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Guarded Neutrality

**The Internment of Foreign Military Personnel in
The Netherlands during the First World War.**

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~ Abstract ~

The Dutch do not consider themselves to be a warlike nation. Traditionally isolated from mainstream European affairs, in 1914 they had no major allegiances that bound them to any one side of the conflict. Geographically and economically caught between two of the major belligerents, Great Britain and Germany, the Netherlands was constantly vulnerable to attack from either side. In adopting a position of neutrality at the beginning of the war, the Dutch took a huge gamble.

The mobilization of the Dutch army offered some deterrent to a possible invader but although significant in relation to the size of the Dutch population the Dutch army was far too small to offer a realistic long-term deterrent. It therefore fell to the Dutch diplomats to pursue a course that would underscore and protect the Dutch neutral position. Whilst the Dutch government was forced to compromise and adapt their neutral stance in some areas, as a result of pressure from the belligerents and most notably in matters relating to trade and shipping, it had complete control over issues relating to internment. The internment of approximately 50,000 foreign troops in the Netherlands, some for almost the entire four years of the war, provided a convenient showcase for the Dutch to demonstrate their adherence to international law and their impartiality towards the all of the belligerents. It also allowed the Dutch to demonstrate their talents as international peacemakers and negotiators by providing a means for Great Britain and Germany to meet and agree treaties, even though at the same time they were still fighting a very bloody war.

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~ Chapter 1 ~

A Neutral Country

Introduction

The first two decades of the twentieth century were eventful ones for all of the countries of Europe, indeed for most of the countries of the world. For the Netherlands they were the decades that defined the position that it wanted to take on the world stage: politically involved, important and influential but above all neutral. With its history of empire and global trading the Netherlands was used to a position of influence in world affairs, indeed her strong links to the Far East and the Americas made her far more of a world power than some of her larger European neighbours. By the turn of the twentieth century, however, her Empire, both fiscal and political, was on the wane and her role as a major player in world affairs was on the decline. Out of this came a new role, that of host to a series of international conferences aimed at providing a legal framework for the conduct of international relations and, if needed, international war.¹ The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 established the Netherlands, in Dutch eyes

¹ The recommendations from these conferences were enshrined in Dutch law. Tuinen, C. van., 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag', in Brugmans, Prof. Dr. H., *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*, (Amsterdam: Elseviers, 1920). p.63-102, p.64.

at least, as an unallied but politically savvy nation whose contribution to world affairs would no longer depend on military or fiscal clout but on integrity and legality.²

As the war clouds gathered over Europe the Netherlands held firm to its belief that it was a neutral country and refused to offer its support to any of the major European nations. As the threat of a European war grew, the Netherlands held on to its declared neutral status whilst at the same time holding talks with its near neighbours about defence alliances. Its representatives loudly proclaimed the Dutch intention to remain peaceful whilst throughout 1913 its army was holding exercises designed to repel any invading troops that crossed the Dutch frontier. Dutch spending on defence in 1914 was, per capita, twice that of its near neighbour Belgium and a third more than Switzerland.³ But when the 'Api Api' telegram reached The Hague on 25 July 1914, signaling the large scale movement of German troops towards the Dutch and Belgian borders, the confidence of the Dutch Cabinet in its ability to remain neutral by declaration alone failed and the Dutch army became one of the first to call up all of its troops in preparation for war.

The story of the Api Api telegram is an interesting one. The exact circumstances surrounding the telegram, who sent it and why, are unclear, but it is generally accepted

² There are a number of works available that consider Dutch foreign policy in the period prior to the First World War. These include: Vandenbosch, Amry., *Dutch Foreign Policy Since 1815. A Study in Small Power Politics*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959). Colenbrander, H.T., 'De internationale positie van Nederland tijdens, voor en na den wereldoorlog', in Brugmans, H., *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1920), Smit C., *Hoogtij der neutraliteitspolitiek. De buitenlands politiek van Nederland, 1899-1919*, (Leiden: 1959). Smit, C., *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog (Vol 1)*, (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1971), Smit, C., *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlands politiek van Nederland 1848-1919, (deel 4 1914-7, deel 5 1917-19, deel 7 buitenlandse bronnen 1914-17 (2 vols) deel 8 buitenlandse bronnen 1917-19 (2 vols)*, (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), Wels, Cornelis Boudewijn., *Aloofness and Neutrality*, (Utrecht: Hes Publishers, 1982).

³ Ferguson, Niall., *The Pity of War*, (London: The Penguin Press, 1998).p.101.

that it was sent by J.J. Le Roy of the Dutch-German Telegraph Company to Forbes Wels, a member of the Dutch General Staff.⁴ The phrase Api Api translates as Fire Fire in Malaysian and was clearly intended as a warning of an imminent threat to the Netherlands. Informal intelligence gathering was usual at this time but it is not clear exactly what threat this telegram was alerting the Dutch government to. It was some five days after the telegram was received that the Dutch Army finally mobilized, so it could be argued that the warning had not been taken as urgent. Nevertheless, the telegram was considered important enough for Snijders, the Dutch Commander-in-Chief and Bosboom, the Dutch Minister of War, to mention it in their later recollections of the mobilisation period.⁵

The Dutch army remained mobilized for the entire duration of the war. Its numbers increased, by conscription, as the threat to Dutch security increased, but at times of low threat the soldiers were released for short periods to go home. Even in times of war the harvest had to be gathered, children were born and businesses needed attending to. The political and cultural life of the country continued. This mobilization was not the only impact that the First World War would have on the Netherlands. Its close proximity to the fighting meant that although never actually invaded by foreign troops, a large number of soldiers from both sides of the conflict would cross Dutch borders in search

⁴ Van Tuyll van Serooskerken Hubert, P., 'Inside Knowledge: Api-Api and the Netherlands' Mobilization', http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/~kansite/www_one/comment/tuyll2.htm/, (14 June 2000) 1997.p.4 and Woltring, J., 'De eerste jaren van de Militaire Inlichtingendienst', *Militaire Spectator*, 134,(1965),p.566-571, p.567.

⁵ See Bosboom, N., *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden, augustus 1914-mei 1917*, (Gorinchem: J. Noorduyn & Zoon,1933).p.2&6 and Snijders, 'Mobilisatie-Herinneringen 1914-18' No 16 IMG DC 91A/3 May 1931. Interestingly, a similar telegraph sent to the Governor General of the Netherlands Indies from an unknown source claiming that the Japanese fleet had entered Wijnkoops Baai on the south coast of West Java proved to be an elaborate hoax. Dijk, Kees, Van., *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, (Leiden, KITLV Press, 2007).p.125.

of refuge and often medical help. It is these troops, and the Dutch reaction to them, that will form the basis of this thesis.

Neutrality in a time of 'Total War'

It is easy to see the two decades before 1914 only in terms of their eventual consequences for the First World War. The old orders were weakening, and in their place new movements and ideals were emerging that were supported by the advance of modern technology and an increasing ease in communications that was starting to shrink the world in a way that had not been seen before. This viewpoint is perhaps valid for those nations that fought in the war and suffered heavy losses. Other countries, like the Netherlands, who declared and maintained a neutral stance throughout the war, saw this period in a different way. International affairs after 1900 can be viewed both as a time when the initial steps were taken in a drama that could only lead to war and also as a period of time when changing attitudes and the rise of international organisations and diplomatic alliances appeared to make a global war not only unlikely but also impossible.⁶ With hindsight, Hosbawm writes about the First World War as a 'zero sum game', a war without limits and one that was fought in a manner which would only ensure total victory or total loss.⁷ The adoption of this 'all or nothing' attitude by the belligerents had several consequences for the neutral countries,

⁶ Roberts, J.M., *Europe 1880-1945*, (London and New York: Longman, 1994, second edition),p.253
Kennedy, Paul., *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, (London: Fontana Press, 1989),p.322, Ponting, Clive., *Thirteen Days*, (London: Pimlico, 2003).p.xi-x., Ogle, Roderick., *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).p.33. Keegan, John.,*The First World War*, (London: Random House, 1998).p.10. and Maier, C.S., 'Wargames: 1914-1919' Rotberg, Robert, I., & Rabb, Theodore, K.,(eds) *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1989).p.256.

⁷ Hosbawm, Eric.,*The Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, (London: Abacus, 1995).p.29.

not least economic, geographical and political (all of which are dealt with at later points in this thesis). The main consequence of this attitude for the Netherlands in the summer of 1914 was that unlike a regional conflict a 'total war' could not be avoided by simply remaining out of the fighting. Nor, unfortunately, could it, or any of the smaller neutrals, confidently rely entirely on international law to protect their position. From the very first days of the war there was always the possibility that one of the belligerent nations, fighting an all out war, would ignore the restraints of international law and put its own interests before that of the international community or, more specifically, any small neutral nation that got in its way. Marwick has also defined total war as a time of vast disruption and destruction that tested the existing social and political structures and what was to become increasing apparent as the war progressed, was that as well as placing a great strain on their diplomatic relations the neutrals, and the Netherlands especially, would feel the impact of this 'total war' on almost every aspect of their internal and domestic affairs.⁸

As the host of two major conferences in 1899 and 1907 which were intended to reduce the possibility of war, the Netherlands could be forgiven for hoping that future conflicts would be resolved around a table rather than on a battlefield. A belief in the rule of law prevailed.⁹ The unsatisfactory conclusion of the 1907 conference, however, did perhaps cast a shadow on the Dutch view of a peaceful Europe. The failure to agree on a naval limitation treaty and the subsequent intensification of the German/Anglo naval race was just one example of negotiation, however well intentioned, failing to achieve its

⁸ Beckett, Ian F.W., 'Total War', Emersley, Clive, Marwick, Arthur, & Simpson, Wendy, *War, Peace and Social Change in Twentieth-Century Europe*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1994), p2.

⁹ Keegan, *The First World War*. p.8.

aim.¹⁰ There have been many volumes written about the years leading up to the First World War and the causes of the war.¹¹ Amongst the many divergent opinions offered on the most important features of the period and the most likely causes of the conflict, one thing remains constant. None of the major works on the pre-war period or the causes of the war devotes any significant attention to the European Neutrals. In a few of these books the emergence of America as a world power earns it some discussion, but the Netherlands and its Scandinavian neighbours only feature as shaded areas on maps of the time. To many historians the Netherlands' only claim to significance in the early years of the new century was as a venue for the 1899 and 1907 conferences. Tuchman sums up the mood quite successfully when she describes the choice of the 1899 conference venue as being 'The Hague, as the capital of a small neutral country'.¹²

So what was that 'small neutral country' like in the decades before the war? In 1913 The Netherlands celebrated a jubilee, one hundred years since the House of Orange had returned to reclaim and revitalise Dutch independence after years of French and Spanish influence. In those one hundred years the Netherlands had once again regained its

¹⁰ Kennedy, Paul., *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, (New York: Humanity Books, 1980).p.442 and Beckett, 'Total War', p.30.

¹¹ Amongst the many books written about the origins of the First World War a few that cover the diplomatic elements as well as the purely military are: Hosbawn, Eric., *The Age of Extremes, The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, London: Abacus 1995) Schaepe-drijver, Sophie, de., *De Grootte Oorlog: het konrijk België tijdens de grootte oorlog*, (Amsterdam and Antwerp:Atlas,1997)' Tuchman, B., *August 1914*, (London: Macmillan), Tuchman, B., *The Proud Tower. A portrait of the world before the war. 1890-1914*, (Toronto: 1966), Liddle-Hart, Sir Basil., *The Great War*, (London: Macmillan, 1997), Keegan, John.,*The First World War*, (London: Random House, 1998), Gilbert, Martin., *First World War*, (London: Harper Collins, 1995). The implications of the Schlieffen Plan as a major cause of the war are covered by Maier, 'Wargames: 1914-1919', p.253.

¹² Tuchman, *The Proud Tower*, p.255. Little changes, Macmillan, writing in 2001 about the Netherlands in 1919 uses exactly the same phrase. Macmillan, Margaret., *Peacemakers*, (London: John Murray, 2001).p.174.

'*zelfstandigheid*'.¹³ The Dutch economy was considerably more stable, with far more potential than it had had at the end of French rule and with social reform very much a feature of the political agenda.¹⁴ Under the influence of King William I (1813-1840) the Dutch had begun to look towards investing their money at home or in the Dutch colonies instead of in foreign ventures. The long-standing tradition of investment overseas was curbed, and more thought given to building an industrial base in the homeland. By 1910 there was more of the active working population employed in industry (32%) than in the traditional occupations of agriculture and fishing (28.4%).¹⁵ The infrastructure of the country was improved and attempts were made to reduce the Netherlands' dependence on foreign trade simply to feed her growing population. This growth was by no means smooth. Although the trend over the period was continual growth it was not constant. The period after 1900 saw far more rapid growth in many areas than the in the century before. Conflict amongst Dutch trading partners, weather and outbreaks of disease all hindered the growth of the Dutch economy.¹⁶ In 1913, however, the Dutch economy could be described as blooming, as illustrated by the opening of the new stock exchange in Amsterdam, and yet for all this the Netherlands was still very reliant on overseas trade, especially trade with her European neighbours.¹⁷ The growth of Rotterdam to a port of world status was due almost

¹³ There is no direct translation into English for this term. A mix of self-reliance, independence and neutrality it defines how the Dutch viewed themselves and occurs frequently in writings on this period of history and again in work on the Netherlands role in the Second World War. Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* Vol 1 p.2 and Moore, Bob., 'The Posture of an Ostrich? Dutch Foreign Policy on the eve of the Second World War' *Diplomacy and Statecraft* Vol 3 (Nov 1992), p.468-493, p.468.

¹⁴ De Vries *De Nederlandse Economie Tijdens de 20ste Eeuw*, (Kappellen: Uitgeverij De Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1973), p.10-12.

¹⁵ Moeyes, Paul. *Buiten Schot, Nederland tijdens de 1914-1918 Eerste Wereldoorlog*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij de Arbeiderspers, 2001), p.16

¹⁶ A good overview of the period can be found in De Vries, *De Nederlandse Economie Tijdens de 20ste Eeuw*, p.63-71.

¹⁷ There are several good general histories of the Netherlands available that cover this period. Amongst them are; Blom, J.C.H., & Lambert, E. (eds.), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlanden*, (Rijswijk: Universitaire Pers Rotterdam, 1994), Kossman, E.H., *De lage Landen 1780-1980*, (Amsterdam:

entirely to trade with Germany. As Moyes says, 'the Dutch economy grew thanks to German trade, and for Germany the port of Rotterdam was the gateway to the world economy'.¹⁸

Having shaken off the French and Spanish influence the Netherlands was faced with a new dilemma, what role would it now play on the international stage? Commenting on the changing shape of international politics in a speech in 1897 the then British Minister of Colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, said 'that the tendency of the time is to throw all power into the hands of the greater empires, and the minor kingdoms – those which are non-progressive – seem to fall into a secondary and subordinate place...'¹⁹. Reluctant to be aligned with the group of small independent states like Sweden, Luxemburg, Switzerland and Belgium and be consigned to the second rank in international relations, the Netherlands government held on to the view that as a colonial power their country deserved more status and a greater role in international affairs.²⁰ Unlike the other small neutral nations the Netherlands did not look to one or more of the larger European powers to guarantee its neutrality. It placed its faith in international law and, rather naively, its own ability to defend itself if attacked. Ogley identifies four types of neutral states. The first of these are 'neutralized' states such as Belgium and Sweden, which have their neutrality imposed and guaranteed by international treaty. Secondly he identifies the 'traditional' neutrals as states that are neutral by choice but which, because their neutrality is not guaranteed by other states,

Olympus, 1986), Colenbrander, T.H., *Nederland in de wereldpolitiek van 1900 tot heden*, (1936), Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlands politiek van Nederland 1848-1919. (deel 4 1914-7, deel 5 1917-19, deel 7 buitenlands bronnen 1914-17 (2 vols) deel 8 buitenlands bronnen 1917-19 (2 vols)*,

¹⁸ Moyes, *Buiten Schot* p.16. The shipping traffic through Dutch ports had grown by 120% between 1870 and 1890 and in the next twenty years it grew a further 240%. De Vries, *De Nederlandse Economie Tijdens de 20ste Eeuw*, p.65

¹⁹ Kennedy, Paul., *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. p.251

²⁰ Joll, James., *Europe Since 1870* (fourth edition), (London: Penguin, 1990). p.23

retain the right to forsake neutrality and enter into a war if they so wishes. The third category is of 'ad hoc' neutrals, states which change their neutral status according to the conflict or who simply have not yet established a strong tradition of neutrality. The final group, according to Ogle, are the non-aligned states, those states who may well be active participants in a war but which, because they are fighting as an individual state and not as part of some larger alliance, can also be considered as a neutral. The Netherlands falls into the category of a 'traditional' neutral. It has a strong tradition as a neutral, as does Switzerland, but unlike Switzerland the Netherlands retained the right to decide on its own neutral status without having to refer to any guarantors. Ogle identifies ad hoc neutrals as being the most at risk during a conflict but goes on to comment that even those states with a prior history of neutrality 'can be very insecure in time of war'.²¹ Professor Colenbrander, a prominent Dutch historian of the time said,

The inclination towards self-reliance is deeply entrenched in the Dutch, as is their absolute right over their own property. We feel we are our own people, with our own wishes and are pleased that this is so. We do not desire another's goods and do not wish to impose on another's freedom; political opportunity has no attraction for us. We pose no threat to others and wish only to be left in peace. We do not seek the world, and are dismayed when the world does not recognise this.²²

Unlike the Scandinavian neutrals, the Netherlands had the significance of its geography to consider. Not only was it positioned in the middle of the three great European powers, Germany, France and Great Britain, it also controlled the mouths of three of the major European rivers, the Rhine, the Maas and the Schelde. These rivers were all major trading routes and their closures would have serious economic consequences for

²¹ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.28, Ogle, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.3.

²² Colenbrander, *De Internationale Positie van Nederland Tijdens, Voor, en Na den Wereldoorlog* quoted in Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.27.

all European nations, not just the Netherlands. In *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* Kennedy considers the elements which contribute towards a state's ability to survive a war, whether as a bystander or as a participant. He sites geography, proximity to the crisis, the number of potential enemies and the number of directions that they might advance from. He also considers the states participation in international alliances. Although Kennedy is referring to the major nations in early twentieth century Europe these issues are all equally valid when applied to the Netherlands.²³ Any army invading the Netherlands would need to be certain that it could capture, and hold, all of the crucial rivers. To lose them to an opposing force would be unthinkable. Better then to have the Netherlands neutral and her ports open to all, than to risk exclusion if the port fell into enemy hands. Likewise, the Netherlands had her colonies to consider. If Germany was the Netherlands' main trading partner within Europe then Great Britain was the only nation with a navy capable of taking, or protecting, the Dutch colonies (or at least the trade routes).²⁴ British activities in the Boer War had upset many of the Dutch but whilst their fight against the Afrikaners might well have made them natural enemies of the Netherlands the needs of the Dutch colonies kept them as allies, if not friends.²⁵

Whilst this self-reliance appealed to the Dutch sense of national identity it was a risky game to play. The idea of a 'neutral' Netherlands crossed both political and religious boundaries. In many ways it was a concept that unified what would otherwise have

²³ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p. 253

²⁴ Germany could be seen as the greatest threat to Dutch colonies. Bulow, the German Chancellor declared in 1895 that 'The question is not whether we want to colonize or not, but that we *must* colonize.' Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p.272

²⁵ Abbenhuis Maartje., *The Art of Staying Neutral. The Netherlands in the First World War*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).p.26, Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.30

been opposing factions within Dutch society.²⁶ The Dutch army was relatively small compared to the major European powers and the main line of defence was the 'waterlinie' (waterline), a plan to flood a central section of the Netherlands and produce a natural barricade from behind which the key cities and ports in the west could be defended. The area behind this line was known as Vesting Holland (Fortress Holland). As it took several days for these floodwaters to rise to a realistic level for defence, a major requirement for any army invading the Netherlands was that it should be slow moving and give adequate notice of its intention to invade. Modern technology had also reduced the effectiveness of this defence line. As artillery now had a greater range Amsterdam was more vulnerable to attack.²⁷ Nevertheless Struycken, the prominent professor of international law from Leiden University, regarded this position of neutrality as not only vital for the Netherlands but also for the whole of Europe. He had full regard for the Dutch geographical position and did not underestimate the importance of the Rhine delta for European trade.²⁸

Although outwardly remaining firmly attached to their neutral stance, events within Europe after 1900 did give rise to debate within the Netherlands that questioned the policy. The idea that any country could stand alone without allies was unusual at this time. Most governments believed that if war came it would be fought by large alliances.²⁹ For example, when the German Keiser Wilhelm II landed at Tangiers in 1905, the young Queen Wilhemina called a meeting of her ministers to discuss the implications of a possible German/French conflict. Kuyper, the leader of the coalition

²⁶ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.29 , Kossman, *De Lage Landen*, p.545.

²⁷ Abbenhuis *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.40

²⁸ Karnebeek, Van, H.A., *De internationale positie van Nederland in de laatste veertig jaren*, (The Hague:Van Stockum, 1938) p.10-11 and Smit , *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.1

²⁹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* p.321.

government from 1901-1905, records that although the Netherlands stuck fast to its neutral status, consideration was given as to which of the European powers would make the best ally. The conclusion reached was that a good ally in time of peace is not necessarily the best ally in time of war, and in the absence of a clear choice then doing nothing and adhering to the neutral policy was by far the best action.³⁰ The same policy had been used earlier during the Boer War. The strong Dutch links with the white Boers had placed great pressure on the Dutch government to declare support for the Boers and to stand against Great Britain.³¹ Despite some pressure from their own population the government held firm, refusing even to impose strong economic sanctions.³²

Whilst the official government line was a firm adherence to neutrality, individuals within the government and the military had differing views on how realistic this policy would be in the event of war.³³ Hendrikus Colijn, the Dutch Minister of War between 1911 and 1913 saw the modernisation and training of the existing military forces as essential for a speedy response to any potential invaders, a view many regarded as pro-British. His views are regarded as at odds with those of Kuyper, the Christian Democratic politician and former Prime Minister, who initiated plans to greatly strengthen the coastal defences. To achieve this, the cabinet had voted some forty million guilders in 1910 to build fortifications at Flushing, but it generated much

³⁰ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.2

³¹ PRO CAB 17/69 11 August 1905. Letter from Sir Henry Howard, the British Minister to the Netherlands to Sir Thomas Sanderson, the Permanent Undersecretary of State for Foreign Affairs detailing the 'dreadfully and unreasonably anti-English' sentiment amongst the Dutch media and the public. Cited in Frey, Marc., 'Anglo-Dutch Relations During the First World War', in Ashton, Nigel et al. (eds.), *Unspoken Allies*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), p.59-84, p61.

³² Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.30 and Abbenhuis *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.28

³³ See Leeuw, A.S.de., *Nederland in de wereldpolitiek van 1900-36*, (Nijmegen, Sun 1975 and 1936) and Langeveld, H.J., 'Abraham Kuyper, Hendrikus Colijn, and the Dutch Foreign Policy, 1901-1914', *Dutch Crossings*, No 48, (Autumn 1992), p.5-19

debate. Whist Kuypers has traditionally been viewed as pro-German and Colijn as pro-British this view has been questioned.³⁴ Troelstra, the leader of the Dutch Social Democratic Party was one of those who were very much against this plan.³⁵ If the Netherlands was to be neutral and was protected by international law why was this money being spent? This money might be better used for other purposes – like welfare.

