

*Aspects of militarization in a neutral state? Expanding the tasks of the Dutch Army
1914-1918 – WIM KLINKERT*

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The Netherlands did not participate in World War I, but its neutrality did not mean the war had no effect on the country. For four years 200.000 Dutch soldiers were in arms and 300.000 men were military trained, so, if the worst came to the worst half a million men could be put in the field. Never in its history was such a part of the male population involved in the Army and Navy.

In my contribution I want to show how the war affected a small neutral country, positioned very close to the front. Two aspects stand out. First the cooperation that developed between industry, government, science and the military. This cooperation hardly existed before the war. During the war the Netherlands tried to keep up, qualitatively and quantitatively, with the international developments in arms production and innovation. This meant, for instance, that the Netherlands tried to establish its own aircraft and chemical industry. This was not only a token to the belligerents and its own soldiers that the neutral country was ready to fight a modern war but it also made the armed neutrality more credible. After the war the urgency to develop this cooperation further disappeared. What remained were small-scale initiatives, committees where military and scientist tried to evaluate the progress of the armaments industry and tried to prepare the country in case a new war would erupt. Only the threat of war twenty years later made the commercial-military-scientific cooperation bloom again.

The choice the Dutch elite made during WW I was to keep up with modern developments in warfare, although it was very expensive for a small country. Also the tactical developments at the Western Front were meticulously followed and sometimes copied. The Dutch Army introduced the German Storm Troop concept in 1918 and studied trench warfare in depth. The Dutch had the advantage that being a neutral they had many contacts with belligerent politicians and officers. Quite a number of times Dutch officers visited the Western Front and German (coastal) defence works.

The second aspect is the civil-military relationship, which developed very rapidly and intensively during the mobilisation. The military 'ruled' almost three-quarters of the country, as large areas were declared 'under siege'. This meant military involvement in the daily life and restrictions of civil liberties. 'Unwanted' persons could be deported, censorship existed and military permission was needed for many social and economic activities. Civil unrest, because of food shortages for instance, was put down by the military. Also, the General Staff prepared measures in case refugees would cause problems, as had happened in Belgium in 1914. Other preparations by the military, should the Netherlands become involved in the war, were related to industries that were considered essential for war production, and to new legislation. The Army leadership supported, successfully, legislation to enlarge the Army, and to enhance the physical condition of the population by introducing gymnastics (physical training) in the schools. Its efforts to introduce civil conscription, which would have meant among others an end to the right to strike and the forced participation of unmarried women in production, failed.

I would very much like to be able to compare the Dutch 'militarization' with developments in other neutral states. My hypothesis is that because of its closeness to the battlefield and its self-image as a great colonial power, the Dutch went further in copying the belligerents than other neutrals.