

# **A bystander catches up : military debate and practice in the Netherlands, 1918-1923**

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Wim Klinkert

A bystander catches up. Military debate and  
practice in the Netherlands, 1918–1923



When the Great War ended the Dutch breathed a sigh of relief.<sup>1</sup> The country had been spared the horrors of war, its armed neutrality having withstood the test of a major European conflict. During the mobilisation years the army had gone through a constant process of innovation, although any mass production of modern weaponry had proven to be impossible. But in November 1918 a peaceful future seemed at last to be near. For the Dutch military the central question was how to analyse the lessons of four years of war. What were the implications of the Great War for a small neutral country? How did the «war experience» influence future military planning both operationally and tactically? What public debates developed in which the military participated? Since war had developed into a phenomenon in which size, numbers and production figures prevailed, did a small state have any role to play?

Dealing with these questions took place in unsecure, even threatening circumstances; fundamentally different compared to 1914: Pacifism and huge budget cuts were facts of life as was a troubled relationship with the southern neighbour Belgium and thirdly, strategically the situation around Holland had changed considerably with Germany in chaos, the Rhineland occupied and Belgium allied to France.

How was the Dutch military leadership to react, when on the one hand, it knew radical budget cuts were unavoidable, while on the other, it realized that the Dutch army needed to implement the expensive technical and tactical lessons of the war. The army had never been able to boast much sympathy from the Dutch society as a whole and after four years of mobilisation, it had even worn thinner. It had in fact only one major achievement it could boast about: had it not been for the army, neutrality had probably not survived the war. But could that claim be any guarantee for the future? And did everybody believe it?

Let us first look at some internal reactions within the Dutch army on the new situation as it appeared from 1919.

## Internal changes

Dutch military preparations had always been based on the fundamental idea of safeguarding neutrality, with the army having to deter potential enemies from crossing the Dutch border. Should that deterrence fail, the army had to be capable of putting up a resistance for a long enough period of time to enter into a coalition war with an opponent of the violator of Dutch territory. So, a mobile field army was to deter potential violators at the border and a Fortress system (Fortress Holland) was to defend the western part of the country where the main cities and ports were located. The fortress system intended to buy the country time to enter into a coalition and prevent a quick occupation of the entire territory.



After 1918 the idea became prominent that the next Franco-German war, which was considered inevitable, would partly be fought on Dutch soil. So, a repetition of the 1914 scenario was deemed unlikely. The southern part of the Netherlands would in all probability be involved in either German or French operations, which meant safeguarding neutrality no longer was the central idea behind Dutch military war planning. At least, not within the General Staff, for politicians neutrality remained the cornerstone of Dutch foreign policy. But military planning, more than before, focussed on fighting an invader. This did not lead to any political discussion as in the political arena the army said it needed money to repeat what it had done so successfully during the four war years: deterring aggression against the neutral territory. If the military had stressed the likelihood for war in the not too distant future, it would have placed itself completely outside current political and public opinion. What the army leadership did was emphasising the need for a modern, technological advanced army as absolutely necessary to preserve neutrality. But during the lengthy parliamentary and public discussions on the future defence organisation, especially in 1919 to 1922, it realized how hugely unpopular such an ambition was.

### How did the war influence military doctrine?

During the war the Dutch General Staff had tried to keep up with the tactical development to the best of its abilities. In general, the pace and the depth of the changes struck the officers. War would, so they concluded, become much more technological and faster. It was not the trenches that they saw as the most important legacy, but the speed of operations through airplanes and motorised units. These were frightening developments for a small country like the Netherlands, which lacked all strategic depth. The danger was that an aerial operation would strike so fast and so hard, that the mobilisation process would be seriously hindered and organised resistance would be too late. The answer was not only an effective air defence but also an army that could be fielded quickly and that would be modern and strong enough to be a partner in a coalition war with a great power. The answer had to be found in a modern field army.

In 1920 the General Staff formed a committee to prepare new comprehensive field service regulations under the chairmanship of the director of the Staff College. Its task was to redefine all general principles of warfare and apply them to the Dutch circumstances. It was important, for instance, that fortress warfare and mobile warfare were no longer seen as two very distinct types of operations. Modern warfare had two, closely related, dimensions: manoeuvre warfare in the field and static warfare in trenches, but both were different aspects of the same. In war the one could develop into the other.





Dutch soldiers in 1918 with helmets, hand grenades, M 95 rifles and gasmasks all made in Holland. (H. Brugmans *Nederland in den oorlogstijd* [Amsterdam: Elsevier publishers 1920], p. 89)

The infantry remained the principle arm, and offensive manoeuvre warfare demanded the most attention. Key words were high morale, dealing quickly and boldly with new situations and persistent action. That was what it took to prevent a long term static war. Should such a trench war nevertheless become inevitable, it had to be fought in a very active way, using all modern equipment and weaponry available.

Exemplary leadership, faith in one's own strength, a just treatment of soldiers and cooperation between the arms and services were deemed essential, and were in fact considered timeless ingredients of warfare. The World War had shown how destructive modern weapons were, and how their fire power could affect morale; how the emergence of aircraft speeded up the pace of operations and how soldiers could get dispersed on the battlefield. Again, according to the Dutch officers, morale was the key to resolve all this. Duty and the will to fight had to be stressed because the demands modern warfare posed on every individual were more exacting



than ever before. Camouflage, preparation and training had increased in significance. It was the role of the commanding officer to lead by example, to show courage, knowledge and will power, but also humanity and insight into character.