More significantly there was much concern that a move to strengthen the coastal forts, clearly to repel any attack by Great Britain, would be seen as an overtly pro-German move and would, in fact, prompt Britain into launching such an attack. The discussions surrounding the fortification at Flushing created a major political storm. The matter was addressed in the British Parliament, where concern was expressed that the building of such a fort would inhibit British access to Antwerp should Belgium be invaded, and received much coverage in the German and British press.³⁶ In the event, the planned strengthening of the forts never took place as the outbreak of war in 1914 dictated another agenda. General C.J.Snijders, the Dutch Army Commander-in-Chief during the First World War was also of the opinion that whilst a policy of neutrality was politically appealing, in reality it was completely impractical.³⁷ In the years prior to the outbreak of war he engaged the Dutch army in a series of military exercises that were

³⁴ Langeveld, 'Abraham Kuyper, Hendrikus Colijn, and the Dutch Foreign Policy, 1901-1914', p.5-19 gives a good overview of the background and the current debate.

³⁵ Vandenbosch, Amry., *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War*, (Michigan: W.B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1927).p.101

³⁶ Many historians have written on the topic, amongst them are: Klinkert, W., 'Met de pen of met het zwaard, Militaire middelen en de verdediging van de neutraliteit 1910-1914', Binneveld, Hans., Kraaijestein, Martin., et al., *Leven naast de catastrofe*, (Hilversum, Verloren, 2001). p.17. Vandenbosch, *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War*, p.101, Frey 'Anglo-Dutch Relations During the First World War' and Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p.67.

³⁷ De Vries, W. Dr., 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *Mededelingen van de Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis Landmachtstaf, Deel 3, 1e en 2e aflevering*, (1980).p.83

designed to prepare them for an attack on one or other of their borders.³⁸ Dutch intelligence on a possible attack was limited, but such information as Snijders managed to gain all pointed to an attack by Germany as the most likely. A similar view is held by a number of modern historians. Kennedy talks of the 'latent German threat to the Low Countries and Northern France' and Berghahn argues that in the years immediately before the war German intentions switched back from the colonies to Continental Europe.³⁹ In *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* Kennedy also comments, albeit indirectly, on Dutch vulnerability to attack simply by being in the path of the German wish to expand into France.⁴⁰ Snijders also believed that the Netherlands was incapable of repelling a German attack and that if Great Britain then launched a counter-attack on Dutch soil the neutral Netherlands would suffer greatly, sandwiched between these two warring nations. His opinion was that in the event of an attack by either side the best option for the Netherlands would be to swiftly align themselves with the one country that he believed could win such a conflict; Germany. Snijders was considered by many to be pro-German as were a section of the Dutch army's more junior officers.⁴¹ Snijders constantly petitioned the Dutch Cabinet, both before and during the war, for a formal commitment to his proposed policy. Each time the matter was raised, however, the government held firm to its declared policy. The Netherlands was neutral and would remain so, even if it

³⁸ Klinkert, *Met de pen of met de zwaard*, p.15, Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.39-41 and Snijders, C.J., 'Nederlands militaire positie gedurende den wereldoorlog', *Militaire Spectator*, 92, (1923), p.536-566, p.536.

³⁹ Kennedy *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* p.274 and Berghahn, V.R., *Germany and the Approach of War*, (London: Macmillan, 1973).p.165 and p.168. See also Van Tuyll van Serooskerken, Hubert, P., 'The Dutch Mobilization of 1914: Reading the "Enemy"'s Intentions', *The Journal of Military History*, No 64,(July 2000). p.711-738.

⁴⁰ Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* p.233, p.445 and p.451.

⁴¹ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p.81 & 82 and De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.83.

found itself fighting invading armies on two flanks.⁴² Snijders was not the only interested party looking for a firm affirmation that the Netherlands would pick sides in the event of an invasion. A group of Cabinet Ministers wanted to ensure that Holland would always side with the Allies as a means of safeguarding Dutch independence from Germany.⁴³



THE STRUGGLE FOR WORLD POWER - And the position of the neutrals. By Albert Hahn, the Dutch political cartoonist.⁴⁴

⁴² Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.14, Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p.82, Van Tuyll, 'The Dutch Mobilization of 1914', p.713 and p.718 and Snijders, 'Nederlands militaire positie gedurende den wereldoorlog', p.536.

⁴³ Kossman *De Lage Landen*, p.547-9. Ogley also works on the basis that a neutral nation, if attacked, needs to call on the assistance of the 'other side' to help repel the invader. Ogley, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.15.

⁴⁴ <http://www.greatwar.nl/> 28.08.2008 Cartoons by Albert Hahn (1887-1918) were featured regularly in the Dutch press during the war.

July 1914

It is difficult to assess the level of Dutch intelligence regarding the prospect of an invasion into the Netherlands in 1914. The strong public stance of impartiality and neutrality that the government had pursued since the turn of the century had made it hard to justify collecting information on possible aggressors, at least officially. It seems highly likely, however, that the Dutch were aware of the 1905 Von Schlieffen plan which included a German invasion of Dutch Limburg as part of an overall German plan to invade Belgium. As early as 1877 the British Foreign Secretary had predicted that in the event of a German attack on France 'we may be fighting for Holland before two years are out'.⁴⁵ What seems less likely is any knowledge of the Chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke's, later revision that took the attacking German forces around the Netherlands.⁴⁶ Most of the intelligence on the increasingly fragile European situation that made its way back to the Netherlands seems to have been as a result of informal enquiries. Snijders certainly had his contacts in Germany and as Dutch officers were often invited to make visits to German military units for the purpose of 'observation' it is reasonable to assume that his information was relatively accurate. Businessmen and holidaymakers were also asked to report back on things

⁴⁵ Fortuin, J.A., 'Nederland en het Schlieffenplan. Een onderzoek naar de positie van Nederland in het Duitse aanvalsplan voor de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *Militaire Spectator*, 149 (1980), p.21. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p.65 and Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.80, Ponting, *Thirteen Days*, p.45, Cecil, G., *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury*, 4 Vols (London: 1921-1923). VolII, p.126-9 p.373 quoted in Kennedy, Paul., *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, p.133 and p.493 and Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p.88.

⁴⁶ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p. 65, Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.80, Ponting, *Thirteen Days* p.46, Oostendorp, Th., 'Duitsland en de Nederlandse neutraliteit 1914-18', *Militaire Spectator* 134, (1965) and Fortuin, J.A., 'Nederland en het Schlieffenplan. Een onderzoek naar de positie van Nederland in het Duitse aanvalsplan voor de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *Militaire Spectator*, 149 (1980), p.21-35. p.229-223. Kennedy claims that although the Schlieffen Plan had been in existence for some time, it was only the massive increase in the strength of the German army in 1913 that made the plan feasible. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914*, p.448 and Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.4.

they might have seen during their travels. Likewise embassy staff, not allowed to collect intelligence in any official capacity, often passed information privately to friends in the government or military.⁴⁷

The gaps in Dutch intelligence gathering become apparent, however, when, in the middle of July 1914, Snijders was allowed to leave the Netherlands for three weeks holiday in Scandinavia, with the full approval of the Dutch government for his absence. The timing of Snijders' vacation indicates that most of his reliable (in his view) intelligence came from Germany, as many of the leading German military figures were also on holiday at this time⁴⁸ After hearing of Austria-Hungary's ultimatum he immediately began his journey back to the Netherlands but did not actually make it back to Dutch soil until after the start of the Dutch mobilisation. In the meantime, as soon as the Minister of War, Bosboom, was told of the 'Api Api' telegram and its implications in the early hours of 26 July 1914 he gave instructions for an immediate partial mobilisation.⁴⁹ Snijders returned home the following day, 27 July.⁵⁰

On 27 July 1914 Queen Wilhemina called a meeting of her ministers and it was agreed that the government would issue a statement reaffirming Dutch neutrality. At the same time plans were put in place for a full mobilisation on 1 August unless the international situation rapidly improved, something it was not expected to do. The population of the Netherlands was, understandably, nervous. The financial markets dropped rapidly in

⁴⁷One of the best assessments of the state of Dutch intelligence gathering in the pre-war period can be found in Hubert Van Tuyll van Serooskerken's 'The Dutch Mobilization of 1914: Reading the "Enemy's Intentions', p.711-738. Klinkert and Abbenhuis also consider the topic in their work on the mobilisation.

⁴⁸ Berghahn, V.R., *Germany and the Approach of War*. p.190.

⁴⁹ Bosboom, *In Moeilijke omstandigheden*, p.2.

⁵⁰ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.64.

the expectation of war.⁵¹ As a trading nation the Netherlands would be hard hit if the seas were no longer safe for her merchant ships. Measures were put in place by the Dutch Minister of Finance, Treub, both to try and prevent any run on the banks and to try and stabilise the financial markets. Once the mobilisation had been announced many Netherlanders started to stockpile food and other essentials. They also withdrew their savings from the Dutch banks, demanding that they be given hard currency and not paper money. The Dutch stocks of copper and silver coins were severely reduced and this shortage of coins in circulation lasted throughout the war as the cautious Dutch placed more trust in a bag of coins under the mattress than paper money in a bank.⁵² By this time the situation in Europe looked very grim and the Dutch government, along with the Dutch public, were very afraid that an invasion was imminent. On 29 July the Stock market was closed.⁵³ For many this was a very visible and significant step. As the diarist Ritter, says 'The Amsterdam stock market closed! Now the crisis is a reality!'.⁵⁴ It remained closed until 1916. Although the initial reaction of the Dutch financial sector to the turbulent events of July 1914 was panic, the situation was soon stabilised by the actions of Treub and the Dutch business leaders working together to restore stability and confidence.⁵⁵ This was achievable because none of those in a position to influence the financial situation, least of all the Ministry of Finance, believed that any outbreak of hostilities would last for very long.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.131 and Brugmans, H., *Geschiedenis van Nederland onder de Regeering van Koningin Wilhelmina*, (Amsterdam, Scheltens & Giltay, no date), p.120.

⁵² Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, chapter 3, p.68, Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.53 and Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.131.

⁵³ De Vries, *De Nederlandse Economie Tijdens de 20ste Eeuw*, p73.

⁵⁴ Ritter, P.H., *De Donkere Poort*, (The Hague: D.A.Daamen's Uitgeversmaatschappij N.V., 1931), p.21.

⁵⁵ Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.133.

⁵⁶ De Vries, *De Nederlandse Economie Tijdens de 20ste Eeuw*, p73.



Panic at the Netherlands Bank in Amsterdam – August 1914⁵⁷

As an indication of the seriousness of the situation the Dutch government made further resolutions that it felt reflected the grim times facing Europe. The celebrations for the birthdays of both the Queen and the Queen Mother were cancelled, no flags were to be flown from public buildings on those two days and all expressions of public joy on festive days were also prohibited.⁵⁸ It is arguable whether this public admission of concern and austerity helped or hindered the growing anxiety in the country.

Nevertheless the government clearly felt that any frivolity was inappropriate at this time.

The Dutch options were limited. Even with the existing Dutch forces fully mobilized the chances of repelling an attack by any of the three main contenders for a breach of

⁵⁷ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/lokale-noden/index.html> 24 August 2008.

⁵⁸ Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.128.

the Dutch borders, Germany, Great Britain or France, were slim.⁵⁹ Snijders, the most knowledgeable and realistic critic of Dutch military capabilities, believed that the Netherlands had neither the manpower nor the equipment to defend its own borders without forming an alliance. In 1914 the Netherlands had only a combined military and naval strength of 200,000.⁶⁰ Many of these were conscripts or recent volunteers. In comparison France had a total strength of 910,000, Russia 1,352,000, Britain 532,000 and Germany 891,000.⁶¹ Whilst as a declared neutral the Dutch could mobilize without it being seen by the major powers as an act of war, any attempt to form an alliance with any nation other than another neutral would have been seen as a declaration of intent to join a war, should hostilities begin. On 29 July the Dutch Foreign Minister, Loudon, contacted the Belgian Ambassador in The Hague and suggested that the two countries form a defence union in the event of one or both of them being attacked.⁶² The Belgian government did not respond immediately, in fact it was four days later before it replied and by then Germany had issued a declaration acknowledging the Netherlands' neutrality.⁶³ Having also rejected out of hand a British statement that the British government would aid the Netherlands in the event of an attack, the Dutch government

⁵⁹ The details of the mobilisation can be found in Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, chapter 3, p.61-94, Klinkert, 'Met de pen of met het zwaard, Militaire middelen en de verdediging van de neutraliteit 1910-1914', Binneveld, Hans., Kraaijestein, Martin., et al., *Leven naast de catastrofe*, p.13-26, Oosterman, J.T., 'De Interneering hier te lande' in Kooiman, J (ed.), *De Nederlandsche Strijdkmacht en Hare Mobilisatie in 1914*, (Arnhem: Herman de Ruiter, 1922) p.801-843, Klinkert, W. & Schultens, J.W.M. & De Vos, L. (eds.), *Mobilisatie in Nederland en België: 1870-1914-1939*, (Amsterdam: De Braafsch Leeuw, 1991), Kooiman, J., *De Nederlandsche Strijdkmacht en hare Mobilisatie in het jaar 1914*, (Purmerend), Munnekrede, P.J.van., 'De Mobilisatie van de Landmacht', Brugmans, H., *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*, (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1920). For a view of the mobilisation given by someone who lived through it see Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*.

⁶⁰ Snijders, C.J., 'Nederlands militaire positie gedurende den wereldoorlog', p.541.

⁶¹ Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. p.261.

⁶² Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.81, Ponting, *Thirteen Days*, p.168 and Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.5 & 6.

⁶³ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.81-83, Laporte, G., *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Proefschrift Licentiaat in de Geschiedenis, Rijksuniversiteit Gent, 1981).p.5 and Ponting, *Thirteen Days*, p.151, 203 and 289.

decided that an alliance with Belgium was not in the Netherlands best interest.⁶⁴ In early August Dutch neutrality was precarious, but not nearly as precarious as that of her southern neighbour. The Dutch were not prepared to sacrifice their own neutrality for the sake of Belgium if, as now seemed possible, the Netherlands was not to be attacked.⁶⁵ This was something of a gamble. Although Germany had recognised Dutch neutrality Britain and France had yet to do so.⁶⁶ These two countries did not issue formal declarations accepting the Dutch position until 6 August.⁶⁷

Internment and the Neutral State

Not only was the Netherlands militarily ill prepared for a European war, it was also uncertain about its obligations as a neutral state towards belligerents in the event of such a war. Whilst rules had been drafted at The Hague Conferences concerning internment, they remained untested and it would be the Dutch politicians, diplomats and military leaders in 1914 who would have the task of interpreting them as the war situation developed.

The first known modern example of internment in a neutral country occurred during the

⁶⁴ Ponting, *Thirteen Days*, p.306.

⁶⁵ Bossenbroek writes that Belgium felt very let down by the Dutch actions Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.17. He implies that Holland had done a deal with the Germans that would benefit the Netherlands to the cost of Belgium.

⁶⁶ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.6 and Frey, Marc, 'Anglo-Dutch Relations During the First World War', in Ashton, Nigel., Hellema, Duco., (eds.), *Unspoken Allies*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), P.59-84, p.60.

⁶⁷ ARA 2.13.70 no inventory number, note from the Head of the Cabinet of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Foreign Affairs informing him of the British position. Dated 6 August 1914. Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.8 and Frey, 'Anglo-Dutch Relations During the First World War', p.60.

1870-71 Franco-Prussian war.⁶⁸ During the Battle of Sedan in 1870 the French General, MacMahon, found himself and his troops caught between the advancing Prussians and the Belgian border. Anticipating a French retreat Bismarck issued a warning to the Belgian government advising them that unless the French troops were disarmed the moment that they crossed the Belgian frontier then the Prussians reserved the right to pursue them. To his own commanders he issued the order 'should the enemy enter Belgium and not be disarmed at once he is to be followed thither without delay'.⁶⁹

In the event the French managed to lose the battle without having to resort to a retreat into Belgium, but the message had been clear enough. If non-participants in a war wanted to remain non-participants then they would have to be punctilious and swift in their dealings with armed forces that crossed their border. This lesson was not lost on the Swiss when later in the same war a second French commander, Clinchant, found himself facing another unstoppable German advance. This time the French backs were against the Swiss frontier and after hurried negotiations with the Swiss authorities Clinchant led 80,000 of his troops over the border where they were disarmed and interned.⁷⁰ In this instance the duration of the internment was short, some six weeks in all, but it was sufficient for the international community to realise that the subject of internment in neutral states and of prisoners of war in general was one that needed to be addressed and regulated by law.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Annet, P. L'internment de Soldats Français en Belgique pendant La Guerre de 1870 in *Revue Belge d'Histoire militaire* Vol 28, (Brussels, March 1990), p.337-349.

⁶⁹ Howard, Michael E., *The Franco-Prussian War*, (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961), p.203.

⁷⁰ Howard *The Franco-Prussian War* p.431.

⁷¹ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.89.

Surprisingly, although the issue of the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers was included on the agenda of the Geneva Conference in 1864, there was no mention of prisoners of war. This was in spite of persistent lobbying on the subject by Henry Dunant, who felt most emphatically that it was a subject that needed to be debated.⁷² In an attempt to bring the matter onto the international stage Dunant founded the International Society for the Amelioration of the Prisoners of War in 1872 and a draft paper from this society was presented at the Conference of Brussels in 1874. With the events of the recent Franco-Prussian conflict to add emphasis to the discussions, the Conference adopted the draft proposal. However, despite this adoption, the draft remained unratified although its influence was apparent when in 1880 the Institute for International Law, meeting in Oxford, issued their latest manual that now also contained a section on prisoners of war.

The first major international treaty to include specific references to prisoners of war was the 1899 Hague Declaration.⁷³ Minor amendments were added in 1907 but both of these borrowed heavily from the Brussels Convention of 1874. The Hague declarations defined who should be allowed free passage across neutral terrain and who should be interned.⁷⁴ The Dutch position was clarified in a series of four articles published in the *Staatsblad* in 1910 that outlined the position that would later be taken by the Netherlands as the basis for neutrality.⁷⁵ As the First World War progressed, however, it became apparent that the general and rather simple terms of these conventions were inadequate to cover many of the situations with which the Dutch government came to

⁷² Moorehead, Caroline., *Dunants Dream. War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, (London: Harper Collins, 1998).p.126.

⁷³ Moorehead, *Dunants Dream. War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, p.170.

⁷⁴ Castren, Eric., *The present Law of War and Neutrality*, (Helsinki: 1954).p.463.

⁷⁵ *Staatsblad* No 73 cited in Tuinen, 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag', p.63.

be faced. In more than one instance it was necessary to act within the spirit of the convention and create the legislation at a later date, as and when time and circumstance permitted.⁷⁶

The legislation concerning military internees, whilst recognising the difference in status between an internee and a more conventional prisoner of war, is understandably linked with prisoner of war legislation. The rights and regulations applicable to prisoners of war were used as a basis when establishing the rights due to a military internee.

However, POWs now had an economic value as well as a tactical one. Not only did the taking of prisoners deprive the opposition of troops but it also provided the capturing army with a supply of workmen that could be used to replace the labour of the men needed for the army.⁷⁷

What had not been anticipated prior to 1914, however, was the sheer scale of the numbers of POWs and military internees that the First World War would generate, nor the length of time that they would need to be detained for. Not only the huge numbers that needed to be housed, fed and guarded but also, as the destructive power of the weaponry also increased, the huge numbers that required medical treatment or were permanently unfit for work and were therefore a drain on resources instead of an asset.

The term 'prisoner of war' (POW) can be defined as a soldier (or sailor or airman) of a belligerent nation that is captured by the enemy and kept in captivity until the end of

⁷⁶ For an insight into the large amount of legislation that had to be created during the early years of the war see Carsten, I., *Maatregel ter Handhaving Onzer onzijdigheid in den Huidigen Oorlog*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1916) and Vandenbosch, *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War*.

⁷⁷ Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p.371.

the conflict. There are now rules governing how these POWs can be treated, the Geneva Convention is one of the few international treaties that many people can name. In 1914 this was not the case. Tentative efforts had been made to formalize the position of POWs but these were fledgling guidelines that had yet to be tested by the demands of a large-scale international conflict. The position of military internees was also regulated but these were even more theoretical than the rules for POWs as there had been only a very few instances where servicemen had been interned and there was very little experience to draw upon when creating the new regulations. There was also very little legislation concerning the regulations for exchanging POWs through neutral countries.⁷⁸

The difference between a POW and a military internee is quite straightforward. A POW is a serviceman who is captured (or surrenders) directly to the enemy during a conflict and is held, usually in captivity, in order to prevent him re-entering the war. An internee is a soldier (or sailor or airman) who is a member of a belligerent force who enters into a neutral country as a direct result of the conflict or who is taken on board a neutral ship and is then interned by the neutral country until the end of the war. In the case of the Netherlands that meant that any soldiers who crossed into the Netherlands from Belgium during World War I because they were fleeing from an advancing army had to be interned. Any soldiers, who entered the Netherlands because they were on leave, and had chosen to visit, were not interned and were free to leave at the end of their visit. In the case of soldiers, especially Belgian soldiers, entering the Netherlands during World War 1, this was not always so straightforward. Bastiaan Ort, the Dutch Minister of Justice in August 1914, defined a soldier as an individual who was with a

⁷⁸ Castren, Eric., *The present Law of War and Neutrality* p.465 and 466.

commanding officer, carried arms, wore a uniform or who could be proved to have enlisted in the armed forces. An exception to this was medical personnel. The Geneva Convention did not allow for medical staff to be taken as POWs or interned. In reality many of the medical staff that crossed into the Netherlands during the war opted to remain and assist their interned comrades. In August 1914 the assumption was that soldiers would want to avoid internment, and that they would wish to return to the war to continue to fight for their country. The emphasis would be on the interning nation, in this case the Netherlands, to prove that they were liable for internment. After the fall of Antwerp in October 1914, however, many Belgian civilians who had fled to the Netherlands decided not to trust the German assurances that it was safe to return home. They decided instead to remain in Holland and for those without any other means of support internment was an attractive option. The Dutch authorities were faced with requests to be placed in internment. Snijders authorized his officers only to intern those that were in uniform or carrying arms. Not a foolproof solution but a practical one given the turbulence of the times. It was also common for soldiers who were entitled to internment to try and pass themselves off as medical staff. In this way they could take advantage of the status of an internee for as long as suited them but could reserve the right to opt to return to Belgium when they wanted to.⁷⁹

During the First World War some of the belligerent nations also interned civilians who were considered to be a threat to the interning nation. Men of military age were treated as POWs whilst older men, women and children became civilian internees. As Carsten says, in some respects these civilian internees were in a more favorable position than POWs but in other respects, because there was not yet any legislation covering these

⁷⁹ ARA 2.13.70 Inv 74 dated 15 October 1914. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.107.

internees, their position was more vulnerable.⁸⁰ The Netherlands did not intern any civilians, as a neutral nation it had no need to. It did, however, restrict the access of some nationalities to certain areas of the country as a security measure but civilians of all nationalities were free to enter and leave the Netherlands during the war. In 1917 under the terms of the treaty between Germany and Great Britain some civilian internees were transferred to the Netherlands where they were treated the same as the exchanged POWs.

