



Neutrals at war, 1914-1918. Comparative and transnational perspectives

*Royal Netherlands Historical Society (KNHG) 2015 Annual Conference
organised jointly with ACCESS/EUROPE and the Department Art & Culture, History, Antiquity
of the VU University Amsterdam*

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The Great War (1914-1918) was the first *world war*. Although not all parts of the globe were affected in the same way, at the same time or with the same intensity, the global scale with which the First World War was waged is of paramount importance in our current understanding of the conflict. However, narratives of the war have been focused on the history of those who were official belligerents in the conflict, routinely neglecting those who remained neutral.

Meanwhile, histories of various European neutral countries, such as Switzerland, Spain, Denmark and the Netherlands, during the period of Great War provide ample evidence that global industrialised warfare had serious repercussions for those neutrals located geographically close to the fronts. Moreover, these histories have shown that neutrals were active participants in the war. They were engaged in diverse areas such as economics and science, culture and humanitarian relief.

In order to write a truly global history of the war neutrals and neutrality must be reintegrated. Yet, neither the histories of belligerence nor those of neutrality offer an exhaustive comparative perspective, which is a crucial first step for such a reintegration. Even more importantly, existing studies tell us very little about the war history of neutrality as the key issue. How was neutrality understood in the ever changing context of the First World War, and how did those understandings translate into actions?

Re-evaluating the global history of the First World War, and the place of European neutrals in it, is both apposite and urgent. As part of a larger process of searching for a European foundation myth, European leaders – including German Federal President Joachim Gauck and French President François Hollande - have argued that the European project was ‘the best way to honour the [Great War] dead’. Speaking in front of a First World War monument, they recast the European Union as the best safeguard against a repetition of the useless slaughter of the First World War in which all participants were, essentially, victims. As many of the former European neutrals now form an integral part of the European Union, we need to reflect on the potentially divisive nature of this new foundation myth. Since in most war narratives neutrals feature only rarely, in no way can they claim to be part of this new universal victimhood. Rethinking neutrals’ relations with the belligerents and, more generally, to the war, will help us to assess critically this new European foundation myth. Additionally, the fact that two of the World War neutrals, Norway and Switzerland, are not EU-

members but in many ways were closely involved with and affected by the European conflict serves as a contemporary parallel to many of the issues with which this conference will deal.

Neutrals at war, 1914-1918 will be explicitly comparative and transnational in nature. We aim to highlight key differences in the various approaches to neutrality, and the transnational nature of the discourses that interacted with these national approaches. Our aim is to reflect on current research, but also to develop a new framework for neutrality studies in the context of global warfare.

Conference committee:

Leonie de Goei, Royal Netherlands Historical Society

Wim Klinkert, University of Amsterdam / Netherlands Defence Academy

Samuël Kruizinga, University of Amsterdam

Henk te Velde, Leiden University

Programme

09:00-09:30 – **Registration and coffee**

09:30-09:45 – **Welcome**

Susan Legêne, Royal Netherlands Historical Society/VU University Amsterdam

Introduction

Henk te Velde, day chair, Leiden University

09:45-10:30 – **Keynote lecture**

Maartje Abbenhuis, University of Auckland

Neutrality from the 19th century to the First World War

10:30-11:00 – **Coffee break**

11:00-12:30 – **Morning session: Neutral identities**

The First World War challenged pre-1914 notions of what neutrality meant, both at an individual and a societal level. It was widely deemed necessary to reframe one's stance in light of the unique nature of the Great War, especially considering the strong identification markers belligerent societies created to explain the nature of the conflict and their roles in it. In this session, we explore different answers given during the First World War to the question: *who* is the neutral?

Chair: Ismee Tames, NIOD Amsterdam

- Anja Huber, University of Bern
Restrictions against Swiss nationals in England during the First World War
- Eirik Brazier, Telemark University College
The stranger in our midst. Public discourses, constructions and representations of the "others" in Scandinavia, 1914-1918
- Marjet Brotsma, University of Amsterdam
In search for an 'ardent neutrality'. The Great War and the European revolt against rationalism among Dutch intellectuals
- Tessa Lobbes, Utrecht University
Negotiating neutrality. Dutch intellectuals, belligerent cultural propaganda and neutral identities during the First World War

12:30-13:45 – Lunch

The Royal Netherlands Historical Society will host its annual meeting (13:15-13:45). During our lunch break, we will host a World War I-themed film programme, presented by EYE Amsterdam

13:45-15:15 – Afternoon session: Neutral agencies

Neutrals in wartime were compelled, and sometimes forced, into action. As the war grew “total”, the supposedly strict lines between the worlds of belligerency and neutrality began to blur, creating opportunities for the transfer of peoples, goods, and ideas. Simultaneously, stringent efforts were made to separate those at war from those who were, at least nominally, at peace. These, often contradictory and constantly debated actions, beg the question: *what does a neutral do?*

Chair: Joep Leerssen, University of Amsterdam/ACCESS EUROPE.

- Anne Rosenbusch, Royal Irish Academy
Spain's relief effort during the First World War
- Carolina García Sanz, Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología-CSIC Rome
The Marginalia of the History of Neutrality in the Great War. Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective
- Michael Olsansky, Swiss Military Academy-Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich
Under the Spell of the League of Nations: Different notions of Neutrality in the Swiss Military Elite at the End of the First World War
- Michael Jonas, Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg
Three Kings Posturing? Royal diplomacy and Scandinavian neutrality in the First World War

15:15-15:45 – Tea break

15:45-16:45 – Towards a new research agenda: brainstorm session and debate

Chair: Michael Wintle, University of Amsterdam/ACCESS

Summing-up: Ido de Haan, Utrecht University

16:45-17:00 – Closing remarks by the organisers

17:00-18:30 – Drinks

The entrance fee (including coffee, tea, lunch and drinks afterwards) is € 30,- for members KNHG, € 10,- for students (members). Non-members pay € 45,- and students (non-members) pay € 25,- . The amount can be wired to IBAN NL25 INGB 0006 9343 91 (BIC INGBNL2A), KNHG, The Hague.

Register at info@knhg.nl.