The emphasis on morale was not completely new, but it was stronger than before. Tactical manuals that were published in this period, too, show that morale was ultimately considered more essential than weapons; that the psychological effect of fire be it from the infantry or the artillery always surpassed the physical effect. So moral fibre based both on the example of the commanding officer and the internalised strength and resilience received during training would make soldiers survive modern war.<sup>2</sup>

The new field service regulations were based upon the strong conviction Holland had to possess a modern field army, more or less a small-scale copy of the large continental field armies. It made the Dutch army a fighting force that would be taken seriously by other European states, even though it was small. All alternatives for a different army organisation, like a defensive militia or a police army (related to the League of Nations) were hardly ever discussed seriously among military. Political support for that kind of alternative army organisations was always a minority, and most of the time hopelessly divided.

Although the army budget was cut rigorously in the early twenties, the General Staff got its way in one essential point: a field army consisting of four small army corps remained the core of Dutch defence, even though money was lacking to arm it properly, even though training suffered badly as a result of the new conscription organisation and even though the potential to field the army quickly in times of crisis was lacking. Hoping for better times to come, that was the creed of the army staff, and in the meantime it kept an organisational structure in tact as a basis for later expansion.

### Inspiration from abroad

During the war the Dutch officers remained informed on the new technological and tactical developments by military attaches and visits to the war fronts. After the war these visits continued, albeit in a somewhat changed form. The first major trip of Dutch officers along the former French front from the Argonnes up to the Vosges took place in August and September 1920. Remarkably enough, the emphasis lay on the application of terrain reinforcements in the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>3</sup> Almost simultaneously two Dutch engineers visited the French bunkers and trenches to acquire technological know-how.<sup>4</sup> In May 1921 the officer who had led the telegraph department of the field army during the mobilization, went to the Rhineland in order to study modern means of communication<sup>5</sup> and, fi-



nally a Staff officer visited the British Army in July 1923, which, in his view, had little capacity left to quickly deploy to the continent and was suffering very much from austerity cuts.<sup>6</sup>

France was especially popular for visits after the war. Talks with the French authorities about this had already started in August 1919 and two months later a small stream of Dutch officers began to flow towards that country. Up to that time, there had never been so many Dutch officers detached abroad; it gave the Dutch attaché in Paris no end of work. In 1920 to 1922 we meet Dutch officers at for instance the *Centre d'études de chars de combat* in Versailles, the *Centre d'études tactiques d'artillerie* in Metz and the *Centre d'instructions* at Montargis.<sup>7</sup> The reports of these officers found their way to the General Staff. Thus the Dutch cavalry concluded that the Dutch terrain especially invited investments in anti-tank measures. A combination of aerial reconnaissance, machine guns with armour-piercing ammunition and the wet divided-up terrain could severely hamper tank action. Also the building of the Dutch anti-aircraft artillery was strongly influenced by the French example.<sup>8</sup> The only non-French detachment took place at an artillery observation battalion in Sweden in July/August 1922.<sup>9</sup> Probably the most influential detachment was the one, by one of the most prominent experts in trench warfare in the Netherlands, Petrus Josephus van Munnekrede (1873–1949). From November 1919 up to November 1920 this Staff officer visited the *Ecole supérieure de guerre* in Paris and remained detached for an additional two years in France.<sup>10</sup> Afterwards he became director of the Staff College in The Hague.

In 1920 to 1922 another Dutch specialist in tactical developments, Johannes Frederik van der Vijver (1880–1975), also attended this prestigious French military school and published between 1923 and 1927 a series of articles on French tactical developments in the most important Dutch military monthly, *Militaire Spectator*. He certainly influenced Dutch tactical thinking. Although the Belgian military attaché in The Hague still thought the Dutch officer corps displayed a dangerous pro-German prejudice, it was undeniable that French influence grew considerably after 1920.

### The public lesson: coping economically

The material mass consumer that warfare had become, the massive involvement of the world of private business in order to be able to conduct the modern war, was another subject to be discussed frequently. The liberal Member of Parliament, J. van Hamel (1880–1964), spoke of «The big enterprise of war»<sup>11</sup> and in his analysis of December 1916 on the character of modern war, J. C. C. Tonnet (1867–1937), a prominent Staff officer, mentioned the «deluge-like character» of the ammunition consumption. In his view, the war characterized itself by «grim, bloody bellicosity», whose «hor-



rors» defied imagination, with the world of industry and aviation having become the major players.<sup>12</sup>

The social-democrat leader P. J. Troelstra articulated the socialist counter argument. Now that the war had become synonymous with the world of the large industries, there was only one conclusion possible in his view: Modern warfare was beyond the capabilities of the Netherlands. He stated that if the Netherlands would have been involved in the past war, it would not have held out for more than two days, and it would have ended in a bloodbath. Besides, he did not consider the army an indispensable guarantee for the maintenance of neutrality.<sup>13</sup> The left-wing liberal MP H. P. Marchant, also an untiring critic of the defence policy, adopted a similar approach: the Netherlands simply lacked the industrial basis of a large power and therefore it should build up an entirely different defence.<sup>14</sup> In this respect and at that moment he was less radical than Troelstra. Marchant believed that only equilibrium between belligerents could give the Netherlands armed forces a role to play. But those armed forces would have to be built along modern lines, befitting a small state, instead of the traditional national armed forces. Marchant pleaded for an international police force within the framework of the League of Nations, and a combination of Marechaussee (military police), militia and Landstorm for interior use.<sup>15</sup> The liberal MP H. C. Dresselhuys pleaded in the Parliament for linking up the military and economic policies, based on the insight that economic potential had become essential for military potential.<sup>16</sup>