Historiography

The Dutch attitude to the First World War is very different to that of its near neighbours. In Belgium, Germany, France and Great Britain the First World War was, and is still, considered to be a major event. Whichever side these nations allied themselves to, and whether they consider themselves to be winners or losers, there is no doubt that the events of 1914-18 have had a far-reaching influence on the formation of these countries as they are today. There is a lively and ongoing debate over whether the First World War should be considered a war in its own right or whether it forms part of an extended thirty years war that encompasses both world wars into one 'super conflict'. This is a debate that lies well outside the scope of this thesis but it does serve to illustrate the significance that the First World War holds for many even now, almost a century after the first shot was fired. This is not the case in the Netherlands.

⁸⁰ Castren, Eric., *The present Law of War and Neutrality*.p.112, and Moorehead, *Dunants Dream., War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, p.196.

Some years ago when starting to research this thesis I made an appointment to take a preliminary look into the archives at the Dutch Army Museum in Delft. An excellent museum, it is housed in a very impressive castle and has exhibits that tell the tale of the Dutch military from the time of the Romans right up to the Dutch participation in NATO peacekeeping missions in Eastern Europe. There is a small World War One section devoted mainly to uniforms of the belligerent countries but with a representation of the mobilized Dutch troops. The archive in the museum holds files from the relocated archive of the Ministerie van Oorlog (Ministry of War) as well as documents and memorabilia from the armed forces. On the day of my appointment I presented myself along with Maartje Abbenhuis⁸¹, a fellow historian visiting from New Zealand who was also researching the Dutch involvement in World War One. The archivist was dismayed when we told her of our interest – ‘but Holland wasn’t in the First World War, you’ve wasted your time coming!’ An instant reaction but one that sums up the attitude of many in the Netherlands.

Studies of the Netherlands during World War One by Dutch scholars are not only few and far between, but until recently have also suffered from a lack of breadth. Interest has centred primarily on two aspects of the conflict. Firstly, the economic implications for the Netherlands caught as a neutral country in the middle of an economic blockade of one belligerent by another, and secondly, the legal status of the Netherlands.

Scholarship from outside the country, and this means primarily American publications, has also tended to look at the involvement of the Netherlands in the conflict from the same two angles, the economic implications and the legal status of a small neutral

⁸¹ Maartje has since completed her research and has published an excellent book, Abbenhuis, M.M., *The Art of Staying Neutral*, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University press, 2006). She refers to the same incident on page 18.

power caught up in an international conflict. The best examples of this are two early works sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation, *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War* (1927) by Amry Vandenbosch which falls into the category of law books, and the excellent four volume *The Netherlands and the World War, Studies in the War History of a Neutral*, (1928) edited by H.B.Greven which deals with the economic aspects of the war.⁸² Greven, in volume three of his four volume series, also considers the implications for the Dutch colonies of the European war, a very rare feature amongst Dutch World War One histories. His contributors consider the impact of the economic crisis for the domestic Dutch market by looking at subjects such as housing and wages, although clearly from the viewpoint of an economist rather than a social scientist or historian. Another book in the Carnegie series, M.J.Flier's *War Finances in the Netherlands up to 1918* (1923) covers much of the same ground but uses a more statistical approach, providing figures for not only the traditional budget items but also for items of extraordinary wartime expenditure, such as the cost of preventing smuggling and of housing wartime refugees.⁸³

Whilst international historians have tended to restrict themselves to the theoretical, Dutch lawyers and historians have been more willing to try and record not only what should have happened but also, as far as possible, what did. A good example of this is L.Carsten's *Maatregel ter Handhaving Onzer Onzijdheid in den Huidigen Oorlog* (1916).⁸⁴ He, like Vandenbosch, outlines the requirements of international law but then goes on to explain how this was incorporated into Dutch domestic law and how it was

⁸² Vandenbosch, *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War*, Greven, H. B., *The Netherlands and the World War. Studies in the war history of a Neutral* (4 Vols), New Haven: Yale University press, 1928).

⁸³ Flier, M.J., *War finances in the Netherlands up to 1918*, (Oxford: 1923).

⁸⁴ Carsten, I., *Maatregel ter Handhaving Onzer onzijdigheid in den Huidigen Oorlog*,(1916).

then applied in practice. Carsten uses actual examples of where laws were applied correctly and, in his opinion, incorrectly. Much of his book deals with the rules concerning internees and in doing so he highlights the problems incurred when laws do not exist to cover new eventualities and governments are forced to adapt and operate within the spirit of existing law rather than using specific legal remedies. Carsten was in the unique position of being both a lawyer and an officer in the Dutch army so his insight into his subject is excellent. Regrettably, this book was written and published in 1916, and as such does not reach any conclusions that are valid for the war as a whole.

Almost without exception, Dutch histories of the Netherlands during World War One that were written prior to 1940 were written by participants in the events they described. Some, but not all, take the form of straightforward memoirs, such as *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden* (1933) written by Nicholaas Bosboom, the Dutch Minister of War until 1917.⁸⁵ Others are compilations from magazines, produced during the war or very shortly afterwards, which were built into comprehensive volumes covering all aspects of the crisis, and were written by a selection of authors, all experts in their respective fields but not necessarily professional historians. J.Kooiman's *De Nederlandsche Strijdmacht en Hare Mobilisatie in het jaar 1914* and the *Gedenkboek van den Europeeschen Oorlog in 1914* (1919) with a forward by W.A.T de Meester are good examples of this type of publication.⁸⁶ The best single volume history of the Netherlands during World War One written by a participant also follows the compilation idea but was produced as a complete edition, Brugman's *Nederland in den*

⁸⁵ Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden*.

⁸⁶ Kooiman, J., 'De Nederlandsche Strijdmacht en hare Mobilisatie in het jaar 1914'.

Oorlogstijd (1920).⁸⁷ Ritter's *De Donkere Poort* (1931) is the other major single volume book on the subject.⁸⁸ Although written by just one author it provides some interesting, if selective, insights into the war from the Dutch viewpoint. It is these books that begin to flesh out the theoretical outlines of the likes of Vandenbosch and Flier and give some idea of the impact of the war, including internment, on Dutch domestic life. A notable feature of many of Dutch works, especially the collections, is their use of pictorial evidence. A large number of photographs exist, or at least did at the time of publication, and these were freely used. Political cartoons are another favourite form of illustration, as are reproductions of postcards from the era.

Later Dutch historians have produced books that have more in common with their American colleagues than the early Dutch accounts of the war. Foremost amongst these is Smit, whose collection of work on the First World War has done much to remind Dutch post-war historians that there was indeed a major European conflict before 1939. Smit, however, does not restrict himself merely to the legal and economic aspects of the war and in his very comprehensive three volume work *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (1971) gives more attention to the policies of the van der Linden government.⁸⁹ Two more scholars who have taken up Smit's mantle in recent years and produced large-scale studies of the Netherlands during World War One are Moeyes with *Buiten Schot, Nederland tijdens de 1914-1918 Eerste Wereldoorlog* (2001) and Abbenhuis with *The Art of Staying Neutral, The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918* (2006).⁹⁰ Both of these books utilise a vast number of resources and provide

⁸⁷ Brugmans, H., *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*.

⁸⁸ Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*.

⁸⁹ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*.

⁹⁰ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*.

an excellent insight into conditions in the Netherlands during the war especially as they relate to the Dutch military. These are well thought out books that address not only the traditional issues of the mobilisation and trade difficulties but attempt to put the issues into a political context both domestically and internationally. Two further books that have been published in recent years have also increased understanding of this previously neglected areas of Dutch history. Tames' *Oorlog voor Onze Gedachten* deals with the Dutch perception and attitude to the War as evidenced by publications of the time and considers how this affected the Dutch national identity and the Dutch population's view of themselves as neutrals.⁹¹ Frey's *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande, ein neutrales Land im politischen und militärischen Kalkül der Kriegsgegner* provides an insight into the Dutch involvement in World War One by analysing the Dutch relationship with Germany. In this publication Frey makes it very clear that economics underpinned much of the dealing that the Netherlands had with its neighbour during the war.⁹²

Most, but not all, of the books discussed above make some mention of internment. A few, like Carsten, take it as their main theme whilst others, such as Greven and Flier barely mention it. The two best general accounts of internment are to be found in Brugman and Kooiman and were written within months of the end of the war by participants in the internment organisation. In 'De Militaire Handhaving van neutraliteit en gezag' in Brugmans *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*, Kolonel van den Generale Staf C. Van Tuinen views internment as just one of the many tasks to be

⁹¹ Tames, Ismee., *Oorlog voor Onze Gedachten*, (Hilversum: Uitgeverij Verloren, 2006)

⁹² Frey, Mark., *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande, ein neutrales Land im politischen und militärischen Kalkül der Kriegsgegner*, (Berlin: Akademieverslag, 1998).

undertaken by the Dutch military as a means of maintaining Dutch Neutrality.⁹³ His account is very factual, addressing some of the difficulties faced by the Dutch army, such as the prevention of escapes, but he does not even begin to consider the issue of internment in the diplomatic forum. Nor does he comment on the interrelationship between the internees and their Dutch hosts or differentiate between any of the different nationalities amongst the internees. By far the most comprehensive account of internment is 'De internering hier te lande' by Generaal-majoor J T Oosterman in Kooiman, *De Nederlandsche Strijdmacht en hare Mobilisatie in het jaar 1914*.⁹⁴ The former commander of the internment camp in Zeist, Oosterman was in a unique position to record the history of internment, as many of the problems he addresses in his chapter were those that he initially faced in reality. Consequently he not only provides a very factual account of numbers of prisoners and where they were held, as does Tuinen, but he goes on to deal with the more practical aspects of interning so many men for such a long period, such as the management of the canteens, the prevention of escapes and the control of visitors. He also gives details of the structure and organisation of the camps, how they were built, who built them and who guarded them. His insight into the later development of the command and control mechanisms is also unique. Oosterman acknowledges the day to day problems of feeding so many internees and providing them with work and education that not only kept the internees contented and less prone to cause trouble, but that also did not conflict with the needs of the Dutch population. His is one of the few immediate post-war works on internment that addresses the social unrest in the camps, the work groups and the participation by internees in the development of left wing politics in the Netherlands, although his version is more

⁹³ Tuinen, 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag'. p.63-102.

⁹⁴ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.801-843.

supportive of Dutch government actions than later works were. Oosterman was selected to write the official history of internment for the Dutch government after the war, a very large account running to many volumes, the last remaining original copy of which is held in the Leger Museum in Delft.

A different, but equally important record of internment is that of Bosboom's *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden*.⁹⁵ Bosboom, the Dutch Minister of War until May 1917, was directly involved in the policy-making decisions concerning internment. His memories are not those, like Tuinen and Oosterman, of someone dealing with the day-to-day practicalities of feeding and housing so many men. He was more preoccupied with ensuring that Holland complied fully with her international legal obligations and, of perhaps greater concern, was seen to be complying. Unfortunately, his move from office before the end of the war makes this an incomplete account but nevertheless one of immense interest and value.

Oosterman, like Tuinen, concentrates his account on the internment of military personnel who crossed into Dutch territory because of the forces of war. Neither mentions, other than in a very general way, those who were interned in the Netherlands as the result of an agreement between Great Britain and Germany to alleviate the situation in their own prisoner of war camps. A book which does cover all forms of internment is *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* (1924) by Th.H.L. Leclercq.⁹⁶ This unique little book is a complete history of the working of the Information Office of the Dutch Red Cross, set up under the control of the Dutch

⁹⁵ Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden*.

⁹⁶ Leclercq, Th.H.L., *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis*, (The Hague: Blommendaal, 1924).

Ministry of War to maintain lists of any Dutch military personnel who were killed or captured during the war. In 1914 it soon changed its main function to that of collecting and maintaining information about all of the Foreign Service personnel who were interned in the Netherlands. As most of the actual records of the Dutch Red Cross for World War One were destroyed during World War Two it is fortunate that this book remains. Not only does it provide a history of the Red Cross Information Office organisation during the war, it also provides an independent record of the numbers and nationalities of all the internees. Written, as all post war histories were, by a retired army officer, in this case one who worked for the Dutch Red Cross during the war and was himself involved in the events described, this volume is not intended as a history of internment and yet, within the statistics so faithfully recorded, is a wealth of detail and insight. Coupled with the narrative history of the Red Cross in H.Ch.G.J. Mandere's *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis 1867-1917* (1917) it is possible to see how the fate of the internees is inextricably linked to the history of the Dutch Red Cross during 1914-18 and the ongoing conflict with the Dutch Army medical services that resulted from Red Cross involvement with the internees.⁹⁷

Later works on internment may make more of an attempt to analyse the results of internment but they have also become scarcer and more specialised. Such work as has been produced has tended to be restricted to either one of the involved nationalities, such as the very comprehensive and readable, *Vluchten voor de Groote Oorlog* (1988) edited by Bossenbroek and Kruishoop which looks primarily at the Belgian internees,

⁹⁷ Mandere, H. Ch. G. J., *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandse Roode Kruis (1867-1917)*, (Algemeene Uitgevers-Maatschappij, 1917).

or works which are concerned with a specific geographical region.⁹⁸ *Harderwijk*, (1994) produced by the Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis is a good example of this.⁹⁹ Included in a general history of the military base at Harderwijk is a factual chapter on the four years it was used to house Belgian internees. Many of the recent, geographically based histories are short and anecdotal, produced by amateur historians using oral history, much of it second hand, as the basis for their information. Where more reliable sources have been used, such as those for *Interneringsdepot Gaasterland, Belgische vluchteling 1914-18* (1996) written to accompany an exhibition in Oudemirdum, they often revisit sources already available, for example, from other books on the subject, or old newspaper reports.¹⁰⁰ This is not to say that no serious or original work has been attempted on internment. *Vluchten voor de Groot Oorlog* mentioned above is highly creditable as well as being very readable and comprehensive in its coverage of a selected area of internment. Klinkert's work on the internment of exchanged prisoners of war also draws upon archive material that has not been previously presented.¹⁰¹ De Vries, writing in 1980 prior to Laporte, also uses archival material in his study of Belgian internees using Dutch sources.¹⁰² The most recent work on both internees and the exchanged prisoners of war is de Roodt's *Oorlogsgasten* which covers not only the military 'guests' in the Netherlands during the war, but also the large number of refugees that crossed the border.¹⁰³ Unlike some other books on

⁹⁸ Bossenbroek, M., Kruishoop., (ed), *Vluchten voor de Groot Oorlog* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1988)

⁹⁹ Elands, M. & Bossenbroek, M.P., *Harderwijk, als militaire stad en de Geschiedenis van*, (The Hague: Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis, 1994).

¹⁰⁰ Doelman, Henk, Dijkstra, Henk & Oosterhof, Jan., *Interneringsdepot Gaasterland, Belgische vluchteling 1914-1918*, (Oudemirdum: Mar en Klif 1996).

¹⁰¹ Klinkert, W. 'Internering van vreemde militairen in Nederland gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', *Mars in Cathedra*, No 71, (1987), p.2447.

¹⁰² De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog'.

¹⁰³ Roodt de, Evelyn., *Oorlogsgasten*, (Zaltbommel: Europese Bibliotheek, 2000).

this topic it puts the position of the internees and POWs into context alongside the refugees.

In this thesis I will attempt to provide a complete picture of both the internment of foreign nationals that entered directly into the Netherlands during the First World War and the POWs that were accepted into internment in the Netherlands under the terms of the international treaties signed during the war. Although in many respects these are two distinct groups the impact that they had on Dutch daily life, and both international and domestic politics, was very similar. It is difficult to assess the importance of one group and its impact and influence on the Dutch neutral status without taking into account the second group.

Internment, whether of internees or POW's was not only a new venture for the Dutch it was a relatively new concept for the entire international community. Whilst the overarching principles had been laid down in the two Hague treaties, the day to day minutiae of feeding, housing, clothing and, perhaps most importantly, occupying, many thousands of foreign troops was something that had not been prepared for at all. The Dutch, and to a lesser extent the other European neutrals, made decisions about their internees as problems arose. It was impossible to plan too far ahead when the Netherlands could not even be certain of the security of its own borders and the constantly changing fortunes of the belligerent nations impacted on the welfare of their troops held in Holland. For this reason I have chosen to present this as a mainly chronological record.

~ Chapter 2 ~

The Netherlands in World War One

One of the most significant aspects of the war for the Netherlands, especially in 1914, was the mass movement of people it engendered. Not only the movement within its borders, as the army mobilized and regiments left their peacetime barracks to take up more defensive positions, but also the colossal number of refugees that entered or passed through the Netherlands as they tried to escape the advancing German forces. As a neutral nation, Holland had an obligation to intern any soldiers from the belligerent forces that crossed its border and prevent them from re-entering the war. Internees were not the only ones fleeing the German advances. During a few short days in October 1914 over one million Belgian refugees also entered the Netherlands. Many of these were in considerable distress, hungry, injured and very tired. Families had been separated and large numbers of children were wandering alone. This is one of the best-documented areas of Dutch World War One history and one of the few events from this time that holds any place in popular memory of the period.¹ The response of the Dutch authorities was immediate and open hearted. Any and all buildings in the border areas were pressed into service. Blankets and food were gathered as quickly as possible and

¹ Chapters on the refugees are to be found in most of the books concerning the Netherlands and the First World War whilst other books are devoted entirely to the plight of the refugees. Some that I have found to be useful are: Kruishoop & Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog: Belgen in Nederland 1914-1918*, Bruijnseels, A., *Het Godsdiensig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918*, (The Hague: 1919) and Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten*.

distributed amongst the cold and the hungry. Help came from charitable organizations and institutions as well as private individuals who simply opened their homes to those in need. Writing in his diary on 8th October 1914 a resident of Roosendaal, a town close to the Belgian border, says,

The situation by us in this place is indescribable. Ten thousand refugees fill the streets, everywhere is full of unlucky people, everywhere - with no exceptions - has refugees in their house, and still there are hundreds begging for just a place to sit, just to be able to rest for a while.²

When the numbers became so great that the border regions could no longer cope then the refugees were sent in special trains to other parts of Holland. Some continued their journey even further by embarking on a boat at Vlissingen and traveling on to Great Britain. Most, however, stayed in the Netherlands. The Dutch press were remarkably slow to pick up on the numbers of Belgians crossing the border in the first few days after the fall of Antwerp. They consistently underestimated the numbers, especially the number of internees, and put reports of the border crossings on the inside pages rather than the front page. The *Telegraaf* soon picked up on the plight of the refugees, many of whom had been separated from their families, and began a 'contacts page' giving details of missing people and trying to reunite families. In time a special section was developed specifically for internees. Understandably this huge influx of refugees caused a great strain on Dutch resources, which although not as limited as they would become later in the war, were already stretched because of the recent mobilization. The Dutch government negotiated with the German commanders at Antwerp for the

² Helvert-Weijermans, E.H.B. Van., *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen. Dagboek van een Roosendaeler Aflevering II*, (Roosendaal: unknown publisher, no date), p.63

refugees to be allowed to return home. Although many were uncertain if the new German commanders in Belgium could be trusted, more did take advantage of the special trains laid on by the Dutch government for their repatriation. Despite efforts to persuade most of the refugees to go home some 100,000 opted to stay in the Netherlands for the duration of the war. Many of these were the families of Belgian soldiers already interned in the Netherlands; some simply had nowhere else to go. A great deal of support was given to those that decided to stay, a large proportion of it initially funded by the Dutch authorities. Special refugee camps were constructed, schools established, workshops started. Charitable committees in every part of Holland found in the Belgian refugees an outlet for all of their good work.³ The presence of these refugees, frequently featured in the Dutch press, was a constant reminder to the Dutch people of what their near neighbours had suffered and what they, so far, had managed to escape.

This mass influx of refugees has become one of the cornerstones in the Dutch memory of their involvement in the First World War. The reception, care and eventual repatriation of the Belgian refugees have effectively overshadowed the history of the military internees in the Netherlands during the war. Although the influx of such a large number of refugees in such a short time is clearly an event worthy of note it does not bring with it the same political and military issues as the internment of 35,000 of soldiers from several different nations. Much of the published work that deals with the refugees includes the military internees as a small part of the same subject and fails to

³ Much of what has been written about the influx of Belgian refugees into the Netherlands is anecdotal. More academic studies include Zanten.J.H.van, 'De Zorg voor vluchteling uit het buitenland tijdens den oorlog', in Brugmans, *Nederland in den Oorlogstijd*, p.317-352, Dunk, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog. Belgen in Nederland 1914-18*, and Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten*.

highlight the diplomatic minefield that their presence in the Netherlands created. In the following chapters the political issues surrounding these internees as well as their welfare will be dealt with in more detail. It would, however, be wrong to assume that the mass movement of refugees and internees was the only major impact that the First World War had on the Netherlands; nor would it be correct to view the Dutch reaction to this mass movement of people against a normal peacetime backdrop. The Dutch were not combatants in this new global war but they were certainly not unaffected by it. The impact of the war on the Dutch, at all levels, very much influenced their response to the demands placed upon their country by the internees and refugees.

As the summer of 1914 wore on and the prospect of a major European conflict looked ever more likely, the choices facing the Netherlands were bleak. Tentative efforts to form a defence union with Belgium had floundered when German forces crossed the Belgian border, and the Dutch government was placed in the unenviable position of having to choose between joining one of the two belligerent powers or attempting to maintain its neutrality for however long the war lasted. After the German ultimatum was issued to Belgium, the Belgian ambassador in The Hague, Fallon, tried to forge a cooperative stance between the Belgian commander in Luik, General Galet, and his Dutch opposite number in Maastricht. Despite initial interest in such an alliance Loudon suddenly lost interest in promoting it. Laporte alleges that this was because the Netherlands had received firm assurances from Germany that their neutrality would be respected.⁴ Joining one of the belligerents from the outset of the war was never an option. As Abbenhuis has said,

⁴ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.42

Neutrality formed a central tenet of Dutch foreign policy and its interests prior to 1914. Neutrality seemed to best guarantee the security and welfare of the nation and its economy, both on the continent and in its colonies. In fact, neutrality had become a celebrated part of the Dutch national psyche and promoted the international face of the Netherlands as a paragon of peace and prosperity in an increasingly unstable world.⁵

The odds were indeed stacked against the chances of this small nation holding out against the mighty powers positioned on either side of it. Geographically, as well as politically it was sandwiched between the two main belligerents, Britain and Germany, dependant on both of them for trade and for free passage for the ships on which that trade, and the economic viability of the Netherlands relied. Whether the Dutch themselves preserved their neutrality by affirmative political action or whether the belligerents merely allowed them to retain their neutral status because that best suited their plans, is a question that has not yet been fully addressed by Dutch scholars and is one which lies outside the scope of this study. What can be said with some certainty, however, is that although the Dutch managed to preserve their neutrality and actually avoid fighting in the war, in no way can they be said to have been unaffected by it. Ørvik cites the events of 1914-18 as the start of the decline of neutrality as a credible option for small states. In 1914, however, despite the outbreak of hostilities it was still a policy that many in the Dutch government, and certainly most of the Dutch public, felt was viable.⁶ The Netherlands did not have to endure the horrific loss of life experienced by those countries that sent their sons to fight on the front lines,

⁵ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.18

⁶ Ørvik, Nils, *The Decline of Neutrality 1914-1941. With special reference to the United States and Northern Neutrals*, (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag, 1953).

nevertheless, the years 1914 to 1918 were as difficult for the Netherlands as they were for the rest of Europe.⁷

The Dutch do not now, and in 1914 certainly did not, consider themselves to be a warlike nation. Speaking in his chronicle of the war years *De Donkere Poort*, Dr P.H.Ritter says 'our people were – what they still are – a peaceful people. We do not have the ability to hate other people, and militarism is not only unpopular but also rare'.⁸ The partial mobilization of Dutch troops ordered on 30 July 1914, followed by a general mobilization one day later were therefore not steps taken lightly. Although the Dutch army in 1914 was a reasonable size relative to the population it served, it was nevertheless tiny compared to the armies of Britain, France and Germany. Thanks to the foresight of the then Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant-General C.J.Snijders, it had spent much of 1913 exercising against possible attacks on its borders. It relied, however, on conscripts and reservists to boost its numbers and so, in the light of the gathering storm clouds over Europe many of those who would have completed their military service in mid 1914 were kept in uniform indefinitely. As a result of this measure some 200,000 troops were available to be sent to guard the Dutch frontiers against a possible attack.⁹ How effective these troops would have been against a concerted German attack is debatable. Snijders, who was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Dutch Army and Navy on 31 July 1914 and then promoted to General the

⁷ For a comprehensive summary of the diplomatic events involving the Netherlands in 1914 and the latter stages of the war see Leeuw.A.S.de., *Nederland in de wereldpolitiek van 1900 –36*.

