try to occupy the Netherlands. The best way to act seemed in secret cooperation with Austria, where the

new emperor longed for peace. These considerations show that neutral peacemaking was also part of high international politics.

However, making peace and staying neutral was not an easy combination. The allies were suspicious of secret Dutch diplomacy. Dutch initiatives were baldly considered pro-German, in spite of simultaneous discussions about peace proposals of the Dutch Foreign Secretary with the French premier. The British envoy in The Hague used his audience by the Queen to inquire into the Dutch intentions by dropping a single word about a possible peace conference in Bern. 'She perked up and said that everything was ready at The Hague' according to the envoy. It shows how seriously the Dutch wanted to organize the peace conference. The Queen indeed initiated talks with the Austrians and finally The Hague even became the place for secret English-Austrian deliberations, but the combination of peacemaking and neutrality remained difficult. As at the start of 1917, peacemaking easily led to criticism about a biased attitude which could lead to an attack on the Netherlands instead of peace.