Another contribution came from artillery officer H. A. F. G. van Ermel Scherer who stated in a lecture held in December 1920 that war was no longer a matter for the military only, but that peoples, and entire economies had become the determining factors. In the future, nationalization, or even socialization, of essential companies might be the only solution. He advised studying the Soviet Russian measures.<sup>17</sup>

During the mobilization years the arms production and development had suffered badly from a lack of raw materials and know-how, making it painfully clear that the Dutch industrial infrastructure had not been equipped for conducting a modern technological war. Professor L. A. van Royen (1865–1946), the managing director of the *Munitiebureau*,<sup>18</sup> and with him the General Staff and the most important Dutch arms factory, the Artillery Construction Workshop at Zaandam,<sup>19</sup> agreed on this. But the 1920s proved not the right period to turn all those ideas and «lessons learned» into practice. Even leading figures in the chemical industry, aviation and the production of ordnance, who, together with the army, promoted during the mobilisation to reform those essential factories into «national industries» did not achieve much. The networks built during wartime quickly fell apart. The concentration that took place within the chemical industry was mainly commercially inspired, the military element hardly playing any



role.<sup>20</sup> Nor did the national aviation industry, so eagerly desired by several military ministers, reach full bloom, with Trompenburg – the only Dutch aircraft factory during WW I – going bankrupt and Fokker not maturing into a national aviation industry, although it did become an important company for the defence organization. The production of ordnance – virtually absent before the mobilization – was only small-scale after 1918 and was mainly based on companies that had come from Germany.<sup>21</sup> The only arms factory of any importance, the Artillery Construction Workshop, was given in the care of an investigative commission led by Delft professor I. P. de Vooy (1875–1955), who was very well acquainted with the world of Dutch business, but his mission was to size the factory down and examine possibilities for non-military production.<sup>22</sup>

On top of that, the Netherlands lacked an important foundation for an arms industry: the production of steel. In spite of pleas for a national steel industry for war purposes and contacts between the founder of Hoogovens and the Ministry of War, the IJmuiden steel works came into being without the active support or involvement of the military.<sup>23</sup>

All in all, industrial war preparations were wishful thinking mostly. The *Militaire Spectator* pleaded in 1922 for close ties between the world of industry and the officer corps and a thorough analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the industrial capacity. Were any essential companies situated in vulnerable parts of the country? Was cooperation necessary? How big was the dependence on coal and other raw materials from abroad? Companies should prepare in peacetime for their war task, as well as set up a distribution of raw materials for the world of industry.<sup>24</sup> J. C. Snijders (1852–1939), the former Commander-in-chief, too, on the basis of his war experiences, pleaded for economic preparation for war as a «common interest of the people». <sup>25</sup> Finally, the managing director of the Artillery Construction Workshop, G. van Dam (1868–1962), delivered a lecture in the *Industrieële Club* in Amsterdam on 24 October 1924 along the same lines, taking the American *Army Ordnance Association* as an example of a close relationship between the industry and the military. But the establishment of something remotely like a preparation for war was a long way in coming; not until the 1930ies did it emerge, and again it was Van Royen who played a pivotal role in it. Up to that time, this broad issue was in the hands of a small bureau of the General Staff, the bureau *Voorziening behoeften in oorlogstijd* (Bureau for war time requirements), led by a Captain.<sup>26</sup>



## The public debate: old and new challenges for national survival

Public debate, especially after 1923 was dominated by a wide variety of anti-war arguments. The social democrats embraced pacifism and disarmament from 1924 onwards as one of the cornerstones of their political program. As mentioned before they argued that the character of modern war, its enormous dimensions and the industrial might involved, rendered anything a small country like the Netherlands could do totally meaningless. Warfare had outgrown the scope of small states; it was just way beyond their means. The only thing the socialists were prepared to pay for was a police force within the framework of the League of Nations. The most extreme members of the social-democratic party even called national defence a criminal illusion.<sup>27</sup>

It was Protestants and conservative liberals who embraced the army most wholeheartedly. They also focused on morale, but in a more civilian form, and called it national strength. In many publications Dutch officers observed that the World War had shown war was a national effort. Waging war meant involving the entire population, the industry and all the «moral powers» a country could muster. Terms used most frequently in this debate were «national strength» or «national power» (in Dutch *volkskracht* or *weerbhaarheid*), meaning the collective power a population could bring to bear. In this military, economic, mental and physical elements were combined.

Two prominent officers stand out in this debate: Willem Edmond van Dam van Isselt (1870–1951) and Pieter Willem Scharroo (1883–1963). The first was a General Staff officer and director of the Staff College and the second a prominent engineer, one of the Dutch experts on concrete field fortifications. But both men had a «second life» in the public domain and that makes them interesting examples of how military themes related to the war period were intertwined with the public debate.