⁸ Ritter. *De Donkere Poort*, p.30

⁹ Munnekrede.P.J.Van., 'De Mobilisatie van de Landmacht', p.5, in Brugmans, *Nederland in Den Oorlogstijd*. This chapter also contains details of the composition of the Dutch army at the time of the mobilization. See also Tuinen., 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag' p.65 in the same book. De Vries claims that guarding the frontier was by far the most important task given to the army. De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.86.

following week, clearly recognized the inadequacies of the situation and by the end of the war had succeeded in persuading the government to more than double the number of men under arms to a total of 450,000 and to invest heavily in equipment.

Despite Snijder's foresight and his efforts to both prepare and increase the capabilities of the Dutch armed forces there can be little doubt that either of the two main belligerent powers situated along the Dutch borders could have successfully invaded and occupied the Netherlands at any time during the war had they so wished.¹⁰ To maintain a visible position of neutrality the Netherlands not only had to adhere to the existing international laws governing neutrality it also had to maintain an evenhandedness in all of its dealings with the belligerents so as not to provoke them into an attack. Unfortunately maintaining neutrality in this way did not always allow the Dutch government to put the best interests of its population first. Although the Dutch government as a whole declared its self to be neutral some individual politicians had, in the decade up to 1914, demonstrated leanings towards either Germany or Great Britain¹¹

The powers of the army were strengthened shortly after mobilization when areas of strategic importance, such as the border areas and regions that housed internment camps or other sites of military significance, were declared to be in a *staat van beleg* (state of siege) or *staat van oorlog* (state of war). Both of these orders gave the military

¹⁰ See Van Tuyll van Serooskerken, Hubert, P., 'On the Edge of the Gunpowder Barrel: The Netherlands and the coming of World War I, 1870-1914', http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/~kansite/ww_one/comment/tuyll1.html, (accessed 2000) 1995. for a more detailed insight into the strength of the Dutch army in the years upto 1914.

¹¹ See Leeuw, *Nederland in de wereldpolitiek van 1900-36* and Langeveld, 'Abraham Kuyper, Hendrikus Colijn, and the Dutch Foreign Policy, 1901-1914' p.5-19.

authority over the civilian population and institutions. The 1899 Oorlogs Wet (war law) allowed the Dutch government to place all or parts of the country under the control of the military authorities in time of war. This gave the military very comprehensive powers to put the safety of the nation before any other consideration. The first opportunity for this law to be invoked was in 1914 when the Holland's water line (an established line of defence) was placed in a 'state of war'. As the war progressed many areas of strategic importance, including the areas around internment camps, were placed under the control of the military by the use of this law. Snijders was constantly at odds with the cabinet over plans for a possible attack. Politically he favored an alliance with Germany over one with the Entente powers. This view was strengthened by his military experience which led him to believe that in the event of an attack the only way to ensure that the Netherlands was on the winning side was to make an alliance with the only side which he believed could realistically win a battle for Dutch territory, Germany.¹² This was in direct opposition to the cabinet's view which was that an attack by one side would not automatically mean that the Netherlands would join forces with the opposing side.¹³ The prospect of an independent Netherlands fighting both England and Germany at the same time was one that Snijders, understandably, found to be totally unrealistic but this was the only option for which the Dutch government was prepared to plan.

The mobilization of the army had an immediate effect on Dutch domestic life.¹⁴ Ritter

¹² Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p.81 & 82.

¹³ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.14.

¹⁴ Both Abbenhuis and Moeyes have written comprehensively on the impact of the mobilisation on the Dutch population and the expectations of the Dutch during the first few weeks of the war. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, chapter 5, p.61 and Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*. chapter 2, p.45.

writes of women and children weeping as they waved goodbye to husbands and fathers who were transported to the borders on one of the many trains laid on especially for the occasion. He also speaks of the young men who were clearly excited at the thought of military action.¹⁵ Life also changed for inhabitants of the border regions who suddenly found themselves with soldiers billeted with them, or a tented army camp appearing in their village overnight. For the inhabitants of Limburg in the south of the country the presence of the war was especially evident. They could hear the guns, and from the high ground near Maastricht they could stand and watch the battles. A report in *De Telegraaf* dated 7th August 1914 gives details of a visit by Prins Hendrik to Maastricht where he spent time with the mobilized Dutch troops and visited the wounded German and Belgian troops that had already, even this early in the war, found themselves in a Dutch hospital. He was so moved by their plight that he lent the Red Cross his car to collect more wounded.¹⁶

In the short term, the perceived threat to the Netherlands and its neutral stance resulted in the population of the Netherlands uniting behind the government and, difficult though it was, supporting the mobilization. This support was made more possible by the underlying belief that the Netherlands would never actually be involved in the war. Marwick asserts that war unites a country and promotes nationalism and not internationalism. This was certainly true of the Netherlands in the summer of 1914.¹⁷ As the eminent historian Brugmans has said speaking of his countrymen in 1914, 'In general terms people believed that war was a wholly redundant institution, which

¹⁵ Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*, p.54.

¹⁶ *De Telegraaf* dated 7 August 1914. See also Kruishoop and Bossenbroek (eds), *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog* p.15.

¹⁷ Beckett, 'Total War', p.30.

people in these times did not need to fear and in which in any event the Netherlands would remain uninvolved.’¹⁸As the war progressed, however, and the contingencies that had been introduced began to bite then this support became less unified.¹⁹ The problems created by removing a large section of the working population soon became obvious. Military pay, averaging Dfl 1.50 a day, was less than the pre-war income that most families had enjoyed.²⁰ Many small businesses were left without their management or workforce. Farms had no one left to bring in the harvest. The government was not unsympathetic and, excepting times when the threat to Dutch borders was perceived to be particularly high, long periods of leave were allowed for a variety of reasons including business, study and domestic crises. In addition, those troops not on leave participated in a large number of events specially created to alleviate boredom and therefore avert dissent or desertion. These were mainly sporting in origin, sports days, long walks, football or rugby matches, but also included concerts and dances. Full coverage of these events was given in the national and local press, especially the picture magazines. It would not, however, accede to some elements of the government and public who called for the troops to be de-mobilized once, in their opinion, the immediate threat to the Netherlands had passed. For all of its belief in the Netherlands’ political ability to remain neutral throughout the war, the Cabinet clearly believed that the deterrent of well-guarded borders was also essential. This policy was not without its drawbacks, in October 1916 Snijders wrote to the

¹⁸ Brugmans, *Geschiedenis van Nederland onder de Regering van Koningin Wilhelmina*, p.120.

¹⁹ These changes in Dutch daily life are addressed later in this thesis. For a general overall view of the Netherlands between 1914 and 1918 see Moore, Bob, Wolf, Susanne, Binding, M. Paul., ‘The Netherlands and Sweden: the experience of neutrality’ in Liddle, Peter. Bourne, John. Whitehead, Ian. (eds), *The Great World War 1914-45*, 2 vols, p.309-328 (London: Harper Collins, 2000-2001).

²⁰ Verberne, L.G.J., *Geschiedenis Van Nederland, Deel III*, (Amsterdam: Uitgeversmaatschappij Joost van den Vondel NV, 1938), p.340.

Minister of War complaining that 61 per cent of the mobilized soldiers were in fact unavailable for duty because they were on some form of leave.²¹

Although the Dutch were not actually fighting in the war and her troops were only employed in a defensive role, there were still some Dutch casualties, most of them civilians, which were directly attributable to the war. The largest group to suffer was fishermen. Many lost their livelihoods or even their lives because of encounters with mines that had been laid in the seas around Holland. Similarly affected was the merchant marine and the commencement of unrestricted submarine war in early 1915 swiftly claimed two such casualties, the SS.Medes on 25 March 1915 followed by the SS.Katwijk on 14 April. Both were sunk by a German U boat. This loss of shipping was a trend that continued until the end of the war. In February 1916 the SS.Rijdam limped back to port with a large hole in its bow and the loss of two crewmen.²² Less than a month later the newly commissioned SS.Tubantia from the Koninklijke Hollandsche Lloyd Company was sunk just off of the Noord-Hinder lightship. Public outcry was enormous, especially when the Germans refused to accept responsibility for the sinking despite the presence of German submarines in the vicinity.²³ Only later, when fragments of a German torpedo were found amongst the Tubantia's wreckage did the Germans agree to pay compensation for this last incident. Von der Dunk estimates that some 36 merchant ships and 26 fishing vessels were sunk during the war at the cost

²¹ Snijders to Minister of War Bosboom, 11 October 1916 ARA 2.13.70 inv 411 in Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p207.

²² *Panorama* No 13, 14 February 1916.

²³ Beaufort, J.A.A.H., *Vijftig Jaren Uit Onze Geschiedenis 1868-1918, Vol 1*, Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen en Zoon, 1928, p.247

of some 200 lives.²⁴ The *Eindhovensche Dagblad* echoed the thoughts of many in 1917 when it responded to the latest attack with this editorial

How long will Germany treat us this way? How long will the conflict for free sea impose on our rights and cramp our freedom? Hundreds of German children are lovingly saved from starvation every week by the Netherlands and still her cold-blooded Navy turns her powerless rage on simple, poor fisher folk.²⁵

Nor were the families of these sailors safe on land either, as stray British and German torpedoes damaged Dutch coastal villages on more than one occasion.

The threat to Dutch civilians came not only from the sea but also from the air as lost and damaged aircraft from both sides dropped explosives onto Dutch property or caused damage by crash landing on the Dutch side of the border. Casualties from these incidents were not heavy, such as on 22 October 1916 when a lost German airship dropped two firebombs over Gorkum, startling, but not injuring the inhabitants. On the night of 29/30 April 1917, however, bombs dropped from a British aircraft on Zierikzee killed three civilians, an event for which the British government eventually paid £10,000 in compensation.²⁶ In an attempt to reduce Dutch casualties the Cabinet ordered the army to open fire on any non-Dutch aircraft crossing the border. This resulted in several aircraft being brought down and a decrease in the amount of damage to Dutch property.

Despite assurances to the Dutch public that all was well with the Dutch banks, precautions were taken to preserve the financial institutions. On 3 August 1914, the

²⁴ Dunk, H.W.von der., 'Nederland ten tijd van de eerste wereldoorlog', in *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden, deel 14*, Haarlem: Fibula-Van Dishoek, 1979, p.46.

²⁵ *Eindhovensche Dagblad* quoted in Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*, p.231 (vol II).

²⁶ Beaufort, *Vijftig Jaren Uit Onze Geschiedenis 1868-1918, Vol 1*, p.244.

Minister of Finance M.W.F.Treub introduced a law prohibiting the export of key items such as grain, horses, coal and gold. This was aimed at preserving stocks of essential products for domestic consumption.²⁷ Despite this foresight the control of goods moving in and out of the Netherlands at the behest of the belligerent powers was to prove one of the biggest headaches for the Dutch authorities as they tried to negotiate their way through the diplomatic minefield created by the outbreak of the war. The problem with trade was twofold. Firstly, there were suspicions in both Britain and Germany that the Netherlands was trading more favorably with their enemy than with them, which caused them to restrict exports to the Netherlands. Secondly, there was the more basic problem of shipping being unable to negotiate seas that were mined and patrolled by belligerent warships and submarines. The result of these two problems was that as the war progressed Holland became less and less able to import sufficient essential supplies for its population.

A prime example of Dutch concern was the supply of wheat. The majority of wheat was imported. Available stocks would only last two or three weeks and the September harvest would only provide a few more weeks worth.²⁸ Rationing became a way of life in the Netherlands as the war progressed, as did more and more stringent measures to control an ever-growing black market.²⁹ The Allies attempts to impose a blockade on Germany resulted in the formation of the *Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij* (NOT), an organization designed to oversee that all goods imported into the Netherlands were for home consumption and were not for re-exportation to Germany. The NOT soon became very powerful and although not without its critics, to a large

²⁷ Treub, *Oorlogs tijd* P.43

²⁸ Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.125.

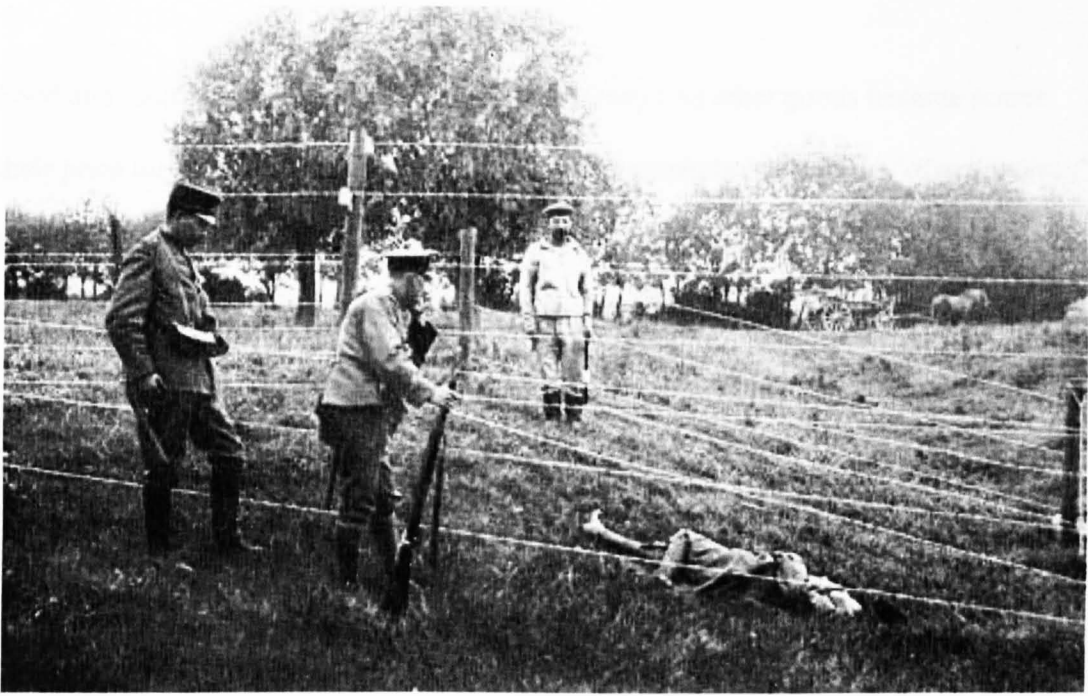
²⁹ The issue of food shortages is dealt with in more depth later in this thesis.

extent achieved its aim.³⁰ Unfortunately the prices that Germany was prepared to pay for supplies meant that despite the best efforts of the Dutch government smuggling was rife. De Vries claims that by the end of the war the Netherlands had some 23,000 men involved in the fight against smuggling, although to little effect.³¹ Once the Germans closed the Dutch/Belgian border in 1916 smuggling became more difficult and lives were lost on the electric fence erected by the Germans along the entire length of the border.³²

³⁰ The most well known study of the workings of the NOT is Maanen, Charlotte.A., *De Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij. Middelpunt van het verkeer van onzijdig Nederland met het buitenland tijdens den wereldoorlog, 1914-19*, (The Hague: unknown publisher, 1935), although the more recent work, Frey, M., 'Trade ships and the neutrality of the Netherlands in the First World War', in *International History Review*, vol 19, 3 August 1997, p.541-562 is also of interest. See also Frey, 'Anglo-Dutch Relations During the First World War' for an overview of the wartime economic relations between Great Britain and the Netherlands.

³¹ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.86.

³² Interest in this fence by historians has resurfaced in recent years but as yet few works exist that cover the impact of closing the border on the Netherlands as a whole. Most work that has been published concentrates on specific, localized effects. For an overview of the impact of the fence see Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p164-169. Abbenhuis points out that the fence is rarely mentioned in archive documents and I would agree with her findings. The one exception to this is illustrations. The impact of a deserting soldier or smuggler caught on a barbed wire fence was irresistible to cartoonists of the time of all nationalities. There are several good examples in the *KLM in Brussels and the LM in Delft*. Photographs can also be found in many of the picture magazines of the time. The fence itself became a tourist attraction. During the last two years of the war many day trippers went to view this new and controversial sight. De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.86.



The electric fence³³

³³ <http://www.greatwar.nl/> 24.08.2008

Food and fuel were soon in short supply and as they and other goods became scarce their price increased. To counteract this, the government brought in the '*distributiewet*' (distribution law), a policy designed to ensure a basic supply of goods at a reasonable price.³⁴ Local councils were responsible for buying in goods, often at a vastly inflated price, and then organizing the redistribution of rations at a lower, fixed, price. Central government met 90% of the resulting losses and local government the remaining 10%. This distribution system, although sound in theory, did not work well in practice and was subject to a barrage of public criticism. Firstly it was expensive.³⁵ Not only were goods bought in at a loss but there was also an increase in the number of civil servants needed to administer it. Many of these were hastily recruited and proved to be either incapable of performing the job or open to corruption. Secondly this huge bureaucratic system was cumbersome and very slow; food was sometime rotten before it was distributed.

The winter of 1916-17 was very hard. Gas and electricity were both rationed which gave added emphasis to the food crisis. A growing housing shortage meant that overcrowding, with all of its inherent health risks, compounded the problems of many ordinary Netherlanders. The increased submarine activity in the North Sea meant that very little food was getting through and so in early February 1917 the bread ration was set at 400g per person per day. A form of bread ration had been in place since 1915 but this was now tightened. On 24 March 1917 this ration was reduced to 300g per person per day and by April this reduced amount was only available for seven out of nine

³⁴ *Staats Blad* No 416, 19 August 1916.

³⁵ Verberne estimates the cost up to the end of 1917 at Dfl 350 million. Verberne, *Geschiedenis Van Nederland, Deel III*, p.361.

days.³⁶ With the entry of the United States into the war all hope of further grain supplies disappeared and such potatoes as were available had to be exported to Germany in exchange for coal. This proved to be too much for the Dutch population and riots broke out in many of the larger towns protesting about the food shortages in general and the lack of potatoes in particular. Unusually these riots were led by women, the unfortunate Dutch housewives who were unable to find food to feed their families.³⁷

Despite the declaration of neutrality issued at the start of the war there was never really any serious prospect of the Netherlands remaining unaffected by the outbreak of World War One. Even if, as seemed very unlikely in 1914, the Dutch cabinet succeeded in maintaining the neutral position they had adopted and remained outside of the actual fighting then the geographical position of the Netherlands in conjunction with its strong trading links with both Germany and Great Britain meant that it would be involved in many other ways. Indeed it is possible to argue, as some did at the time, that many Netherlanders benefited from the war as the national income rose in real terms despite a fall in the value of the guilder.³⁸

Henrietta Roland Holst the revolutionary poetess, writing in 1926 about the Netherlands during the war said,

In no other country did the bourgeoisie make capital out of the catastrophe of the war with such shameless cynicism, by all possible means, even the lowest and most despicable.

³⁶ Verberne, L.G.J., *Geschiedenis Van Nederland, Deel III*, p.361.

³⁷ Flier, *War finances in the Netherlands up to 1918* p.108.

³⁸ Kossman, E.H., *The Low Countries*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) p.552.

Kossman makes the point that Holst's political opinions were known to be extreme and that at best this statement must be regarded as arbitrary as it cannot be proven and in the latter stages of the war even wealthier Netherlanders faced some drop in their standard of living.³⁹

As in those countries actually fighting in the war it was the poor that felt the effect of the food and fuel shortages the most. Those that did not have the financial resources to pay for goods on the black market were the ones who spent the last two years of the war cold and hungry. For the wealthier members of Dutch society rationing was an inconvenience but as compensation they were able to enjoy the more varied social life brought about by the influx numerous foreigners to The Hague and other major cities, including many of the interned officers who were allowed to live outside of the internment camps. Another similarity with many of the belligerent nations was the increase in the number of women who found employment outside of the home in the period 1914-18. Dutch men were not fighting in the war but many of them were mobilized and away from home leaving their womenfolk to take over, albeit temporarily, responsibilities normally held by men.

It would be wrong to assume that all of Dutch life was disrupted by the war and sport was one area that blossomed in spite of the conflict. The number of competitions, tournaments and sports events in general increased during the war years, partly with an eye on keeping the mobilized troops occupied. When the 1916 Olympic Games were cancelled because of the war, a national Olympic games was held in Amsterdam. Likewise, despite the problems that the very cold winter of 1917 brought, it also

³⁹ Quoted in Kossman, *The Low Countries*, p.553.

provided the chance to stage an Elfstedentocht; an event that even a world war would not stop the Dutch holding once the ice was available!⁴⁰



Coen de Koning leaving Hindeloopen on his way to winning the 1917 Elfstedentocht. He was one of only two skaters ever to have won the Elfstedentocht twice.⁴¹

Politically, even though the war remained a time consuming and important item on the government's agenda, it did not completely monopolise Cabinet thinking and time was found for other domestic legislation to be debated and passed, including significant changes to both tax and suffrage law

⁴⁰ The Elfstedentocht, which literally translates as the eleven towns race is a long distance skating event that is only held in winters that are cold enough to freeze the canals and waterways that connect the eleven towns. The vagaries of the weather mean that the race is held infrequently and when a cold winter does produce the correct conditions for the race the day becomes an unofficial public holiday.

⁴¹ <http://geschiedenis.vpro.nl/artikelen/33274984/> 24 August 2008. Evert van Benthem was the second, winning in 1985 and 1986. I am indebted to Prof. Dr. Peter Romijn for this information.

~ Chapter 3 ~

The first few weeks: applying the rules in practice.

The Dutch had very little time to ponder the niceties of their neutral status and its inherent responsibilities as the first candidates for internment crossed the Dutch border within days of the outbreak of the war.¹ The proximity of the fighting to the Dutch frontiers made it inevitable that some soldiers from both sides would, either deliberately or inadvertently, cross into the Netherlands. The initial response of the Dutch border guards was mixed: this was a new situation and in the confusion of the mobilisation clear orders for the processing of foreign soldiers had not been given a high priority. Formal declarations of neutrality and the rules relating to internees were published in the *Staatscourant* within days of the outbreak of hostilities. It took a little longer for these to be converted into orders and communicated to the Dutch border guards. The numbers involved were small and as these first potential internees entered Holland they were sent, regardless of nationality, to the garrison commander at Maastricht for his attention.² In the months of August and September 1914 some 52 Belgians and 179 Germans arrived at Maastricht of which 15 and 130 respectively were wounded.³ At this stage detailed instructions for how to deal with these potential

¹ On 5th August 1914 the Netherlands confirmed its status as a neutral in a special edition of the *Staatscourant*. Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog Vol II* p.12.

² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.4.

³ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.805.

internees had not yet been issued.⁴ Indeed many situations that were to occur over the next four years had not even been anticipated. Languages were also a problem. Very few of the Dutch soldiers assigned to protect the borders spoke English, French or German and very few potential internees spoke Dutch. Confusion was inevitable.

The first German internees were part of the 27th and 34th Infantry Brigades, whilst the Belgians were an assorted group who crossed into the Netherlands in order to escape falling into the hands of the Germans. The first Belgians to cross the border in any number did so as a result of the German attack on Liege.⁵ Many, from both sides, who entered Holland in those first few days, were simply separated from their units by the speed of the German advance. Once in Maastricht these first internees were segregated by nationality and held in the army barracks, under the same conditions as those enjoyed by the Dutch army.⁶ Unfortunately for Dutch assertions of neutrality, not all unintentional crossings of the border resulted in internment. Two German officers travelling by car to Aachen took the wrong road and ended up in Maastricht, where the helpful Dutch border patrol not only let them refuel their car but also provided directions for the correct road before allowing them to continue on their journey. This particular incident came to the attention of the French government who sent a rapid and strongly worded reprimand to the Dutch government that resulted in more formal guidelines being issued. Although the most public, this was almost certainly not the only instance of genuinely lost troops being allowed to leave Dutch territory.

⁴ On 7 October 1914, in anticipation of the imminent fall of Antwerp, Snijders sent a letter to all of his army commanders in the field with a very clear and workable set of instructions regarding the handling of potential internees. ARA 2.13.17 inv no 113.

⁵ Laporte, *Belgisch Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.10.

⁶ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.10. A copy of the orders that were eventually issued can also be found in De Vries 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog' as appendix iii.

On 17 August 1914, some time after the first internees had already been identified and incarcerated, attempts were made to ensure that all border guards were aware of their responsibilities with regard to potential internees. The Commander of the Field Army issued instructions to the commanders of the III and IV divisions of the III Infantry Brigade and the Cavalry Brigade on how to deal with foreign soldiers crossing into the Netherlands. The salient points of these instructions were that i) those that were about to cross should be warned of the consequences and ii) those who had crossed in error and were discovered very close to the border should be asked to leave and interned only if they chose not to comply. In order to minimise any possible confusion Dutch soldiers who were fluent in German and French were to be used at the borders to ensure that all instructions and warnings were properly understood.

The medical services of the Dutch Red Cross were also present along the Dutch border at the points closest to the fighting. They had been given permission to cross into Belgium, up to one hour's travelling distance from the border, in order to give aid to injured soldiers where no other medical help was available, and this they did on the first few days of the war. In reality the initial wave of humanitarian action by the Dutch Red Cross was halted by their Commander-in-Chief, Snijders, as soon as he realized the implications of bringing unconscious soldiers across the border. Despite a few complaints from German soldiers who found themselves interned, both the Germans and the Belgians had appreciated the actions of the Dutch Red Cross. Official permission was sought from both German and Belgian governments to offer assistance to wounded soldiers, regardless of nationality, who were lying close to the Dutch

border. Both governments agreed without hesitation and the Dutch medics were able to resume their activities.⁷ Some casualties were obviously treatable on the spot, but others required attention that could only be provided in a hospital. These more serious casualties were brought back into the Netherlands. The rule applied here with regard to internment was that any injured soldiers who were given treatment in a Dutch hospital were offered it under the condition that once recovered they would be liable for internment.⁸ Those that were unwilling to accept this condition were, theoretically at least, left on the battlefield. Those that were unconscious when they were brought into the Netherlands were deemed not liable for internment because they had not willingly crossed the border. Simple rules when written out, but there were to be many inquiries during the course of the war as former patients claimed that they had been wrongly interned, that they had been unconscious when entering the country or that they had not been warned of the consequences of accepting Dutch medical help⁹. Given the appalling state that many of the casualties were in when found, often without identification, the confusion is hardly surprising. An example of the sort of problem that could occur is the case of Captain Bouvier, a member of the Belgian army who was brought 'dying' to the military hospital in Waesmunster. Later he was removed by Belgian sisters to St Jean Steen where he was given over for further nursing to the Maristen-klooster.¹⁰ On 21 November the convent was raided by Dutch soldiers looking for Belgian military personnel. It seems that many other Belgian soldiers had

⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Internering* p.20, Mandere, *Geschiedenis Van Het Nederlandse Roode Kruis*. p. 129-132 and De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.92. See also Tuinen, 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag' p.72.

⁸ The Ministry of War issued 'Regels omtrent de Internering van oorlogvoerenden en verpleegd gewonden' (Regulations for the internment of belligerents and wounded that had received medical care) published in the *Nederlandse Staatscourant* no 185 on 9 August 1914.

⁹ ARA 2.05.04 box 742 inv no 35966. Letter from General Snijders to Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 18 December 1914.

¹⁰ It is unclear whether these sisters were nuns or nurses. They may well have been both.

been helped there and the nuns had failed to inform the military authorities. A lot of confusion surrounds the position of Capt Bouvier but eventually Snijders ruled that because Bouvier had crossed the border alone and in civilian dress he would allow him to be released. Snijders seems to give more weight to these two factors than to Bouvier's claim that he should be released because he was unconscious when brought over the border.¹¹ Despite the general confusion the Dutch did endeavour to abide by the rules, trying to offer humanitarian help without prejudicing their neutral status. The Dutch Red Cross not only collected wounded from the battlefields, in a visit to a hospital just across the Belgian border in Eysden they persuaded to German authorities to allow them to remove some of the very severely wounded for care in the Netherlands. The Germans were initially reluctant to agree to this but the overcrowding in the hospital was a major problem and so eventually they agreed.¹²

A further problem for the Dutch authorities during the initial stages of the war was the status of aircraft from the belligerent forces that, for a variety of reasons, found themselves either over, or forced to land in, Dutch territory. The Germans argued that aircraft should be treated as ships, so that aircraft experiencing technical problems could land in the Netherlands in the same way that a sinking ship could seek shelter in a neutral harbour. The Dutch did not agree with this position. In their eyes aircraft were another form of war weaponry and any transgression of Dutch territory was an infringement of their neutrality. Accordingly any aircrew entering the Netherlands were interned, as were their aircraft. In his discussion of the legal basis for the Netherlands' declaration of neutrality Bosboom concedes that it was an error to omit aircraft from

¹¹ ARA 2.05.04 Inv No 35966 Letter from General Snijders to Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 18 December 1914.

¹² *De Telegraaf* 7 August 1914.

the declaration of 30th July 1914. A mistake, which he says, “was not repeated in the next”. He ensured that the Royal Decree of 3rd August 1914 made full reference to transgressions across Dutch borders by foreign aircraft.¹³

This ruling was not yet in accordance with contemporary Dutch law. The *Oranjeboek*¹⁴ of 1915 says: when foreign airships and aircraft, for whatever reason, are found on Dutch territory or in Dutch territorial waters they, and their crew, are liable for internment.¹⁵ This was a classic example of events and technology overtaking the lawmakers. Nothing existed in either international or Dutch law to cover this eventuality because, quite simply, the extensive use of aircraft had not been anticipated when existing treaties and laws had been agreed.¹⁶ Where aircraft landed in the sea then the same rules as for shipping were applied. For example a British aircraft manned by two crewmen was rescued some 10 miles east of the lightship Galloper, in neutral waters, by a Norwegian steamship and brought into the Hook of Holland. The crew were released but the aircraft was interned. During the early years of the war it was not uncommon for regulations to be put into effect on the authority of the Commander-in-Chief before the appropriate legislation had been finalised by the government. This is not to say that the Dutch Army was acting contrary to the wishes of the government or outside of the spirit of the peace treaties, but simply that the speed of events on the ground was considerably faster than the speed of the administration in The Hague. In April 1916 Lambertus Carsten, a reserve first lieutenant in the Grenadiers published his doctoral thesis from the University of Leiden entitled *Maatregelen ter Handhaving*

¹³ Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden* p.324.

¹⁴ The official record of Dutch parliamentary proceedings.

¹⁵ Carsten, *Maatregelen ter Handhaving Onze Onzijdigheid in Den Huidigen Oorlog*, p.122.

¹⁶ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.26.

Onzer Onzijdigheid in Den Huidigen Oorlog (Regulation for Upholding our Neutrality in the Present War). This well written document summarised all of the new situations that had occurred since July 1914 and the new laws that had been enacted to deal with them. It illustrates just how much had to be dealt with in 1914 and 1915, especially as this was not the only new legislation brought before the Dutch Parliament in this time. They also had a domestic agenda to deal with.¹⁷

The first internment camp

As the number of internees increased the need for a permanent internment camp became evident and a suitable site was sought. There were several criteria to be considered. The site needed to be well away from the border area but still easily accessible. It needed to be easy to guard with a peaceful local population that were unlikely to react in an adverse manner to having foreign soldiers living in their midst. Finally there had to be a source of good drinking water in the locality. Alkmaar was chosen and a Royal Decree of 9th August 1914 confirmed the choice. W.H. de Lussanet de la Sabloniere, a former officer in the Koninklijke Nederlansche-Indische Leger, (KNIL) (Royal Dutch-Indian Army) was named as commandant and was confirmed in post as a member of the army reserve and given the rank of Colonel in the Infantry.¹⁸ He arrived at the new camp on 8 August and the first internees were transferred from Limburg one day later. The instructions for the commandant of an internment camp were issued by Ministerial Decree on 11th August 1914.

¹⁷ Carsten, *Maatregel ter Handhaving Onzer onzijdigheid in den Huidigen Oorlog* has a good overview of Dutch domestic legislation of the time.

¹⁸ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.805.

The German attack on Liege in the first week of August and its eventual capture had increased the numbers of German and Belgium troops arriving in Holland, many of whom were injured. These included a patrol of Belgian lancers, consisting of one officer and 24 men who had been cut off by the speed of the advancing German army and had opted to flee into the Netherlands to avoid falling into enemy hands.¹⁹ These men were sent to the care of the garrison commander at Maastricht, from where they were transferred by train to the newly established internment camp at Alkmaar. The speed with which events were overtaking the Dutch at this stage in the war is shown by the fact that the first internees arrived at Alkmaar on the same day as the Royal Decree was issued formalising its creation.²⁰ By 17 August 1914 Camp Alkmaar had 111 occupants, 42 Belgians (2 officers and 40 other ranks) and 69 Germans (4 officers and 65 other ranks).²¹ On 11 August 1914 the government issued the 'Aanwijzingen voor den Commandant van het Interneeringsdepot' (Instructions for the Commandant of the Internment Camp) a very common sense set of instructions that still left a large degree of flexibility for the commandant to deal with the unexpected as he saw fit.

The Belgians at Alkmaar were housed in an empty warehouse belonging to the Ministry of Food after permission had been given for this by the Department of Justice. In the absence of anything more suitable the Germans found themselves housed in the gymnasium of the local secondary school. It was obvious that this could only be a temporary solution to the problem, not only was the accommodation unsuitable but it

¹⁹ Oostermans, 'De Interneering hier te Land' p.803.

²⁰ Royal Decree dated 9 August 1914 nominated Alkmaar as the site of the first internment camp and fixed the strength of its staff. See also Oostermans 'De Interneering hier te Land' p.805.

²¹ Oostermans 'De Interneering hier te Land' p.805 and Smit *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog Vol II*, p.32.

was also considered desirable that the two nationalities be housed in different locations.²² The decision was therefore taken to move the Germans to a new, tented camp that was to be established near Bergen. This was done on 17th August, at which time the Belgians took their place, moving from the warehouse into the gymnasium of the school.²³ Even this arrangement was to be temporary as it was still considered that Alkmaar and Bergen were too close to each other and any further increase in the number of internees could result in disorder between the two.

The location and establishment of a new camp for the Belgians was put in the hands of Kolonel der Infanterie Jhr Teding van Berkhout who selected Gaasterland as the site of the new camp and became its first commandant. Once again, the organisation and administration of the internees lagged behind the speed of events, as Belgians were transferred there on 24th August 1914 - before the camp was ready for occupation. The Germans had already left Alkmaar the week before for their new camp in Bergen. Initially a tented camp and later equipped with barracks, this was to remain the main location for German internees until the end of the war. The new wooden accommodation was eventually built with assistance from funds from Germany. All new internees were now transferred directly to either Bergen or Gaasterland and Alkmaar was formally closed on 24th August 1914.²⁴

Not all foreign soldiers crossing into the Netherlands, however, were liable for internment. In accordance with existing international law, escaping POWs were

²² Leir, F.J. van., 'Internering van vreemde militairen in Nederland tijdens de eerste wereldoorlog', *Ons Wapen*, 14 jaargang, No 2. (1967), p.50-57.p.52.

²³ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.805.

²⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.15

allowed to transit through the Netherlands on their way home and were frequently given assistance to speed them on their way. The Dutch press, especially the illustrated press, often carried stories of improbable or exciting escapes, usually supported by a picture of the individuals concerned side by side with the Dutch border guard who had allowed them entry into Holland. Interestingly, this was not the case in Switzerland. Like the Netherlands, Switzerland was a neutral country that offered shelter to POWs from both sides as part of an official exchange treaty but it had existing legislation in place that allowed it to send back escaping POWs that crossed its borders.²⁵

Deserters were another problem. Almost exclusively German, the number of deserters increased as the war progressed and presented the Dutch authorities with several problems. Not least was that of identifying a true deserter as opposed to someone merely wishing to avoid internment. In 1917 (the only year for which figures are available) at least 488 German soldiers were interned and then released as deserters.²⁶ Undoubtedly many more never even reached the stage of being interned. Precise figures are unavailable but one estimate put the number of German deserters living in the Netherlands by the end of the war as high as 20,000. This figure is taken from an anonymous article published in a New York magazine in 1918, which claims to have been written by a German deserter who had made his way through the Netherlands to America. It is, however, difficult to verify this figure; the actual number may have been considerably less. These were soon to be joined by many former prisoners of war who took the opportunity to escape when being repatriated through the Netherlands immediately after the war, because they had no wish to return to a defeated Germany.

²⁵*Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.4 MRA Inventaris de Archieve fonds 1914-18 II Personalia box 17 No 89.

²⁶ Numbers taken from ARA 2.05.04 various documents.

These, and the status of the German deserters, will be dealt with in more detail later in this thesis.

In the early months of the hostilities there were a number of complex, and often high profile, cases that served to codify Dutch practices on internment and set precedents that could be followed in the future. The Dutch authorities were not only faced with interpreting the law of internment with regard to belligerents crossing its land borders. As early as September 1914 they were confronted with an incident that required interpretation of the laws concerning their responsibilities at sea.²⁷

The sinking of HMS Cressy, HMS Hogue and HMS Aboukir

The law with respect to the status of shipwrecked and wounded sailors had been incorporated in The Hague Convention in an attempt to bring the rules governing war at sea in line with the principles of the Geneva Convention. They were not simple, nor, as time would prove, were they completely comprehensive. In plain language, any sailors from belligerent navies, shipwrecked or wounded within neutral waters, that were rescued by a neutral ship were liable for internment without regard to any other shipping in the area. In international waters the situation was more complex.

Vandenbosch offers a concise summary of the rules applicable when a neutral vessel affected a rescue of sailors from one or other of the belligerent forces

²⁷ The sinking of the Cressy, Hogue and Aboukir was not the only time when the Dutch Government had to interpret the laws of internment with regard to shipping. There were many others. Some are illustrated in Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland 1848-1919, Vierde deel 1914-17*, No's 131, 132 and 183 relate to German commercial shipping in the Dutch colonies. No 265 concerns a German submarine that was sighted, followed, but not interred.

Article 12 of this (the Geneva) Convention deals with wounded, sick, or shipwrecked, found, among others, on neutral merchant ships. In regard to these persons this article recognises the right of belligerent warships to demand that they be handed over. Article 14 stipulates that such persons falling into the power of the other belligerent are prisoners of war, and the Article then further stipulates what may be done with them. One of the possibilities cited is that they may be taken into a neutral port. In this event, Article 15 then further provides that the shipwrecked, sick or wounded, who are landed at a neutral port with the consent of the local authorities, must, unless an arrangement is made to the contrary between the neutral and the belligerents, be guarded by the neutral state so as to prevent them again taking part in the operations of the war.²⁸

The failure of the still skeletal international law with respect to internees to cover all eventualities was illustrated with the sinking of the British Men of War the HMS Hogue, the HMS Cressy and the HMS Aboukir to the north west of the Maas Light Vessel, some 30 miles off of the Dutch coast on 22 September 1914.²⁹ The unfortunate crews of these three ships were woken in the early hours by an attack from the German submarine U9. Taken by surprise there was little that the British crews could do and all three ships were sunk. Many lives were lost in the attack and the few survivors that remained took to the lifeboats. Fortunately for the shipwrecked sailors a Dutch merchant ship from the Koninklijke Nederlandsche Stoomboot Maatschappij, the SS Flora, saw the sinking of the Cressy and rushed to assist the crew. At the same time her captain contacted a sister ship from the same line, the SS Titian, that was also in the vicinity and which similarly came quickly to the scene. As the last of approximately 125 survivors were being transferred to the Flora two German submarines were sighted in the distance, a fact which convinced the captain of the Flora not to attempt to land his passengers in England as requested, but instead to return directly to IJmuiden in the

²⁸ Vandenbosch, *The Neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War*, p.154.

²⁹ Hogendijk, J.H., *De Nederlandsche Koopvaardij in den Oorlogstijd (1914-18)*, (Amsterdam: Van Holfema & Warendorf, 1930). p.423.

Netherlands. For the same reason it was not considered safe for the survivors to be transferred to the British destroyers that had by now also made their way to the scene but who then left to give chase to the two German U-boats.

The Titian rescued a further 114 men and two Dutch fishing vessels, which had also seen the sinking and had held off for fear of mines, now also moved in and collected the last few survivors. On the way back to port the Titian passed a British warship, the Lucifer, who relieved it of most of its passengers leaving only 20 survivors and five bodies to be offloaded at the Hook of Holland.

Many of the shipwrecked crew required immediate medical attention, indeed several died before reaching the Dutch coast. Even those that were not injured needed dry clothes and food. The plight of the shipwrecked sailors captured the imagination of the Dutch public and they were quickly re-clothed and fed.³⁰ The injured that survived the transfer were taken to hospital on arrival, whilst their able-bodied colleagues were placed in internment. At this early stage in the war there was no separate internment camp for the British and so they were interned with their Belgian allies in the newly established camp at Gaasterland. This was confirmed in the *Nieuwe Courant* on 23rd September 1914 in an article that also informed its readers that the dead would in all probability be buried in the Netherlands, although the British Consulate was trying to arrange for the bodies to be shipped back to England.³¹

The Dutch government immediately began to examine their liability to intern the

³⁰ LM ,Plakboeken deel 3 Q193-40.

³¹ *Nieuwe Courant* 23 September 1914

sailors and, to the delight of the British, swiftly came to the conclusion that any internment would be unlawful. These sailors fell into a category that was not clearly covered by The Hague Convention, that of belligerent crews rescued by a neutral ship that did not then pass a belligerent warship on its way to a neutral port. Although not taken up in the main body of the convention, Professor Renault, an advisor to the Commission who drafted the Convention, had anticipated this eventuality. In his opinion shipwrecked sailors picked up by a neutral ship, who did not encounter a ship from any of the belligerent nations on their way to a neutral port, were not liable for internment by the neutral power. Professor Renault's views on the subject were much quoted in the press reports concerning the release of the British sailors.

A report from Captain Nilmont Nicholson, the captain of HMS Hogue, to Vice Admiral G F Tydeman, the director and Commandant of the Navy in Amsterdam written on the day after the sinking confirmed the essential facts of the case. In his report Captain Nicholson makes every effort to establish the fact that no contact was made with any German vessel in the area.

I wish particularly to bring to your notice that this was the only occasion on which the Germans were seen and that no communication of any kind, either verbal or by signal passed between these vessels and the SS Flora.³²

Having made this point Capt Nicholson went on to commend the bravery of the captain of the Flora, Captain R P Voorham, who having seen the Cressy sink and

³² ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 Letter from Captain N.N.Nicholson of HMS Hogue to Vice Admiral G.F.Tydeman dated 23 February 1915. Also a statement from Captain J.A.Berkhout, captain of the Dutch ship Titan dated 24 September 1914.

although unaware of whether the cause was mines or torpedoes, immediately steamed to the scene of the disaster and was instrumental in saving no less than 276 lives.³³

Clearly the Dutch had acquitted themselves well, as a letter of thanks from the British Ambassador to The Hague, Sir Alan Johnstone, to Loudon dated 25 September confirms. Indeed the Dutch played the gallant saviour card to maximum effect insisting that once released from internment the shipwrecked sailors were to be considered as guests of the Dutch government until arrangements could be made for their return to Great Britain. The only bill later presented to the British government was for the services of the Zeeland Steamship Company who charged Dfl 3893.60 to transport the men home. In a further letter to Loudon dated 11 November 1914 Johnstone also thanked him for the loan of 255 overcoats, which had now been return to the Dutch government.³⁴ The bravery and generosity of the Dutch caught the imagination of the British public and one; Mr M Stephenson of Southport, Lancashire, was so inspired that he wrote personally to Loudon saying 'Please accept this postal order as a gift for the kindness of the Holland nation to our sailors. It is good of the Dutch people to keep neutral in his struggle' (The amount was for three shillings).³⁵

Following the problems of August and the trespass of German soldiers into the Netherlands, which had prompted such a swift and virulent complaint from the French, the Dutch authorities were keen to abide by the letter of the law in this instance.

Initially there appeared to be very little controversy, the ships had been sunk as a result

³³ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303. Letter from Captain N.N.Nicholson of HMS Hogue to Vice Admiral G.F.Tydeman dated 23 February 1915.

³⁴ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 Letter from Johnstone to Loudon dated 11 November 1914 and again a further letter dated 08 January 1915 enclosing a cheque for the transportation costs.

³⁵ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 Letter from Mr Stephenson dated 30 September 1914.

of a legitimate act of war, the Dutch merchant men had behaved not only correctly but also very bravely in making the rescue and there seemed to be little disagreement with the Dutch interpretation of the law. In a file note sent to the Ministry of War dated 12 October 1914 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that the German ambassador in the Netherlands had given his verbal agreement to the release of the British sailors.³⁶ This opinion was strengthened by the receipt of an official note from the Germans dated 28 September 1914,³⁷ some six days after the rescue, that again confirmed their agreement to the release from internment, provided that any German sailors found in a similar position would be treated in exactly the same manner.