Van Dam was a prominent member of the Society for National Strength (*Volksweerbhaarheid*), established at the time of the Second Boer War in South Africa, a war that had stirred Dutch society considerably. Not only did the Dutch population sympathise with the «Dutch» Boers, but that war also became a symbol of a major power crushing a small one just for imperial and economic gains. It had been might over right. Van Dam's themes from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards were firstly an alternative organisation for the Dutch defence, less a copy of the German army and more a reflection of what he called Dutch national characteristics. This meant, according to Van Dam, a «people's army», a close merger between people and army based on general conscription and a conscripted officer corps. This army would find its strength in the fact it was rooted deeply within Dutch society. In a military sense its stance would be defensive, geared towards



protecting the entire national territory, inch by inch as it were. It was, in fact, a combination of a Swiss-like militia system and a more traditional, professional army. According to Van Dam, the effect such an army organisation would have on society as a whole was that civilian values would permeate the army and military virtues would permeate society.

His second theme was the strengthening of the population, both physically and mentally. He predicted that the future of the state depended on the strength of its population and the willingness of the population to show enthusiasm for upholding and reinforcing that state. National unity of effort was important. This was to be brought about by gymnastic and military training of the Dutch youths from the time before they went to school until they were studying at university. Physical training made young men more vigorous and energetic, not only for the moment the fatherland called on them, but it would also improve them in their civilian life, so strengthening both army and civil society. A social-darwinist, Van Dam thought this an essential element for a secure future.

The World War had proven, in his eyes, the correctness of his opinion. The Belgians had shown, through their heroic fight at the inundations in western Flanders, that a determined people could resist the best army in the world by using specific field conditions. Low-lying wet polder landscape was also a dominant feature of the Dutch terrain, so Van Dam argued the Dutch should have more faith in their own strength. Also, the years from 1914 to 1918 had proven that waging modern war took a national effort, the very thing Van Dam had always propagated.<sup>28</sup>

Van Dam's views enjoyed a measure of popularity among liberals, but they were a relatively small group. The Dutch society was anything but unified, and the war had made social divisions even greater. Van Dam's «solutions» in fact seem more in place in 1900 than in 1920. In the political debate on the future of the army organisation they carried little weight.

Engineer Scharroo published regularly on trench warfare and field fortifications. He can be considered as one of the army's eminent experts in these fields. But from 1915 Scharroo showed an additional interest, like Van Dam, in sports.<sup>29</sup> As the chairman of the National Athletics Union and a member of the National Olympic Committee (NOC), he became a prominent member among Dutch sports officials. The foundation for Scharroo's philosophy had been laid during the mobilization. For those who worried about the physical development of the Dutch younger generation and about their lack of discipline, the mobilization was an excellent chance to train a large proportion of the young and to teach them a love of sports.<sup>30</sup> In the eyes of these advocates, there was far too little attention for physical development in the primary and secondary schools, and military service could not compensate for that deficiency. Pressure from the Inspector of Military Education and the Inspection of Physical Education, established in



1913, had not been very effective with the Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for the school curriculum. During the mobilization both organizations received support from the NOC. The sports unions enabled the soldiers to get a taste of all sorts of sports and the Ministry of War organized large sports events, in cooperation with the NOC, which often enjoyed royal interest: in Amsterdam in July 1916, in The Hague in September 1916 and August 1917, and in Gouda in May 1917. Scharroo was closely involved in all these events.

As the mobilization lasted, the propaganda for sports was intensified and the arguments assumed a more emphatically military ring. The NOC pointed out that in the belligerent countries sports had boosted morale and physical development. It also emphasized that only those who were the strongest physically could wage modern war effectively, and terms such as «people's strength» and «defence force» increasingly featured in the sports propaganda.

In Scharroo's view the war had demonstrated the importance of «people's strength» and this then was his message in 1919. Only if societies in all their constituent parts were prepared to go all the way for the war effort, would victory be possible. In the Netherlands Scharroo observed the development had taken the reverse course: «degeneration, no sense of community, lawlessness, weakness, lack of discipline.» Sport was the most suitable instrument to change the situation for the better. Scharroo thought it a disgrace that so few children got sports classes at school, that there were so few play gardens and that the army showed so little interest in sports,<sup>31</sup> in spite of all the good initiatives from the mobilization years.<sup>32</sup> In fact, sports and physical training of the young in general were important first steps, more so because they would lead to a stronger economy and it was in the economic field that Scharroo foresaw the first major struggle for survival in which in its present state Holland might undergo.<sup>33</sup>

For Scharroo this economic element was closely linked to his plea for physical development. In September 1919 he published a pamphlet on the necessity of making the entire population economically stronger as a basis for military strength, and he spoke on this theme during a conference of *Volksweerbaarheid* in Utrecht in July 1921.<sup>34</sup> He had shed his light on the economic side of things on earlier occasions as the founder of the *Militair Technisch Tijdschrift* (Military Technical Journal) in May 1918.

With their emphasis on the military, and therefore national, importance of a physically well-trained younger generation, Van Dam van Isselt and Scharroo fitted well in a movement that had begun at the end of the nineteenth century. It was the period of the introduction of personal conscription, but Van Dam van Isselt thought the period in arms too short to adequately train a recruit physically. Compensation could be found in physical exercise outside the army, and the civilian education was to provide the



solution.<sup>35</sup> It proved to be no easy route, as there were many objections to the military angle in educational circles and the introduction of physical education in primary and secondary schools went extremely slowly. A subsidy from the Ministry of War to the Netherlands Gymnastics Union and involvement of the Inspection for Physical Education had not led to any spectacular results, in spite of the passionate appeals from the military by, among others, Van Dam van Isselt.

In May 1919 the report of a commission that had been appointed in December 1917 by the Minister of War to investigate the physical education was published. It confirmed the sombre picture: only 3 per cent of the recruits had had enough physical education at school! In line with Van Dam van Isselt and Scharroo, the commission deemed this situation unacceptable in view of the character of modern warfare, which demanded «stamina, strength of spirit and skill» of every soldier. The report stated that war «brought nerve shocking influences which far exceed those of life in times of peace, even in the most adverse of circumstances.» It was therefore necessary to offer enough physical education from a young age onwards. This «physical education of the people» ought to be the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (established in 1918) in the service of the general good, «for the race» and in order to keep military training as short as possible. That would mean the defence budget could remain modest, while the young men were still physically trained.

Directly after the war, government interference with sports increased, but the military organization did not play a big part in this. In 1916 the Ministry of War had withdrawn from the organization for physical education in schools and the measures that were introduced later were all civilian in character: construction of more play gardens (1919); athletics and field games next to gymnastics in secondary education (1920) and a decision to strive for obligatory physical exercise classes in primary and secondary education (1921). But, as Scharroo disappointedly concluded in 1922, most of these measures were more word than deed. In fact incentives to strengthen physical education and sport after 1922 were for the most part private initiatives, culminating in 1924 in the allocation of the 1928 Olympic Games to Amsterdam. Scharroo played a prominent part in this and many other sportive projects.

Van Dam and Scharroo, finally, made an appearance together at the first post-war conference of the *Tucht-Unie* (Union for Discipline) in Utrecht in October 1922, whose theme was the struggle against indiscipline among the Dutch people. With military pundits Snijders and Minister of War J. van Dijk in their audience, they presented themes such as the relation between sports, the armed forces and the enhancement of discipline among the young and national defence strength.<sup>36</sup>

Van Dam and Scharroo were not the only ones feeling the Dutch were



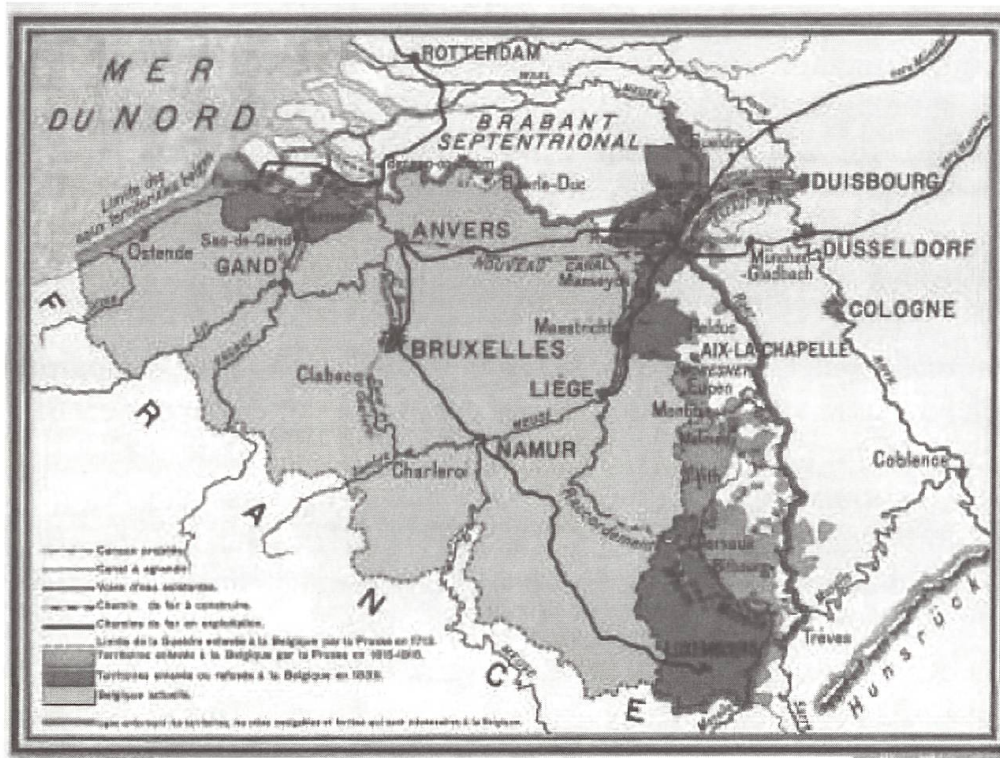
missing the true lesson of the war. In the early twenties, when uncertainty about the future was rife, there were more initiatives related to the theme of national strength. A good example is the national conferences on «strengthening the Dutch nation» held in 1919, 1920 and 1921. Officers, politicians, women's rights activists (but only the more conservative ones) and scientists discussed many aspects of the central question of how to strengthen the Dutch nation to be prepared for the future. The topics for discussion ranged from a stronger army, economic war preparations, sports and education, to the role of the colonies, of women and of the press. At first, the conferences attracted reasonable attention, maybe because the former Commander-in-Chief was involved and the Royal family showed interest and approval, but public interest dwindled rapidly. A fourth conference was never planned.<sup>37</sup>