By 28 October, however, the German position had changed and a formal complaint was lodged. Even before the formal complaint was lodged the matter was being hotly debated in the German press. The *Kölnische Zeitung* was fully in favour of the British sailors being interned in the Netherlands and the Dutch government was clearly concerned about its position and German public opinion on the stance it had taken. Copies of several newspaper reports, sent by Dutch diplomats in Germany are lodged in the archives alongside the official correspondence. The German stance was also discussed in Dutch newspapers although there appears to have been no inclination to take sides.³⁸ The German case was based on several points. Firstly it argued that as the British had not signed The Hague Convention on Naval Warfare, the law being applied by the Netherlands was in any event invalid. The Dutch response was that as the Netherlands had ratified the treaty the status of the British in this instance was

³⁶ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 File note from Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Ministry of War dated 14 October 1914.

³⁷ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 Official note from German Embassy to Dutch Ministry for Foreign Affairs dated 28 September 1914. Unsigned.

³⁸ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 inv 3303 various documents.

irrelevant. A more crucial objection, and one which had potentially far reaching consequences for Dutch impartiality during the rest of the war, was that the British had been released without German consent.³⁹ In a stinging reply The Dutch government said,

The Dutch government is of the opinion that its position as a neutral government does not permit it to ask advice from one of the belligerent powers about measurements for maintaining its neutrality, much less so that the taking of such measurements should be dependent on the permission of one of these powers.

It softened the blow by adding that;

It (the Dutch government) cannot contradict the duties of a neutral if it then follows the same line towards the other belligerent power.

The Dutch government also quoted the findings of the Renault report as a justification for their action.⁴⁰

The German government were, however, reluctant to let the matter drop and continued to lodge objections with the Dutch although the Dutch consistently refused to alter their position. When the Dutch wished to publish the correspondence on this matter in the *Orange Boek* (the official record of Dutch government actions) in April 1916 the Germans refused to give their consent on the grounds that, in their view, the matter was still open.⁴¹

³⁹ Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland 1848-1919, Vierde deel 1914-17.* nr 505 p.521.

⁴⁰ ARA 2.05.04 box 745 nr 3303 undated but after 27 January 1915, also Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland 1848-1919, Vierde deel 1914-17.* p.521.

⁴¹ Vandenbosch, *The neutrality of the Netherlands during the World War* has a more detailed consideration of the laws regarding the internment of English crews in chapter 10. It also cites several



Eenige der geredde matrozen, voorloopig gekleed in de uniform van onze soldaten.

A few of the rescued sailors, temporarily clothed in uniforms from our soldiers.

The fall of Antwerp

Until the end of September 1914 the problem of the internees had been a minor one. Clearly the main preoccupation of the Dutch armed forces was the defence of its country's borders and any manpower or equipment that had to be diverted from this task to guard internees was to be regretted, but as the numbers were relatively small it was a manageable problem. This was soon to change.

In his top secret report to the cabinet on the current political and military situation

other scenarios where either the Germans or the Allies called the actions of the Dutch Government into question.

dated 20 August 1914 General Snijders considered the possibility that the Germans would attack Antwerp.

When the fortifications at Antwerp are attacked or captured by the Germans, we must take steps to deal with the situation because the fortifications on the north side are very close to our border. Trespass onto our land, by Germans or Belgians, must be repelled with force.⁴²

Snijder's main fear was the infringement of Dutch neutrality that might occur if the fighting spilled over onto Dutch territory, including the waters of the Schelde. Given the example of the recent German attack on Liege, he must also have been aware that even if the Netherlands was not drawn into the war by the need to actively defend her borders, then there was the possibility of a sudden increase in the number of internees. Press coverage of the German attack on liege had not been favourable to the Germans. There was much anticipation of what would happen if Germany attacked Holland.⁴³ It is unlikely that even he, who had anticipated most of the key events of 1914 with remarkable foresight, could have predicted exactly how many servicemen and civilians would cross the Dutch frontier as a result of the fall of Antwerp. Snijders was well aware of the possible risks to the Netherlands neutral status if Antwerp fell, and that the fall of Antwerp was a very strong possibility. As early as 20th August 1914 he wrote to his commanders advising them of the steps to be taken if such a situation occurred.⁴⁴ Nevertheless on 7 October 1914 he wrote a long letter to all of his land and sea commanders clarifying some of the more intricate details of the internment regulations and cautioning them against those (clearly Belgians although not actually named as

⁴² ARA 2.13.70 Report by Gen. Snijders to the Commander of the Field Army dated 20 August 1914.

⁴³ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.91.

⁴⁴ ARA 2.13.70 Dutch Commander-in-Chief to the Commander of the Field Army 20 August 1914.

such) who would try to avoid internment by claiming that they were not from a belligerent country but merely a country that had been attacked by a belligerent.⁴⁵

Antwerp, with its double ring of inner and outer fortresses, had not been attacked in the main German push through Belgium to reach the French troops. After the fall of Liege in mid August, 65,000 members of the Belgian field army had retired to Antwerp and these supplemented the 80,000 reservists that were already based there. A series of Belgian sorties to attack the German flank, which was under the command of General von Kluck, convinced the Germans that the city had to be taken.⁴⁶ They commenced the bombardment of the outer fortresses on 28 September and took them with relative ease. The British government, mindful of the importance of securing the channel ports and the Schelde sent Winston Churchill, then Minister for the Navy, to Antwerp to investigate the situation personally. Unconvinced of the Belgian ability to hold Antwerp long enough for the British expeditionary force to reach and reinforce the channel ports, the British government dispatched an emergency force consisting of 2,000 men from the British Naval Division to Antwerp on 4 October and a further 4,000 more the day after.⁴⁷

The tale of the British involvement in the fall of Antwerp was, with hindsight, never going to be a glorious one despite the best intentions of those involved. The Royal Naval Division (RND) sent to Antwerp was not properly prepared for combat. It was a mixed unit consisting of naval reservists and a great many volunteers. Moreover these

⁴⁵ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.8 and Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.8.

⁴⁶ Churchill, Winston., *The World Crisis 1911-1918*, (London: Penguin, 2007), p.189.

⁴⁷ A summary of the events of early October in Belgium can be found in Charles, Prof.Dr.J.L., 'Sinjoren Onder Vuur', *14-18 De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, Band 1 (Amsterdam, Amsterdam Boek), p.301-306.

were not only naval volunteers but also included ex-miners from the north of England who had rushed to join their local army regiments in August 1914 but due to a surplus of volunteers had found themselves being diverted to enlist in the RND. The commanders and some Senior NCOs were regular soldiers from either the Army, Navy or the Marines but many of the naval reservists who had been intended to make up the bulk of the enlisted men were transferred out mid-training to take up other appointments which left the level of experience in the division very low.⁴⁸

The first British troops arrived in Antwerp on 6 October 1914. By 8 October the order for retreat had been given and it was with that order that the confusion started which was to result in some 1500 members of the RND crossing the Dutch border. The naval party in Antwerp consisted of two brigades of three battalions each. The officer delivering the order for retreat at 5pm gave it not, as he should have, to the Brigade Commander, Commodore Henderson, but instead to Commander Campbell of Drake battalion, informing him that Commander Henderson was already aware of the order, which in fact he was not. The result was that whilst the Second brigade, comprising the Marine brigades and Drake battalion left as soon as possible, Commander Henderson and the remaining three battalions Hawke, Benlow and Collingwood of the First brigade did not begin their retreat until shortly before midnight. The bulk of the Second brigade, hampered by the many refugees travelling on the same road, eventually made it to St Gillaes where they entrained and completed their retreat. Because of their late start and a combination of bad staff work, poor intelligence gathering and the sheer

⁴⁸ A more detailed insight into the composition of the Royal Naval Brigade and the limitations of its training can be found in Jerrold.D., *The Royal Navy Division*, London: Hutchinson & Co, 1923. (reprinted 1995 & 2004 Naval and Military Press Ltd). See also Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918*, p.199 –200.

physical exhaustion of the men, the members of the First brigade were unable to follow their colleagues. In the confusion of the retreat the Division became separated, some managing to entrain at Kemseke. These, however, were later taken by the Germans and spent the rest of the war as POWs. The remainder, some 1500 men, believing, it later became apparent incorrectly, that the Germans had already taken the railway line a little way down from St Gillaes and that they were in danger of being taken captive by the Germans were led by Commander Henderson over the Dutch border.

Henderson's decision to enter Holland was later upheld by the Admiralty in a formal investigation into the occurrences at Antwerp.⁴⁹ Whatever the outcome of later investigations, however, it was of immense importance to the welfare and treatment of the interned British soldiers that right from the start of their internment they were not held to be culpable in any way for their internment. Indeed public opinion in Great Britain held the incompetence of government responsible for the loss of 1,500 fighting men at a time when they were much needed. In the eyes of their countrymen, their superiors and the many charitable organisations that supported prisoners of war, the British soldiers interned in the Netherlands were considered to be the equivalent of POWs and were therefore accorded the same help and support that POWs received. This support from the home nation is thrown into sharp relief when compared to the relationship between the Belgian government and its interned soldiers.

The retreat by a large section of the Belgian army from Antwerp into the Netherlands is

⁴⁹ PRO ADM 116/1914 The Board of Enquiry into the retreat of the First Naval Brigade from Antwerp details the poor condition of the men at the time of the retreat and the limited options open to Henderson. See also Churchill, *The World Crisis 1911-1918* .p204.

an unresolved issue in Belgian history.⁵⁰ The basic facts are undeniable. The Germans continued their bombardment of the city even after the withdrawal of the Belgian Court and the British reinforcements. The result was inevitable and on 10 October 1914 Antwerp formally surrendered. The Germans had by this time all but surrounded the city, leaving just one exit open, to the west. This was the route taken by the Belgians as they made their way to safety in Holland.⁵¹ The controversy that has not yet been fully answered concerns the timing of the retreat and the role played by the Belgian officer corps. It was alleged that many of the ordinary soldiers had already left their posts before the order for retreat was given and that desertion on a massive scale had taken place. It was also alleged in many eyewitness accounts of the retreat given by ordinary soldiers, that the Belgian officers abandoned their men and sought safety for themselves, a view supported by Bosboom, the then Dutch Minister of War. This situation only added to the confusion over who was eligible for internment and who was not. One of Oort's criteria for defining a potential internee was that they were in the company of a commanding officer. The majority of the Belgians entering the Netherlands in October 1914 were clearly not under any form of command and this made the job of the border guards especially difficult.⁵² In his thesis on the internment of the Belgians, Laporte disputes the allegation of mass desertion, but not that of dereliction of duty by the officers.⁵³ He asserts that the Belgian actions were on a par with the British and that therefore the Belgian internees should have received the same treatment from their government as the British enjoyed. Laporte acknowledges that

⁵⁰For a Belgian viewpoint see Mamet, Major d'E. M. retraité., *La Chute D'Anvers et L'internment des Soldats belges en Hollande*, (S.A.Brugéoise d'Imprimerie et de Publicité).

⁵¹ See Kruishoop and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.12-15 for a good account and interesting photographs of the attack on Antwerp.

⁵² See p.16.

⁵³ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*.p.12.

there is insufficient evidence on the subject and further research is needed to arrive at the truth. The Belgian government did hold an enquiry into the matter, but not until 1966 and even then the findings were inconclusive. In fact the truth of the matter is largely irrelevant for this study. What is important is that regardless of what actually happened, at the time that they were interned, the Belgian soldiers were perceived by their countrymen as being deserters and their officers were seen as being at best incompetent and at worst also deserters.⁵⁴ It goes without saying that the relationship between the interned Belgian officers and other ranks was also very poor.

This breakdown of trust between the Belgian government and a substantial part of her army did little to help either the soldiers themselves or the Dutch government as they sought to accommodate this huge influx of internees and it greatly influenced the amount of support that the Belgian authorities were prepared to undertake to ensure a reasonable standard of living for their interned soldiers. In February 1916 the Belgian government authorised a circular to be distributed amongst the Belgian internees that absolved them from any blame with regard to their internment. It was a half-hearted measure that had little impact on the lives of the internees or the attitude of both the Belgian government or the rest of the Belgian nation towards them.⁵⁵

In considering the influx of some 35,000 new internees into the Netherlands it is important to remember that these were not the only ones crossing the Dutch border. Just as the soldiers had been forced to flee from Antwerp so had much of its civilian

⁵⁴ Bruijnseels, *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918*, dl III, p.32.

⁵⁵ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.104.

population and they had also fled in the direction of Holland.⁵⁶ Estimates vary as to the total number of refugees but a rough average of these places the figure at around 1,400,000 of which 300,000 continued their journey by taking a boat to Great Britain.⁵⁷

Clearly the impact on the Dutch villages and towns along the Belgian border of this mass movement of people was enormous. Most of these places were still coming to terms with the newly mobilized Dutch troops that had been billeted on them or who had established temporary tented barracks alongside the civilian housing. All of the areas along the border had also had a 'Staat van Beleg' imposed upon them and now found themselves being governed by the military rather than the civilian authorities. It was, in short, a time of disruption and uncertainty for the local population. The effects of the siege of Antwerp were almost immediately apparent as the number of refugees increased as soon as the Germans began their attack.⁵⁸ By night the flames of Antwerp could be seen easily from the Dutch side of the Schelde and by day the numbers of refugees increased even more. The Dutch diplomats based in Antwerp, who had been sending regular reports of the situation there, had been told by Loudon on 9 September

⁵⁶ The subject of the First World War in the Netherlands has been largely neglected by Dutch historians but the main exception to this has been the influx of so many Belgian refugees in 1914. It is a subject that has attracted the attentions of serious academics and of amateur historians, most of whom have produced work based on their location. Unfortunately much of the work, especially by amateur historians, draws upon information already in the public domain and despite the volume of information available there is little that is new. The majority is also written from the viewpoint of the Dutch experience rather than that of the Belgians. The best accounts can be found in Bruijnseels, *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918*, and Kruishoop, and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog: Belgen in Nederland 1914-1918*. Later historians writing on the Dutch experience of the First World War as a whole have put the refugee issues into better context. Chapters on the refugees and internees can be found in Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* and Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog Vol II*.

⁵⁷ Moeyes quotes the Centrale Commissie tot Behartiging van de Belangen der naar Nederland uitgeweken Vluchtelingen (Central Committee for looking after the interests of the refugees in the Netherlands). They give the number of refugees as 1,056,000 but only count those that cross at three main locations, Limburg, Zeeland and Noord-Brabant. Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.101.

⁵⁸ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.807

1914 that they could leave. In fact they stayed on until 6 October 1914 when a boat was used to take them to safety along the Schelde⁵⁹

A resident of Roosendaal who wrote in his subsequently published diary of those turbulent days provides a vivid description.⁶⁰ On Saturday 3 October 1914 he speaks rather jubilantly of the Dutch troops sent to fortify the border in case of attack,

Around two o'clock we suddenly heard music. We ran outside, and yes, there came the 3rd Regiment from the Molenstraat, which moved with full music and banners flying in the direction of Bergen op Zoom. It was a beautiful view! – the men looked splendid. Behind the troops came the inevitable ambulances and further turmoil. The citizens enjoyed it; many had never seen anything like it. Around 3 o'clock I wanted to go to the Stationweg, and really, music again! There the 2nd Regiment moved into Roosendaal with merry sounds, continuing after a pause towards Breda.⁶¹

On 6 October he writes,

The number of refugees is ever increasing. I can't describe the situation: fleeing Belgians, runaway Germans, soldiers; yes, you would not recognize Roosendaal.⁶²

The following day the position deteriorates even further,

What this must come to, I don't know! Thousands, I don't lie, thousands of refugees from Antwerp and surroundings arrive by trains, cars and on foot into Roosendaal. Rich and poor, everybody flees to the Netherlands.⁶³

⁵⁹ Smit, *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlands politiek van Nederland 1848-1919. (deel 4 1914-7)*, .Nr 182 p. 166.

⁶⁰ Van Helvert-Weijermans, *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen*. Afl II p.55

⁶¹ Van Helvert-Weijermans, *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen*. Afl II p.57.

⁶² Van Helvert-Weijermans, *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen*. Afl II p.61.

⁶³ Van Helvert-Weijermans, *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen*. Afl II p.62.

By 9 October 1914, at the peak of influx of refugees and potential internees the situation had become critical;

The situation becomes unbearable! One of the towns' fair days is known for the enormous number of people, so that one can say 'from the Town Hall to the Schuiven one can walk over the heads'. That is also the case this morning, though now they are refugees instead of fairgoers. Rental carriages from Antwerp, low trailers, buses, cars, lorries from large Belgian companies; all move around. Through the night the trains were running. This morning I saw one coming into the station with 64 wagons, full of unhappy people in the first, second and third class wagons; with much of their belongings with them. I can't think where all those people are going to stay. Last night more than 12,000 refugees stayed in Roosendaal. All of the churches are full. I have seen it myself: in the St.Johanneskerk a high mass was read by a foreign priest in one of the side-altars, while next to and around the altar stressed, tired people were sleeping on beds.

Washing, cleaning, dressing, it was all done in the church; the same in the monastery of 'Eerwaarde Paters Redemptoristen'. In the 'Gasthuis' all available rooms and corridors are full. These are mainly people who were brought here ill. Everybody walks in and out. The Sisters don't have enough hands to supply all the help that is necessary. It is an indescribable situation. Women and children walk crying around the market and through the streets; children have lost their parents, parents have lost their children. And in between all this noise and misery are the sneaky Germans, who in earlier days received so much hospitality from the Belgian people; they are definitely uncomfortable in this situation. Suddenly, around nine o'clock in the morning, the windows rattle, just like last night, about eleven-thirty; one supposes that one of the forts has been blown up again. Around noon such a large army as I have never seen passes by; there was no end to it. Also machine guns on dog sleds. Carriages and more carriages, full of blankets and the like, were at the rear. Everything went to Hoogerheide and Putte. Nobody knows what is happening. It all has a painful and sorrowful uncertainty.⁶⁴

Roosendaal was just one place where the Belgian soldiers and civilians crossed into the Netherlands. The pattern was repeated to a greater or lesser degree along the entire border.⁶⁵ The Dutch authorities faced a multitude of problems; not least in maintaining

⁶⁴ Van Helvert-Weijermans *Uit Bange Oorlogsdagen*. Afl II, p.64.

⁶⁵ The effect of this mass movement of people was felt all over the Netherlands, not just along the border. For example, the effect on the town of Zwolle has been considered by M. Zegers in Zegers, Michael., *Een levendig Geschiedenis van Zwolle en de Grote Oorlog. Zwolle in de jaren 1914-1919*, (Eindscriptie, Windesheim, August 1997).

an appropriate military presence at the border, ready to fend off any attack on Dutch neutrality that might result from the fall of Antwerp. A journalist from *Het Vaderland* wrote about those that simply could not find a place to shelter and were reduced to living in the forests near Putte.⁶⁶



Belgian refugees crossing the Dutch border in October 1914⁶⁷

Responsibility for providing relief for this mass of refugees lay with the local councils, but in such extraordinary times as these help came from all directions. Ordinary people simply opened their homes and took in the weary refugees, any and all large buildings were pressed into service as temporary accommodation, churches, barracks, factories, anywhere that could provide some form of shelter. As De Vries has said, many Dutch

⁶⁶ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.95.

⁶⁷ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/lokale-noden/index.html> 24 August 2008.

authors consider the help given to the Belgian refugees to be the 'schoonste bladzijde' (cleanest page) of Dutch history in wartime.⁶⁸

The military medical services were immediately brought into action, as they had been when 7,000 Belgians sought shelter in Holland after the fall of Liege. Their concerns were twofold. Firstly there was the immediate problem of providing medical assistance to those who required it, and secondly there was the need to maintain standards of hygiene that would protect the local population, and the nearby-mobilized troops, from infection. A further concern for Snijders was the presence amongst the refugees of women of 'loose morals' and the infections that they might bring with them and pass on to the local Dutch troops. He wrote to all field commanders concerning the problem.⁶⁹ Initial plans to undertake some sort of rudimentary medical check at the border proved impossible once the numbers of refugees reached its peak. Instead centres for medical help were established both at the border at places like Putte, where many of the refugees actually crossed into the Netherlands, and at places further inland such as Roosendaal and Bergen op Zoom. In Roosendaal for example, the two civilian doctors based in the town were normally sufficient to minister to the needs of the towns 17,000 souls. However, there was no way in which they could cope with the huge increase created by the fall of Antwerp. Consequently a special medical facility was set up by the armed forces purely for refugees with an attached, but separate, section for wounded and sick internees (of which there were 68 in total). These medics were especially looking for infectious diseases such as scabies; however, one of the most frequently required medical treatments was in fact assistance at childbirth. Many new

⁶⁸ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.96 and De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.87.

⁶⁹ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 152 dated 12 October 1914 Letter from Snijders to his field commanders.

citizens arrived during the first few days of their mother's arrival in the Netherlands, their early appearance sometimes caused by the flight from Belgium.⁷⁰

By the beginning of October the Dutch border guards had become used to dealing with soldiers of the belligerent armies that crossed into Holland and they were fully aware of the need to intern such soldiers. New orders were issued to supplement those of 3 August 1914 clarifying further actions to be taken by border guards. This time additional topics such as the movement of local people who crossed the border because of their business were dealt with and the responsibilities of the different agencies were set out.⁷¹ With the mass influx of October, however, a new problem emerged, that of identifying which of the men crossing the border were soldiers and which were civilians. Whilst large numbers of the Belgians and all of the British crossed the border in uniform and as part of a large group, many did not. Some had merely lost their uniform and colleagues en route, but others had changed clothes in a deliberate attempt to evade internment. Men in civilian clothes who identified themselves as servicemen were taken for internment and a number of civilians also claimed that they were soldiers, presumably in the hope of bed and board, and, although these were also interned, once their true status came to light they were released. Snijders was worried that any failure to track down Belgian soldiers in civilian clothes would be seen as a failure of the Dutch to adhere to the rules governing neutrality.⁷² The motivation for such a move also varied. Some wished to avoid internment in the Netherlands in order to proceed to Britain, from where they

⁷⁰ ARA 2.13.70. Inv 1 'Overzicht van het Gemeente in het gebied der III de Divisie doe den Militairen Geneeskundigen Dienst verricht, in verband met de aanwezigheid van de uit België hier te lande binnengekomen Vluchtelingen', October 1914.

⁷¹ ARA 2.13.70. Inv 127 dated 14 October 1914. Orders for the border guards.

⁷² Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden* p.324 and *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.13.

could rejoin a fighting unit and return to Belgium to continue the fight against the Germans. Laporte, quoting Belgian government papers, estimates that some 7,000 Belgian soldiers who entered the Netherlands and who should have been interned managed to continue on to Great Britain.⁷³ Others simply wanted to keep out of any further involvement with the war. Of those Belgian soldiers who did not cross the border as part of a large military group some had managed to find their families and were travelling with them, whilst others were alone. In the confusion of the many refugees it is easy to understand how many who should have been interned were not. The control of refugees and the search for out-of-uniform soldiers did not end once the border had been crossed. On 14 October, for example 18 Belgian soldiers were spotted in Groningen, travelling with a group of civilian refugees. They were identified because although they were dressed in civilian clothes they still wore their army footwear.⁷⁴ Definitive numbers for exactly how many potential internees crossed into the Netherlands as result of the fall of Antwerp are difficult if not impossible to find. As Oosterman says 'the peace and time needed in these busy days to list, count and recount the internees was just not available'.⁷⁵

On 27 October 1914 General Snijders wrote to all of his military commanders warning them to be on the lookout for male foreigners, particularly Belgians, who had evaded internment and were now trying to return to Belgium to rejoin the army. In this letter Snijders alleges that there were in fact some members of the Belgian army working in

⁷³ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.13. See also Kruishoop and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Groote Oorlog* p.31.

⁷⁴ *De Telegraaf* 14 October 1914

⁷⁵ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.45. Tuinen gives quite precise figures but he does not specify when they entered the Netherlands nor the source of his figures. Tuinen, 'De Militaire Handhaving van Neutraliteit en Gezag' p.68.

secret in the Netherlands to round up any uninterned soldiers and get them back to Belgium.⁷⁶ Certainly there were those both in the Netherlands and Belgium who were actively working to help British and Belgian soldiers return to their units avoiding either internment or being taken as a prisoner of war.⁷⁷ The most famous of these was the nurse Edith Cavell who was later executed for her role in assisting British servicemen to cross into Holland. Escaped POWs were, of course, entitled to transit through the Netherlands on their way home without risk of internment, Snijders' concern was with those that had never been POWs and should therefore be interned⁷⁸

Official figures are also contradictory. According to the border troops between 8 October and 14 December some 27,862 military internees arrived. However, it is apparent from the figures of internees transported in the period 10 to 31 October that 32,979 men and 381 officers were involved. The second figure, around 32,000 seems the more plausible in this instance and it ties in more easily with the numbers arriving at internment camps.⁷⁹ Laporte gives the figure as 35,000 in chapter 1 but increases this to 40,000 in chapter 2 of which 7,000 pass through the Netherlands leaving 33,000, a figure that is roughly in line with other estimates.⁸⁰ Official figures from government publications in 1916 are quoted as 35,000 Belgians, 1,500 British and 200 Germans.⁸¹

⁷⁶ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.12

⁷⁷ A difficult topic to provide reliable numbers for, the main evidence that not every soldier that should have been interned was, comes from personal memoirs of such escapees. See Beaumont, Harry, 'Trapped in Belgium', Durnford, Hugh, et al. *Tunnelling to Freedom and Other Escape Narratives from World War 1*, (New York: Dover publications Inc, 2004). p.33 and p.39.

⁷⁸ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.4.

⁷⁹ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.45.

⁸⁰ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.12 and p.31.

⁸¹ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.33.

The Dutch press, usually slower to report the effects of the war at home than the events on the front line overseas, were predictably slow to pick up on the story that so many foreign soldiers were crossing the border. In the edition of *De Telegraaf* on 9 October 1914 there was only a small article that mentioned 100 Belgian soldiers who crossed the border at Heenenveen and who had been sent to Gaasterland. By 10 October the figures being mentioned are larger, 600 crossing at Putte and a further 122 landing at Middelburg having crossed by boat.⁸² On 11 October the number of internees was the lead story with the number of crossings at Sas van Gent estimated at 12,000 with a further 2,000 at Roosendaal. Only a day later *De Telegraaf* quotes from 'a reliable source' that the number of new internees has now reached 20,000 with the numbers increasing in every edition.⁸³ 'Along our border are based strong German patrols, their aim is to take the dispersed Belgian troops prisoner or to push them in the direction of Dutch territory.'⁸⁴

Given the poor state in which many crossed the border the first priority was to provide shelter and food. In Oost Zeeuwsch Vlaanderen those interned were sent to Hulst, Axel and Sluiskill where attempts were made to house them in barns. Unfortunately many of the barns were full with the recent harvest and those that were not were already providing shelter for refugees. As a result the internees were accommodated in the local

⁸² Many of those that crossed by boat were injured. Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.807.

⁸³ ARA 2.13.70 Nr 176 dated 12 November 1914. The Germans were clearly concerned about how the press coverage of the retreat from Antwerp would affect Dutch public opinion of Germany. This document is a transcript of a series of telephone conversations between the German Consultant and the German Ambassador concerning the image of Germany being presented in the Dutch newspapers. Their conclusion is that little damage has been done. Perhaps of more interest is the fact that the Dutch Government was clearly bugging German telephones and was itself concerned about German opinion of Dutch public opinion.

⁸⁴ *De Telegraaf* 12 October 1914, 1st edition.

barracks though this meant a great deal of disruption for the local regiments.⁸⁵ Indeed in Hulst, the need for accommodation was so great that many slept in the streets and these were filled with straw in an attempt to provide at least a little comfort. Classrooms in local schools were used to house refugees in Sluis, Aardenburg and IJzendijke.⁸⁶

A further consideration was food. As a matter of principle and in compliance with international law, the internees were fed one warm meal at lunchtime and two bread meals, morning and evening. Before being sent on to an internment camp they were provided with bread for the journey. All this was very welcome, as the vast majority of the internees had entered the Netherlands hungry, what little food they had being consumed on the journey. Unfortunately, whatever the intentions of the Dutch authorities, the situation on the ground did not always permit the rules to be followed to the letter. Wherever possible local supplies were used. In Nieuw Namen, for example, use was made of a supply of meat, rice and cake that was found on one of the Belgian trains. In Hulst the bread was completely sold out and so the internees were fed biscuits and rusks, with brown beans and bacon as a warm meal. In Neuzen the local population were ordered by the local garrison commander to provide a meal for some 400 Belgians. Already the difference between the British and Belgian government with regard to their internees was beginning to show. Whilst the Belgians were completely dependent on their Dutch hosts the British consul at Vlissingen made arrangements for the British internees to receive extra bread. The British always considered internees to be a form of POW. In their statistical lists compiled at the end of the war internees in

⁸⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.48.

⁸⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.49.

both Switzerland and Holland are listed alongside more traditional POWs and included in the overall totals.⁸⁷



Bread being handed out to refugees by the Dutch army in Roosendaal in October 1914.⁸⁸

As soon as possible the internees were moved inland away from the borders, both to relieve the situation in that already overcrowded region and to prevent any possible attempts to escape back into Belgium. Many internees were taken from Zeeuws Vlaanderen by boat to Vlissingen. From there they were sent on to the internment camps by train, initially only to Gaasterland but later to other locations as well. There is little evidence of any resistance to being placed in internment or any reaction to the makeshift conditions under which the internees spent their first few days in

⁸⁷ *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920*, (London: HMSO 1922) p.329.

⁸⁸ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/lokale-noden/index.html> 24 August 2008.

confinement. Indeed many seemed to hold the view that internment was a small price to pay for shelter and food and a means of escaping the German advance. The only objections seem to have been from the British officers on behalf of their men, a responsibility that the Belgian officers clearly did not feel.⁸⁹ It may also have been due to the fact that the British were not expecting to be interned. They had fully expected that the Dutch would let them continue back to Great Britain. It is difficult to establish what the average British soldier believed would happen to him once he had crossed into the Netherlands. The Belgian government consistently held the view that their men should not be interned. Given the large number of Belgian soldiers that went to considerable lengths to avoid being detained it is, however, hard to believe that the regulations regarding internment were not widely known.

De Telegraaf of 13 October 1914 described the arrival of one such group of internees at Loosduinen;

Yesterday morning around 10 o'clock they arrived here, the Belgian soldiers, who were disarmed by our troops. These men walked wearily along the road, some in clogs, some in slippers, some with their head covered by an old hat or cap, a few without any head cover. Almost all carried something: a bundle in a colourful clothe, a handbag. Many had a blanket as a bandoleer around the shoulders; it was a sad sight, those dirty faces. Some had only just experienced their first battle, those from the northerly forts; others had been fighting and happened to end up in a different regiment. All were men between 25 and 35 years old, so the older generation. Near the administration building of the steam train the 1,600 men had a rest and afterwards they moved to the camp, where everything had been made ready for them. After dinner and a wash the internees spread out. First there was a roll call and then everybody was allocated to a tent.

⁸⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.54.

Information Office of the Dutch Red Cross and the Belgian Information Office

One of the biggest problems in the first few days after the fall of Antwerp was that of trying to reunite people who, for all sorts of reasons, had become separated during the rush to leave Belgium. Many walls in the Dutch border towns became unofficial notice boards where refugees left notes saying who they sought, asking for information about their loved ones. *De Telegraaf* made a more organised and realistic attempt at reuniting families by publishing the names of the missing and giving the location of the people who sought them. What started out as a single column in the newspaper grew within a couple of days to fill several full pages as the number of refugees also increased. Attempts to reunite people by *De Telegraaf* stopped. Instead it advised that all queries concerning internees should be directed to the Information Officer of the Dutch Red Cross.

The idea for an Information Office of the Dutch Red Cross had been established in 1909 and was a direct result of the 1906 Geneva Convention, which, in article 4, required belligerent nations to keep a record of their own casualties and to inform their enemies of casualties or prisoners found to belong to enemy forces. The 1907 Peace Conference took this initiative a step further by requiring that even neutral countries should keep a record of foreign soldiers that fell into their care either as internees, wounded or deserters.⁹⁰ This second requirement was rather put on a back burner by the Dutch authorities that could not envisage such a scenario occurring. When the first

⁹⁰ Moorehead, *Dunants Dream. War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, p.182.

office was opened at Lange Voorhout 6 in The Hague it was with the sole intention of maintaining records of soldiers belonging to the Dutch army who were injured or killed on Dutch territory.⁹¹ This idea was expanded to include the delivering of mail and parcels to all prisoners of war and, where appropriate, ensuring that belongings were returned to next of kin. In the Netherlands this idea was accepted with alacrity and set in motion by a law of 25 May 1908 (*Staatsblad* 152) and Royal Decree dated 19 January 1909 (*Staatsblad* 14).⁹²

It was decided that two organisations were required, one to deal with the sick and wounded from the Dutch military and one to deal with the prisoners of war and internees. The Royal Decree of April 1909 nominated the Netherlands Red Cross as being responsible for the first of these tasks, should the Netherlands ever find itself involved in a war. No decision was made over the second organisation beyond the fact that it would fall under the responsibility of the General Staff.⁹³ As the Dutch Red Cross was also under the direct control of the Ministry of War this meant that effectively both elements were part of the same department although there were no plans to activate the office for POWs.

Once the Dutch troops were mobilized in July 1914 then 'Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis' (The Information Office of the Dutch Red Cross, hereafter referred to as the Information Office) was put on alert and on 1st August 1914 came into being.⁹⁴ Initially the Information Office was to deal only with those members

⁹¹ Leclercq, *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis*, p.13.

⁹² LeClercq, *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.8.

⁹³ *Staatsblad* 90A 1909.

⁹⁴ LeClercq, *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.24.

of the Netherlands military that were wounded or captured but with the influx of foreign servicemen from the warring nations that began almost with the first shots being fired then the task was expanded to include holding records relating to all internees.⁹⁵

Initial responsibility for the Office was given to the Dutch Red Cross and they took advice from Professor Mr. H.W. Methorst, director of the Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Central Office for Statistics) with regard to organising the information. This was to be in a card index, with a card for each soldier and different colours for each branch of the army.⁹⁶ The organisation of the Information Office was an administrator's dream. A theoretical problem and one that could easily be solved given the right amount of little bits of paper, or in this case card. The structure of the Information Office was planned, established and then effectively mothballed until such time as it was needed which, given the prevailing Dutch policy of peace and neutrality, seemed very unlikely.

It would be wrong to think of the Dutch Red Cross during the First World War as being the same as the independent and neutral organisation that it is now. It was funded by the Ministry of War, staffed by former military officers and controlled, nominally at least, by the supreme military commander. Nevertheless it was clearly a humanitarian organisation, well on its way to achieving the status that it holds today. Although

⁹⁵ This expansion was ordered by the Minister of War on 8 August 1914. LeClercq, *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.16.

⁹⁶ These cards were sent to the home countries of the internees after the war to supplement their service records. Most of the Belgian cards still exist. With the exception of the first and last few letters of the alphabet the rest can be found, still in alphabetical order in the archives of the Army Museum in Brussels.

functionally part of the General Staff it does not appear that this was anything other than an administrative position. The Dutch military commanders made no demands of it that conflicted with its purpose of aiding all troops. Given the desire of the Dutch government to underscore its neutrality at every opportunity any such demands were unlikely.⁹⁷ The Information Office was an excellent advertisement for the official Dutch attitude towards the war, a wish to abide completely with all international law (in the hope that other nations would do the same), to remain neutral, but to offer aid to soldiers of any nationality who had suffered as a result of the war.

In his excellent history of the Information Office during the war years LeClercq says,

And then on 1 August 1914, in connection with the mobilisation of the army and regarding the threatening war danger, the 'Information Office' had to open; it was immediately ready and sufficiently prepared to accept its task fully.⁹⁸

In a directive from the Ministry of War on 8 August 1914 point 7 was specifically relevant to the Information Office.⁹⁹

The heads of the hospitals which are under military rule and where the sick and wounded belonging to the belligerent nations are looked after, and also the head of the internment camps will send immediately after their arrival and further twice monthly, reports to the Information Bureau of the Red Cross containing all information that can be used to identify personnel, as well as information that could be used to inform and reassure relatives in their home countries.

⁹⁷ Such histories of the Dutch Red Cross during the First World War that exist (and there are not many) were almost all written shortly after the war by members of the Red Cross who had worked in the organisation during the hostilities. An exception is the very comprehensive history of the Dutch Red Cross by Leo van Bergen, *De Zwaargewonden Eerst?*, (Rotterdam: Erasmus, 1994). As with many histories of the Netherlands in the twentieth century, however, Bergen devotes very little space to the First World War. The bombing of the Red Cross archive in the Netherlands during World War Two has also reduced the amount of original documentation considerably.

⁹⁸ LeClercq, *Het Informatiebureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.16. See also *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.4 and p.11.

⁹⁹ LeClercq, *Het Informatie Bureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.18.

At this stage in the war it was still considered that the main function of the Information Office would be with respect to Dutch troops if, and in August 1914 this was a real possibility, the Netherlands were drawn into the war by an attack on its borders. A year later, however, it was clear that the major role of the Information Office would be the coordination of internment figures and in September 1915 an amendment to the original order was given which emphasised the change in the primary duties of the Office and reflects the Dutch experience of internment in the first year of the war. One of the key differences in the second year of the war was that the Dutch authorities now had the time to monitor the internees and to produce accurate records of just how many internees were in each location and to clearly identify each individual internee. The orders issued to each camp commandant in September 1915, as shown below, illustrate this change. The role of a commandant was not only to guard and care for the internees. He also had a responsibility to provide information that could, if requested, be fed back to the home government or the internee's family.

Immediately after arrival of foreign military personnel the commandant of the internment camp will send a report to the Information Office of the Red Cross containing all relevant information that can be used to establish the identity of the internees. Also as soon as possible all changes relevant to these military personnel, such as change of posting, dismissal from internment, indefinite or long leave, gone missing and return, should be reported to the Information Office. Also the Information Office should be informed by telegraph of the arrival or the escape of officers, or the death of internees, including the cause of death and the time of the funeral. Copies of the above and details of the numbers of internees in each camp should be send to the above mentioned office on the 15th and last day of every month.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ LeClercq, *Het Informatie Bureau van het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis* p.19. *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.11.

At the same time as the Dutch were recognising a need to form a central information point to hold details of all of their internees, the Belgian authorities were coming to the same conclusion. On 4 October 1914 the Agence Belge de Renseignements pour les Prisonniers de Guerre et les Internes (Hereafter known as the Belgian Information Office) was established in The Hague. Its main role was to provide information to families on the location and status of Belgian soldiers that had either been taken as POWs or internees.¹⁰¹ It had four main aims; information, correspondence, financial help and help in general. Its main source of information was the lists of POWs issued by the Germans and the lists of internees provided by the Dutch. On 24 October 1914 it opened its doors to the public who could submit requests for information on slips of paper. Although the idea was sound, the Belgian Information Office was unable to fulfil its primary task because of insufficient information. By the end of 1915, although it now had around 100,000 records most of them were incomplete and only 5% of requests for information could be answered.¹⁰² Both the Dutch and Belgian Information Offices would expand their staff as the war progressed and the need for their services increased; neither would reach the scale of the Swiss Information Office, which at its peak had a staff of 1,200 volunteers.¹⁰³

Just as the role of the Dutch Information Office was expanded to include all foreign troops that crossed into the Netherlands the Belgian Office was also expanded to include details of any French or British soldiers who were wounded or imprisoned on Belgian soil. The German authorities in the occupied section of Belgium were very co-

¹⁰¹ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.75.

¹⁰² Verhaege, J., 'Documneten over belgen die tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Duitsland gevangen waren of in neutral landen geïnterneerd', *Revue Belge d'Histoire Militaire*, 24 series (1983) p.746.

¹⁰³ Moorehead, *Dunants Dream. War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, p.184.

operative and swiftly gave permission for this expansion in the role of the Belgian Information Office.

Volunteers staffed the Belgium Information Office but it worked closely with the Belgian Red Cross. In the autumn of 1914 the Belgian Red Cross visited all of the internment camps in the Netherlands with a view to not only inspecting conditions but also collecting information on the internees. This visit sparked a contact between the two Information Offices that was to result in a close and fruitful partnership that lasted the entire length of the war. The Dutch Information Office not only provided up to date information on the well being and location of internees, it also facilitated the exchange of post which, especially after the border between Belgium and Holland was closed in 1916, was not always easy.¹⁰⁴

Although the Belgians had an information office in The Hague that dealt solely with the internees, the main Belgian Information Office was in Le Havre and this held information on all Belgian POWs. It underwent several name changes and mergers with other agencies until in November 1917 it found its final form as the Office Central Belge pour les Prisonniers de Guerre (Central Office for Belgian POWs). Interestingly this office did not include the internees as part of its remit. They were not considered to be POWs and so were not afforded any help. Only in July 1918 was formal recognition given to the 30,000 members of the Belgian military in Holland and they were offered the assistance of the main Belgian Information Office.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Laporte, G., *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.75.

¹⁰⁵ Verhaege, 'Documenten over Belgen die tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog in Duitsland gevangen waren of in neutrale landen geïnterneerd', p.746

By the end of 1914 the Netherlands had undergone another transformation. The threat of imminent invasion had receded and although the army was still fully mobilized some stability had returned to everyday life. The urgent problems the Netherlands now faced were of a political and economic nature rather than military. How could the Dutch government maintain its firmly avowed neutrality without jeopardising the crucial trading ties with both Germany and Great Britain that were so important to the Dutch economy? The problem of the internees was a good illustration of the decisions that had to be made. The Dutch government also now had around 35,000 foreign soldiers to feed, house and guard for the duration of the war. Although the cost would, or at least should, be met by the home nations there was no guarantee that any of the belligerents would be in a position at the end of the war to repay any expenses. In December 1914 it was also anyone's guess how long the war would last. The initial predictions that it would be 'over by Christmas' had obviously been wrong but it was still impossible to tell.

~ Chapter 4 ~

Administering Military Internment: The Camps

Given the turbulence of the first few weeks of August 1914 the Dutch government was remarkably swift in issuing guidelines for dealing with internees. The Royal Decree of 8 August 1914 gave instructions for the internment of foreign soldiers that crossed the Dutch border and those injured soldiers that were brought across the border for treatment in a Dutch hospital.¹ It was signed by the Minister of War who, in an order signed by the Queen and dated 28th August 1914 was charged with all responsibility for the internees. This same order also stipulated that the internees were to be treated in the same way as their equivalent rank in the Dutch Army with regard to nursing, conditions and allowances.² Whilst each separate order provides an insight into the views of the Dutch government on internment as a whole, it is very helpful in showing the priority that each aspect of internment was given. There can be no doubt, for example, that internment (unlike the refugees) was considered to be a military problem best dealt with by the military and not by the civilian authorities.

General Snijders was charged by the Minister of War with the day to day running of the camps. In order to leave as many regular army officers in position on the Dutch border as possible a selection of retired officers were brought back on to the active list and

¹ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.1. This pamphlet holds copies of most, if not all, of the regulations brought into force by the Dutch Government to deal with the influx of internees in 1914.

² *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.5.

installed as the commandants of the newly formed internment camps. It was made quite clear that these officers were to be responsible to the Commander-in-Chief. However, what was not made clear was the authority that the commandants would have over the troops that they were given to guard the internees. This issue was never really resolved. The guard commander was, as a regular officer, ultimately responsible to the Commander-in-Chief but whether he was also to accept orders from the camp commandant was a moot point. In reality this led to many minor disagreements between the camp officials but over the course of the war common sense prevailed in most instances and the individuals concerned managed to work together for the general good. Van Lier, writing in 1967 about internment from the point of view of the Koninklijke Marechaussee (military police) cites 19 January 1915, when areas containing internment camps were declared to be in *Staat van Beleg*, as the point when the police guards assigned to the camps came under the authority of the camp commanders.³ With the introduction of the *Staat van Beleg* the authority of the military police now extended to the whole region and not just the camp and activities such as assisting an internee to escape by providing clothes or shelter were now prohibited by law.

The decision to locate the first internment camp at Alkmaar in August 1914 set the pattern for the establishment of all future Dutch internment camps. In deciding on Alkmaar as a location the government was led by several factors, the distance from the front line and the borders, the availability of water and other essentials, adequate transport links and, perhaps the most important of all, the availability of land on which to pitch tents and empty local buildings that could also be pressed into service as

³ Lier, 'Internering van vreemde militairen in Nederland tijdens de eerste wereldoorlog' p.54.

required.⁴ That the government decided to use a school gymnasium during the summer holidays perhaps indicates that they were only thinking of this as an emergency and very temporary camp.⁵ Indeed at this early stage in the war little thought seems to have been given to the length of time for which this initial camp would be needed. By the end of the first month, however, its first failing had already become obvious; the different nationalities could not be housed within the same camp without the risk of hostilities breaking out. Consequently by mid August 1914 the need for a second camp had already arisen.

The war of 1914 was, for everyone involved in it, a new type of war and it would be unfair to the Dutch government to criticise them for not anticipating the number of internees they would be called upon to house. There was no precedent to inform their planning or even suggest that plans ought to be made. The establishment of all of the internment camps was, therefore, governed by the Dutch need to react to events rather than their recognition of potential problems that could be planned for. Of all of the criteria listed above that were considered in locating internment camps two were of most importance, distance from the border and the availability of empty accommodation. One was a security consideration and the other a function of the need to create camps quickly, in many cases within hours never mind days. The need for the establishment of internment camps was recognised very early on in the conflict with the issue of a Royal Decree on 8 August 1914. However, this document had only three articles and is indicative of the importance that the Dutch attached to internment at this

⁴ When reading through the official history of internment (*Geschiedenis der Interneering*) it is these factors that are mentioned time and again when the location of camps is being described.