Were there no dissident voices? One former officer constituted a remarkable dissonant in the military contribution to the discussion on national defence: in December 1919 the retired officer and historian G. J. W. Koolemans Beijnen (1848–1928) pleaded for disarmament. The course and end of the World War had made an indelible impression on him, giving him the conviction that the world should be disarmed, beginning with the Netherlands. The retired Lieutenant General had become a true pacifist. His views were founded on three considerations. First, Prussian militarism had been defeated on the battlefield and Germany had been forced after the war to drastically limit the size of its armed forces. Second, the «war eager» autocratic regimes of southern and central Europe had been replaced by peace loving democracies. Finally – and he deemed this decisive –, with the League of Nations an international body had been created which allowed the peaceful settlement of conflicts between states. For Beijnen the League of Nations signified a watershed: Wars had become obsolete and would not be waged in Europe anymore in the foreseeable future, which he put at some forty to fifty years.<sup>38</sup> His point of view triggered some indignant reactions from several of his former colleagues. On 30 November 1921 Van Dam van Isselt debated with the apostate general in public on the subject of national disarmament.<sup>39</sup>

### War on the doorstep: a strategic environment in flux

The demands for annexation of Dutch territory, presented by the Belgians in Paris in 1919 as justifiable revisions of the 1839 treaty, caused a huge outcry in Holland. The Dutch did their utmost to prove the «dutchness» of the areas in question and even feared war might break out and discussed a possible offensive into Belgium. In September 1919 for instance, rumours circulated that Belgian volunteers, just like d'Annuzio's famous raid on Fiume in that same month, planned a «raid on Maastricht».





Belgian annexion demands 1919. (Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and of Military History)

Moreover, with Belgian troops occupying the northern Rhineland, the Belgian army surrounded the entire south of Holland. But that was not all; in 1920 Belgium and France closed a military treaty that ended Belgian neutrality. Together with the French occupation of the southern Rhineland, this meant strategically an enormous strengthening of French military presence just south of the Dutch border. Finally, in January 1923, French and Belgian troops invaded the Ruhr area and that fact led the Dutch General Staff to work out a scenario of what to do when the country was attacked from the south. A retreat behind the great rivers that cross the country from east to west was in that case considered inevitable.

More than ever, military arguments dominated the Dutch-Belgian relationship. Belgium had chosen for a military alliance as solution for its security problems, thereby bringing France into the area as a main player, whereas Holland remained dedicated to neutrality, as that had seemed the panacea that had kept the country out of the world war.

Both the Belgian and Dutch decisions raise two interesting questions, first about the Belgian annexation demands and second about the different interpretations of the consequences of the war. It was to drive the countries apart even more than before.

The Belgian wish to annex Dutch territory was already expressed by officers in the first weeks of the war. The Dutch denial to let British warships sail to Antwerp was the main reason, but it kindled dormant feelings of dissatisfaction with the 1839 treaty that had separated the two countries.



When a Dutch diplomat in London made a remarkable utterance to his Belgian colleague that Holland might trade parts of Zeeland and Limburg for German territory, it was fuel to the fire.<sup>40</sup> But during the war, annexations did not become Belgian government policy however, nor did the king support it. More influential for public opinion were the ideas for «grande Belgique» brought forward from 1915 onward by politicians and journalists from Brussels and Wallonia such as Fernand Neuray (1874–1934) and Pierre Nothomb (1887–1966). The last can be considered the most prominent voice from 1916 onwards. Their publications were accompanied by small-scale agitation by pro-Belgian agents in Dutch Limburg and Zeeland, but that did not have a great impact.

On the other hand, it is remarkable with what ease the Allied powers, both politicians and military, even as the German army was still well entrenched in France, already discussed territorial changes after the war: Who was to get Alsace-Lorraine? Who was to get Luxemburg? Who was to get the Rhineland? All these questions were discussed as if the eighteenth century of cabinet warfare had not been buried yet. The French General Staff already from 1916 onwards strived for a closer union with Belgium that would contribute more to the future defence of France if it possessed the strategically important areas of Dutch Zeeland and Limburg.<sup>41</sup> Philippe Pétain, on an allied military conference on 25 July 1917, declared himself in favour of those annexations. The Dutch were to be compensated with German territory, especially eastern Friesland (with the harbour of Emden) and the northern Rhineland around Cleves.<sup>42</sup> On both areas the Dutch could, theoretically present historic claims, but they were both fully germanised and the Dutch were not interested at all. Nevertheless this trade-off of territory remained part of diplomatic exchanges into the early months of 1919.<sup>43</sup> Foch also approved it, as the Belgian annexations would strengthen the French hold on the Rhine. French politicians were more hesitant to support these military arguments wholeheartedly. Only Philippe Berthelot (1866–1934), a close associate of Jules Cambon (1845–1935) expressed his support.<sup>44</sup> The French war plans of 1923/24 did in fact include the possibility of occupying Dutch territory in order to protect French influence in western Germany.<sup>45</sup>

Also the British were hesitant. They did not feel comfortable with a stronger French influence on the Scheldt. It is therefore all the more remarkable that the British military leaders William Robertson (1860–1933) and Henry Jackson (1855–1929) declared as their personal view in August 1916 to be in favour of the French plan to compensate Holland with German territory.<sup>46</sup>

The Belgian king and government held their distance from the annexation demand, mainly because they did not want to endanger relations with Holland. This changed at the end of the war. In France and Belgium anti-



Dutch press articles and comments became widespread. Not only were the Dutch seen as war-profiteers, the retreat of tens of thousands of German soldiers from Belgium via Dutch Limburg back to Germany and the asylum granted to the German Emperor by the Dutch, both in November 1918, provoked tempers even more. Nothomb peaked in membership of the *Comité de Politique Nationale* that published its much-debated map of *Belgique mutilée*. But it was all very short lived. None of the major powers supported any actual territorial changes and the Belgian government could not force matters in Paris diplomatically.<sup>47</sup> Any military solution was also out of the question; after four years of war, depredation and occupation, Belgium was exhausted. Even Foch had to accept that French ambitions in the Rhineland would have to be met without the possession of Dutch Limburg.

The Belgian answer was to find security by aligning itself militarily with France. This was not undisputed as it made Belgium, according to critics, the buffer to protect France in the next Franco-German war that all military experts expected would come. From that moment, French influence resounded in the Belgian war planning.

The Dutch on the other hand actually feared the Germans as much as the Belgians did. Dutch war planning of the early 1920s was dominated by worries about a German military revival and by the conviction the next war would not spare Dutch territory, neutral or not. One might expect that this military opinion would lead to questions on neutrality as the leading principle for national security. But it did not. The dominant idea after 1918 was that neutrality had kept the country safe and would do so in the future, even though the Dutch were disappointed in the behaviour of major powers that had during the war flouted many legal rules on neutrality. Notwithstanding, for many in Holland the League of Nations promised a better future, and neutrality was deeply ingrained in Dutch political culture. Moreover, the Belgian pro-Allied stance had made that country unacceptable either as ally or as example to follow. Paradoxically, the military fought an internal political struggle to keep the budget cuts acceptable on the theme that a strong army could protect the neutral territory; while behind closed doors it more realistically planned Dutch participation in possible future coalition wars against Germany.

For the Belgian-Dutch relationship the planning shows that a war between the two countries was unimaginable, but as part of a larger Western European conflict, Dutch-Belgian military cooperation, which might have made a difference, was unimaginable as well. Military logic from the Dutch perspective was completely opposite to the Belgian; national historical experiences and cultural attitudes proved dominant.



## Conclusion

From 1918 onwards the military leadership tried to secure a modern field army for the Netherlands. It did not really consider any alternative form of defence organisation. The Dutch professional officers were, for the most part, deeply influenced by the idea that only a continental-style army could protect the Netherlands sufficiently, could lend the Netherlands international credibility and meet the cultural needs of a military elite, deeply influenced by the German military example but now focussing more on France. Exercises and new regulations were certainly influenced by thorough analysis of recent experiences of the warring Great Powers, but the widening gap between modern war and financial and economic capabilities was not fundamentally addressed.

The public debate centred on different aspects of national unity. Its main theme was that war making in the future was a national effort on economic, industrial, personal and moral levels. It was people on the left wing of the political spectrum who concluded that this was beyond the scope of a small nation. They propagated other forms of defence. But this was no new phenomenon. The left had for decades refused to support the classic German-style defence organisation. And the arguments brought forward by officers as main lessons of the war were also not really new. It was in many aspects a debate already held around 1900. The fear that ideologies would split the country apart; that the future of the country depended on vague, social-darwinist inspired notions of national strength and that the army could be the national vehicle for unity and strength were in fact rather conservative notions, dating from the late nineteenth century. It is remarkable to see a revival of those notions after 1918, when both the European future and internal cohesion were rife with uncertainties. But the fundamental questions raised by Van Dam and Scharroo, amongst others, were too comprehensive for the General Staff to solve.

Although publications and conferences were abundant, it cannot be said that Dutch society as a whole was very interested in military ideas on 'national power'. The political discussion on defence centred on costs and conscription on the one hand and abhorrence of modern war on the other, not on fundamental changes. The public debate touched military decision making only marginally. The Netherlands lacked veterans as an influential pressure group and had not been physically damaged by the war. When a kind of national consensus emerged, it was on pacifism, anti-militarism and disgust of the horrors of modern industrial war. Ideas on economic and industrial war preparation were not realized until the late 1930's, and physical education of the youth did expand but not directly related to future war planning or social-darwinist notions of national survival. In that sense, Van Dam and Scharroo were voices of the past. The public as a whole never showed



any interest in the field army as something prestigious or of national importance. Many critics were in fact right, army and people were strangers to each other and the mobilisation of 1914 to 1918 had not changed that.

- 1 This article is based on Klinkert, Wim, *Defending neutrality. The Netherlands prepares for war, 1900–1925*, Leiden/Boston 2013.
- 2 National Archive The Hague (NA), archive Headquarters Field Army, inv. nr. 25; archive General Staff inv. nr. 25 and archive Ministry of War, inv. nrs. 4980 and 4981. Bruyn, J. N., *Beknopt handboek bij de studie der tactiek volgens de ervaringen uit den wereldoorlog 1914–1918*, Eibergen 1922.
- 3 NA, archive Ministry of War, inv. nr. 4975.
- 4 They visited the Verdun battlefields, the forts near Reims and the Flemish coastal batteries. A lecture on this trip was held for KIVI (Royal Institute for Engineers) on 29 December 1921.
- 5 NA, archive Ministry of War, inv. nr. 4984.
- 6 NA, archive Ministry of War, inv. nr. 4999.
- 7 NA, archive Ministry of War, inv. nr. 1514.
- 8 Lecture 7 March 1924 published in the *Orgaan ter beoefening van de Krijgswetenschap (OBK)* (Journal for War Studies).
- 9 NA, archive Ministry of War, inv. nr. 4992.
- 10 OBK, 1922/23, 128–130 and Brabant Historical Information Center 's-Hertogenbosch (BHIC), archive De Quay, inv. nrs. 3096 and 3098.
- 11 *Handelingen Tweede Kamer* (proceedings of Parliament, Second Chamber) (TK), 1 February 1918. The proceedings are published on the Internet: [www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl](http://www.statengeneraaldigitaal.nl).
- 12 Tonnet, J. C. C., «Moderne oorlogvoering», speech 22 December 1916, published in OBK n. p.
- 13 TK 20 November 1917, 31 January 1918, 8 and 9 June 1921.
- 14 TK 23 November 1917 and 18 February 1919.
- 15 TK 20 February 1919.
- 16 TK 28 November 1918.
- 17 OBK, 1920/21, 146–150.
- 18 This bureau (1915–1918) managed military production, innovation, acquisition abroad and formed military-industrial-scientific networks. See: Klinkert, W., *Defending neutrality*, 65–130.
- 19 North of Amsterdam, within the fortress ring around the capital.
- 20 Schot, J. W., *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw*, Zutphen 2000.
- 21 Aalders, G., *Operatie Safehaven*, Amsterdam 2006.
- 22 Vooy, I. P. de, *Verslag der commissie in zake de vredesarbeid van de Artillerie Inrichtingen*, 's-Gravenhage 1920 and Baneke, David, *Synthetisch denken*, Hilversum 2008, 103–118.
- 23 Vries, J. de, *Hoogovens IJmuiden 1918–1968*, IJmuiden 1968, 65 and 111.
- 24 *Militaire Spectator* 1922, 664–670.
- 25 Netherlands Institute for Military History The Hague, collection Snijders, inv. nr. 136.
- 26 Bakker, M., *In de schaduw van de totale oorlog*, MA thesis University of Amsterdam 2010.
- 27 TK 18 February 1919, 15 and 16 December 1919, 10 December 1920 and 8 June 1921.
- 28 Klinkert, Wim, «A Dutch mass army? Dutch liberal ideas and practices to enlarge the army, 1914–1922», *Journal of First World War Studies* 2 (October 2011), 233–248.
- 29 Klinkert, Wim, «Piet Scharroo», in: Boterman, F. and Melching, W. (ed.), *Na de catastrofe, de Eerste Wereldoorlog en de zoektocht naar een nieuw Europa*, Amsterdam 2014, 241–254.
- 30 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 24 July 1921.
- 31 In Scharroo's spirit was the «Voorschrift voor lichaams-oefeningen», (Manual on physical exercise) published in 1920, in which, apart from physical training also sports, games, obstacle courses, athletics and hand grenade throwing were dealt with.
- 32 Scharroo, P. W., *De betekenis van de lichamelijke opvoeding voor de economische weerkracht*, Leiden 1919.
- 33 Dam van Isselt, W. van, «De betekenis en de verdere ontwikkeling van onze weermacht na demobilisatie», *Onze Eeuw* 1918 and OBK, 29 April 1919.
- 34 *Het Vaderland*, 24 July 1921.
- 35 The most important advocates for physical education at schools for military purposes were an officer in the Royal Marines, Joor Bastiaan Verheij (1851–1913) and the Physical Training teacher of the Erasmus gymnasium in Rotterdam, Sebastiaan van Aken (1856–1927).
- 36 *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, 28 May and 19–22 October 1922.
- 37 The conferences, each year in September, were covered extensively in the daily press.
- 38 *Het Vaderland*, 24 December 1919; [www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn5/koolemans](http://www.inghist.nl/Onderzoek/Projecten/BWN/lemmata/bwn5/koolemans) and Vogel, J., «Een generaal wordt pacifist», *Parade* 17 (1996), 98–111.
- 39 Moeyes, Paul, *De sterke arm, de zachte hand: het Nederlandse leger en de neutraliteitspolitiek, 1839–1939*, Amsterdam 2006, 353 and *Het Vaderland*, 12 January 1920.
- 40 It was Edgar Michiels van Verduynen (1885–1952), who spoke to Gaston de Ramaix (1878–1937), secretary of the Belgian legation. The Belgian diplomat Edmond de Gaiffier d'Hestroy (1866–1935) commented that only in friendly consultation a swap of territory would be acceptable to Holland. He thought it very unlikely. See Haag, H., *Le comte Charles de Broqueville*, Bruxelles 1999, 336–337 and Palo, M., *Belgian war aims*, Ph. D. thesis, University of Illinois 1978, 255.
- 41 Prete, R., «French military war aims 1914–1916», *The Historical Journal* 28, 4 (1985), 887–899 here 896.
- 42 Palo, War aims, 255, 264 and 606.
- 43 National Archives London, FO 608/120 and FO 608/4 (1919). On British war aims: Fest, W. B., «British War Aims», *The Historical Journal* 15 (June 1972), 285–308, here 289; Woodward, D. R., «Britain's Brass-Hats and the question of a compromise peace», *Military Affairs* 35, 2 (April 1971), 63–68, here 64 and Rothwell, V., *British War Aims*, Oxford 1971, 49–52. On French security politics, Jackson, P., «French Security and a British 'Continental Commitment' after the First World War: a Reassessment», *The English historical review* 126 (April 2011), 345–385, here 347s.
- 44 Palo, War aims, 404 and Haag, Broqueville, 452–456.
- 45 Provoost, G., *Vlaanderen en het militair-politiek beleid in België*, Leuven 1976, 310.
- 46 Palo, War aims, 398s.
- 47 Macmillan, M., *Peacemakers. Six months that changed the world*, London 2002, 285s.