⁵ A more detailed explanation of the establishment of Alkmaar as an internment camp is given in chapter 3.

time. Article one dealt with the staffing of the camps and article three placed the whole organisation of the camps under the control of the Minister of War. It is article two that sheds most light on to the lack of interest that the Dutch government had in internment. Article two deals with only one topic and states quite clearly that the commandant of an internment camp was not entitled to a military horse.⁶

The empty barracks that had previously housed the now mobilized Dutch army provided an instant and in many ways satisfactory solution to the immediate internment problem. The weight of numbers and the fact that the army would, at some point, need the barracks again meant that in most instances these camps could only be temporary. A similar caveat applied to the use of empty agricultural buildings, come harvest time these would also be needed for their primary function. All of these pressures forced the Dutch government into taking a decision to construct purpose built camps that could hold the internees securely but also afford them an acceptable standard of living. A further consideration was the number of men needed to guard the internees. The Netherlands wanted every able-bodied man to be positioned on the border ready to repel any invaders. To achieve this it needed camps that could be guarded by the minimum number of men. As early as October 1914 orders were given to start building permanent internment camps. A farsighted move, this proactive approach may not have spared many internees from spending the cold winter of 1914-1915 under canvas or in an unsuitable building but it did mean that by 1915 almost all were in far better accommodation than previously. Any delay on the grounds of possible cost saving or in anticipation of an early end to the war would have condemned many to a second winter in temporary lodgings.

⁶ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering*, p.5.

At this early stage in the war the local population appears to have been supportive of the government's attempts to house the internees. In the days after the fall of Antwerp there was an enormous outpouring of sympathy for the Belgians especially, and whilst the authorities concerned themselves with feeding and housing the internees, many local civilian committees were established to attend to other needs that the internees may have had, such as education and entertainment. This open-hearted welcome did wane as the war progressed and conditions for the Dutch population became more difficult. There were the inevitable problems brought about by locating so many unaccompanied men near to a local population but these were not extreme. In many ways the local population benefited from the camps, not least by the economic advantage of supplying the camp and the availability of a workforce to replace the Dutch men who had been mobilized. These issues will be dealt with in more detail in later chapters.

When decision to create a further internment camp at Gaasterland was taken in the second half of August 1914, the flow of foreign soldiers crossing into the Netherlands was steady and internment was clearly going to be an issue for the entire war. The numbers were manageable, however, and the prevailing predictions concerning the possible length of the war indicated that this was unlikely to be a long-term responsibility. With the experience of the camp at Alkmaar to draw upon, the Dutch government now moved forward by creating only single nationality camps.⁷ Although some specialist detention centres would, later in the war, be multinational, no further attempt was made to house different nationalities in the same camp on anything other

⁷ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.31.

than a temporary basis. This had as much to do with the economics of the situation as it did with the politics. Separate camps made it far easier to calculate separate costs and, ultimately, to produce separate bills for each of the home nations. In August 1914 costs were not high but the speed with which the numbers of internees increased in October of the same year underscored the logic of this decision.

The Belgian Camps

The next camp to be created was Gaasterland and it was, by any standards, an unusual camp.⁸ It comprised a group of villages ringed by canals. Colonel E.A.Teding, who then became its first commandant, selected its location. It was a very Dutch solution to the need for an instant internment camp to house the steadily increasing number of internees. The site was chosen because it was high and dry, surrounded by woods and further more it was easy to isolate.⁹ Teding arranged for the bridges at Sloten, Woudsend, Galamadammen, Warns and Lemmer to be opened, thereby creating an island. Permanent guards were placed on the bridges but otherwise Teding put his faith in the natural water barriers forming a deterrent against escape. Clearly the new 'camp' also now included the Dutch civilians who lived in these villages but who seem to have had very little objection to being suddenly placed in the forefront of the Dutch war effort. In this rural community many farm buildings were used to house the refugees whilst the guards were billeted on the local population. A site on the Elfbergen was chosen as being suitable for a campsite and work started on preparing the ground.

⁸ A full and more detailed impression of this unusual camp can be found in the book that accompanied the 1996 expedition over the camp. Doelman, Henk, Dijkstra, Henk & Oosterhof, Jan., *Interneringsdepot Gaasterland, Belgische vluchteling 1914-1918*, (Oudemirdum: Mar en Klif 1996).

⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.17.



Map of the southwest corner of the province of Friesland
 showing the location of Camp Gaasterland¹⁰

The first residents of the new camp were the Belgian internees transferred from the old internment camp at Alkmaar. They arrived on 24 August 1914 accompanied by 1 officer and half a platoon from the First Foot Squadron. The previous day the other half of the squadron had arrived to prepare for the arrival of the internees. These were accommodated in and around the farm Spitael belonging to S.de Vries, the guards sharing the rented accommodation with the internees, officers

¹⁰ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/refugees/camp%20gaasterland/index.htm> 24 August 2008.

included.¹¹ The only equipment that seems to have been provided for their use was a hundred cribs 'and accompaniments' that had been sent by boat from Leeuwarden a couple of days previously. As the German attack on Belgium continued then the flow of internees being sent to Gaasterland also increased. A newly built farm between Rijs en Oudemirdum was pressed into service to meet the increased need. The officers were accommodated in the farmhouse while the other ranks found a place as best they could in one of the farm outbuildings or in one of the 25 specially erected sixteen man tents. The internees from Spitael were moved here on 9 September. Even at this early stage some effort was made to provide activity for the internees and besides the inevitable football matches a large shed on the farm was established as a relaxation area with a reading room containing fresh books and magazines. In addition a canteen and a sick bay were also created.

On 24th September 1914 the number of internees was increased by the arrival of 267 British sailors (243 men and 24 officers), rescued from the recently sunk Hogue, Cressy and Aboukir. These took the place of the Belgian internees in the tented accommodation, who were themselves swiftly moved to lodgings with several local farmers. In the event the disruption proved unwarranted as after further consideration the British were released from internment and returned to the UK, leaving Gaasterland on 26 September 1914.¹² The resulting drop in the number of internees at Gaasterland was, however, only temporary and with the fall of Antwerp in October the numbers increased again but this time by thousands rather than hundreds. On 1st October 1914 the number of internees at Gaasterland stood at 2 officers and 65 other ranks with the

¹¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.17.

¹² The circumstances surrounding these British sailors are discussed fully in chapter 3.

slightly unusual addition of two horses, belonging to one of the Belgian officers, which had been transported to Gaasterland and were maintained there at his own cost.¹³ (Any other confiscated horses were sent into the care of the Dutch army at Breda and later in 1915 to Utrecht). Many of the officers had private incomes and were not reliant on their military salary. For the Belgians this was especially important as their relationship with their government was problematic, but it was also true of the British and German officers. Once the decision was made to allow officers to live outside the camps, the extra income allowed for a far better standard of living than the allowances paid by the Dutch government ever would. The keeping of horses was one manifestation of this and was more common amongst the German officers who traditionally owned their own horses.¹⁴ On 8 and 9 October 163 more Belgians arrived bringing the total of internees in the camp to around 500. On 17 October this number was quadrupled by the arrival of a further 1,500 from Loosduinen and on 19 October another 300 came from Amersfoort.¹⁵

The initial accommodation was now completely inadequate and internees were placed wherever there was a space for them under a roof, regardless of the type of building. Barns were clearly an obvious source of shelter but workshops, schools and even churches were also pressed into service. When this type of shelter became scarce then refugees were billeted on the local population, for which they received 60 cents per day. A feature of Gaasterland that was unusual, even in the turbulent days after the fall of Antwerp, was the many Belgian families that were also there. Refugees in their own

¹³LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.18. See also Laporte *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.54.

¹⁴ *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.7.

¹⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.85.

right, many were the families of internees that had either been travelling with them when they crossed the border or who had gone to Gaasterland with the express intention of finding their husbands, sons or brothers. At this stage there appears to have been very little effort made to separate soldiers who had been interned from their families. This may help explain the relatively small number of soldiers who tried to escape internment. Although the internees were compelled to go where ever the Dutch authorities wanted to send them, the civilian refugees could have resisted attempts to relocate them away from the border areas. There is, however, little evidence of any resistance. Clearly those refugees that were travelling with members of the Belgian military who had been identified for internment were happy to go wherever their loved ones were sent. The remaining refugees were for the most part looking for somewhere to sleep and eat away from the fighting and trauma of the past few days. The refugees, like the internees, were spread amongst all of the villages in the area. Some were lodged in the council school in Sloten but a large number of the refugees were housed in the brick factory in Rijs. (This suited the owner of the factory. The production of bricks was expensive due to the poor quality of local clay. More suitable materials had to be brought in from Tzum and Oude-Bildtdijk and so the chance to hire out the building to the authorities to provide shelter for the Belgians was too good to miss, even if it did result in the work force of 50 losing their jobs).



Two views of the interned Belgians at the Steenfabriek in Rijs on picture postcards produced at the time.¹⁶

A further 1,200 were accommodated close by in the buildings of the Tichelwurk, the families in the old ovens and peat stores and the single men in the drying sheds. This industrial site was to remain as a camp. Initially the only extra facility was a doctor's

¹⁶ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/refugees/camp%20gaasterland/index.htm> 24 August 2008.

surgery and a washroom but later a shop was created along with two extra barracks for families and two more for the single men. This sort of ingenuity was not unusual. All sorts of buildings were commandeered, some more suited to the task than others. It is difficult, when examining the accommodation used in Gaasterland during this time to be entirely sure where internees were placed, where refugees were placed and where there was a combination of the two. Oosterman offers the following table and this seems to fit as well as any with the other evidence available.¹⁷

Village	Lodging	Internees	Guards
Bakhuizen	Rented church with kitchen and guardroom	250	4
	Lodged with locals Without food	323	
Rijs	Open sheds converted to barracks on the ground of the brick factory with kitchen and canteen	800	9
Unspecified	Four farms	59	16
Oude Mirдум	Rented farm with kitchen and canteen	140	6
Mirdum	Two farms	49	11
Sondel	Seven farms with kitchen and canteen	300	6
Balk	Rented house	50	9
	Seven lodgings without food with kitchen and canteen	250	
TOTALS		2223¹⁸	61

¹⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.86 Laporte also claims that some 2,200 internees were held here spread out over 5 villages. Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p. 39.

The cost of this accommodation varied. The church at Bakhuizen was rented for Dfl 200, the farm at Oude Mirdum for Dfl 1,200 and the house at Balk for Dfl 120. Where internees were placed in lodgings without food their hosts were paid an allowance of 10cts per day (sometimes an increased rate of 20 cents per day was paid for the first 14 days). In Rijs the cost of accommodation was set at the higher rate of 20 cents per day until the costs of clearing and converting the open sheds had been recovered.¹⁹

Initially most of the refugees and internees accepted their accommodation without comment. After several days on the road and the terror and disruption of the German attack prior to that, most were pleased to be anywhere that provided a roof, a bed and regular food. As winter approached, however, the drawbacks of the makeshift accommodation became more obvious. Most of the bedding was straw, susceptible to the damp and, despite being frequently burned, also a breeding ground for fleas and lice. Many of the roofs leaked. The sheds at Rijs had only been closed by the use of loose planks that let the draughts in. The distance between the accommodations was also a problem. Not only were the internees spread out over several villages, the accommodation within a village was also spread over a large area meaning that the internees had some distance to walk for their meals and other facilities. The refugees had the choice of accepting the conditions or going elsewhere, the internees did not. An added problem for the majority of the internees was that they had only one change of clothing with them. Personal hygiene, even ignoring the fleas and lice, was a problem and not one that did much to improve morale. It was apparent that Gaasterland as it then stood could only be regarded as a temporary camp and was unsuitable for

¹⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.86.

occupation during the winter. Complaints were made such that in the beginning of November the Minister of War made a personal visit to Rijs and as a result wood was provided to enable sleeping platforms to be erected above ground level, therefore avoiding the worst of the cold and damp. Not all reactions to the situation were negative; however, the internees in Harich and Balk were so happy with not only their accommodation but also the food they were given, that they also wrote to the Minister of War, this time asking that they be allowed to remain in the villages.

Guarding a camp such as Gaasterland was always going to be problematic given the large area that it covered, the nature of the terrain and the way in which the internees were distributed over many different locations. The number of guards provided, even though this was increased in November 1914, was clearly inadequate to prevent the escape of any internees who made a determined effort to do so. Despite this fact, however, the number of escape attempts, successful or otherwise, was limited. No exact figures are available but the number of internees housed at Gaasterland remained constant for the rest of 1914 so it is reasonable to presume that there were few escapes.

As the stream of retreating Belgian soldiers continued to cross the Dutch frontier it was apparent to the Dutch authorities that more locations were required that could be utilised as internment camps. The recently evacuated Dutch army barracks at Amersfoort was one such location that was available for immediate use. The barracks were normally the base for the 5th Infantry Regiment but they had recently left as part of the general mobilisation. The terrain was ideally suited for the task of internment. The facilities were newly built and the entire area of around 9 ha was enclosed, making

guarding the internees much easier.²⁰ On the night of 9/10 October 1914 some 4,000 Belgian soldiers accompanied by 30 of their officers arrived at the camp to be greeted by the Commander of the Engineering Regiment that had been tasked with adapting the accommodation to meet the needs of the internees. He found himself with the additional problem of having to allocate accommodation and ensure that the internees were fed. The newly appointed camp commander and his staff did not arrive until the following day. A company of infantry from the Dutch army was transferred from Apeldoorn to act as guards.

With a population of 4,000 internees and their guards the army camp made an ideal internment camp. When a further 6,000 Belgian soldiers and 90 officers arrived on 11 October the available accommodation was stretched to its absolute limit even with the further addition of two more companies of Dutch troops to assist with guarding and two nursing officers to deal with the sick. The arrival of another 4,000 internees on the 12th October pushed the available space in the camp to such an extreme that on 13th October the Minister of War, *Generaal-Major Bosboom*, made a personal visit to the camp to assess the needs for himself. At the time of his visit the population of the camp stood at 223 officers and 16,500 soldiers.

With the help of a detachment of 200 *genietroepen* (army engineers) that had arrived on 11 October, 500 tents were erected on the parade square (7 ha) and when this proved inadequate a further 400 tents were placed on the ground behind the barracks. This area then had to be enclosed with barbed wire to prevent a mass escape. The tented camps

²⁰ The suitability or otherwise of these empty barracks is a matter of opinion. Laporte speaks less favourably of the facilities offered to the Belgian internees. Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.33.

were provided, as far as possible, with latrines and other necessities but it was not until 14 October that some sort of realistic order could be brought to the camp. Laporte in *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* talks about minor unrest in this camp because of the large numbers interned there and the cramped conditions.²¹ It seems to have been limited, however, to the throwing of projectiles at the Dutch guards. The local people were aware of the problems and some brought gifts of food, which they passed through the wire fence. Not all were this charitable and some tried to sell food through the wire. The local paper, *De Amersfoortsche Courant*, criticised those Netherlanders that sought to make a profit out of the 'helpless internees'.²²



Amersfoort 1914²³

The officers all gave their word not to escape and were released from the camp to find

²¹ Ritter also alludes to minor unrest in these temporary camps when he talks about the need for more permanent accommodation Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*, deel 1, p.147.

²² Laporte 'Vlucht en opvang van de Belgische soldaten', p.32

²³ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/refugees/vluctelingen/militarien.html> 24 August 2008

accommodation in the town. They were given freedom of movement but were not allowed to leave the local area. The accommodation situation seems to have aggravated the animosity between the Belgian soldiers and their officers. The release of the officers to live in what Laporte describes as 'luxury' at the very time that the ordinary troops were facing the worst overcrowding and chaotic organisation was ill timed, even though it was aimed at relieving the situation.²⁴ With the help of some of the Belgian officers the Dutch authorities now began to produce a form of nominal roll, which included the names of the interned and their military unit.

Given the large numbers that had to be housed in tents it was clear that Amersfoort would need to be one of the first camps to be reduced in size. On 19 October 1,500 internees were transferred to Gaasterland and Leeuwarden and once the newly built camp at Zeist, some 7 1/2 km away, was in a state to receive internees a further 6,000 were transferred there. This reduction in the number of internees meant that a far greater proportion of those still left at Amersfoort could be housed in other than tented accommodation and that the number of guards needed was also reduced.²⁵

Almost immediately after the fall of Antwerp it had become apparent to the Dutch authorities that the current provision of internment accommodation was inadequate. A large number were housed in tents that were insufficient to deal with the oncoming winter and those that were in more suitable buildings were frequently occupying barracks that the Dutch army now required to accommodate new conscripts. The solution was a decision taken by the government in mid October 1914 to erect a

²⁴ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.3. See also Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden*, p.341.

²⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.99 to p.103.

purpose built camp close to the town of Zeist.²⁶

The Ministry of War placed the task of constructing the camp in the hands of the Wapen der Genie (Engineering Regiment) under the supervision of Kapitein G.C.Beltman.²⁷

On 13 October he was instructed to build a camp for 6,000 internees plus their guards (calculated at 1 guard for 10 internees) within 14 days.²⁸ The civilian firms Van Rossum and Technisch Bureau Rutgers, both from The Hague, were also commissioned to assist with the task.

By 14 October some 175 troops from the Engineering Regiment were already at work clearing the ground. Materials, primarily wood, were moved in to the site day and night through the railway station at Huis ter Heide. The army of civilian carpenters brought in to construct the barracks, however, only worked during the day although they did continue on Sundays. When the number of military labourers proved inadequate more workers were drafted in from Utrecht. Four days into the building of the camp at Zeist, Beltman was also instructed to build two further camps, one at Harderwijk for 7,500 and one at Oldebroek for 3,500. During the building it was decided to extend the camps at Zeist and Harderwijk to 13,500 and 11,500 respectively.

The camp at Zeist was developed from the experience of the first two camps at Alkmaar and Gaasterland. It was sub-divided into three smaller camps, two for internees and one

²⁶ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.41.

²⁷ Beltman, G.C. *Eenige Mededeelingen Betreffende den Bouw en de Inrichting van de Interneeringskampen te Zeist, Harderwijk en Oldebroek*, an undated pamphlet. The text had originally been printed in *De Ingenieur; Orgaan van het Koninklijk Institute van Ingenieurs en van de Vereeniging van Delftsche Ingenieurs*, No 35, 28 August 1915.

²⁸ Bosboom, *In Moeilijke Omstandigheden*, p.341.

for guards. The guard camp comprised four accommodation barracks, one for each company plus a fifth barrack that provided not only accommodation for a further 100 men but also space for rest rooms, a tailor and barbers. In an effort to cut down on costs the kitchens, canteens and workshops that already existed on the site were pressed into use. For the internees everything was to be newly built. Camp 1 had 30 accommodation barracks that could hold 250 men (or 300 in an emergency), 4 washrooms and laundries, 4 latrine blocks plus a Roman Catholic chapel, a post office, a refuse oven and workshops for tailor, barbers and cobblers. Camp 2 had only 24 accommodation barracks and as well as the normal facilities provided in camp 1 it had three school buildings, a cinema and both a Roman Catholic and a Protestant chapel. Each of the internment camps had a guardhouse with tents for new arrivals and two portable Red Cross barracks for the sick. The camps all covered an area of roughly 12 ha each. A more detailed description of the construction of the camp at Zeist, and all of the other Belgian camps, can be found in Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*. He provides an interesting contrast to the Dutch view that the construction of these camps in record time was a major feat of engineering and a humanitarian gesture. In Laporte's eyes the camps were far from perfect and were deliberately constructed in that way.

Two companies from Army Battalion E plus their staff arrived on 31 October to take up responsibility for guarding the camp. The first 6,000 internees arrived on 3 November 1914 and although the bulk of the building work was complete many of the supplementary buildings were not yet entirely finished. In addition, there were no cells available and no accommodation for the officers that made up part of the Dutch guard

detachment. These were quartered on a temporary basis in nearby Soesterberg and Huis ter Heide.²⁹

The camp at Harderwijk was constructed along similar lines to the camp at Zeist. The Dutch army had rented the camp area for many years from the local authority at Harderwijk. It covered an area of around 32 ha and was subdivided into five separate camps; guards, internees, stores, visitors and sport. The accommodation for the internees was in 46 accommodation barracks supported by 2 canteens, 1 church which had facilities for both Roman Catholic and Protestant worship, 3 education barracks and 1 barrack for the sick. It also had all of the necessary washing and toilet facilities as provided in Zeist. As this camp was not located near a railway line as Zeist had been, the first task for Beltman was to organise for a special line to be laid. Although a major task it was considered a cheaper option than bringing in all of the required materials by other means of transport. It also provided a means of transporting the internees to and from the camp. Once the camp was completed a road was also built, replacing the existing dirt track with a hard surface. The costs for the road were met jointly by the local authority and central government.³⁰

²⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.104.

³⁰ An good overview of this camp can be found in Elands, M. & Bossenbroek, M.P., *Harderwijk, als militaire stad en de Geschiedenis van*, (The Hague: Sectie Militaire Geschiedenis, 1994),p.62-73.



Harderwijk before construction started: a tented camp.



Harderwijk after the construction of permanent accommodation.³¹

Construction of the camp at Oldebroek was more problematic because, unlike the sites chosen for the Harderwijk and Zeist camps, at Oldebroek there already existed

³¹ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/refugees/vluctelingen/militarien.html> 24 August 2008.

buildings that were to be utilised in the new camp. It was also already in use as a refugee camp. In early December 1914 the refugees left the camp and work commenced to convert it to an internment camp. A further problem with the camp at Oldebroek was that there were no existing towns or villages within close proximity of the camp. Relatives who wanted to visit the internees therefore had no means of securing accommodation in the area. The solution was the construction of a barracks next to the camp that could be used to house up to 100 visiting relatives.³²

The internees that were sent to Kampen were housed in the barracks of the Instructie-Bataljon (Education Battalion), specifically in the buildings of the chief instructor and the riding school. In order to make them habitable, the concrete floor of the exercise area and the sand ring of the riding school were covered with a wooden floor onto which surrounds for the straw mattresses were nailed. Canteens were established in all buildings and kitchens, wash areas and toilets were renovated and made more suitable for long-term use by the internees.

On arrival the internees were divided into nine companies of approximately the same strength. In making this division the Dutch took account of the internees' units and language in an effort to avoid unnecessary tensions arising between groups. By placing French and Flemish speaking soldiers into separate groups it meant that orders only had to be given in one language.

³² A short but comprehensive overview of the camp at Oldebroek can be found in Bremen, L, van den., 'De Kamp van Oldebroek' in *Ampte Epe* No 89 (1989), p. 6-10.

The British Camps

Compared to the large number of Belgians that were interned in the Netherlands the number of British internees was very small. The majority of British servicemen who were interned in the Netherlands during the First World War came from the Royal Naval Division that had been part of the British Expeditionary Force sent to support the Belgian army at Antwerp. The first British military personnel that crossed the border were sent on to Leeuwarden but the main British camp for the entire duration of the war was located in the northern town of Groningen.³³

As a result of the Dutch mobilisation there were two empty barracks available for use in Groningen and these were allocated to the British internees. The first arrivals on 11 October were placed in the barrack on the Heerenweg; this was intended for the NCOs and other ranks. The camp commandant and his administration officer arrived on the same day. All of the British officers had given their promise not to escape and so were allowed, at their own expense, to live in the town.³⁴ The accommodation in the barracks was well suited to the needs of the internees. A drill hall was used as a mess hall, a canteen was staffed by local civilians and the second floor was used as a sick bay. Later on the drill halls were provided with heating and lighting so that they could be used as recreational areas. On 17 October 1914 a further transfer of British internees from Leeuwarden brought the total of internees up to 1,513, far too many for the available accommodation. As the second available barrack at the garrison was less suited to the needs of the internees because it had been a military hospital, it was decided that instead

³³ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.807.

³⁴ The issue of officers parole will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 5.

of using it for accommodation, a different building would be leased. To this end a large bicycle factory, also on the Heerenweg, was rented from Fongers Rijwielfabriek as a temporary measure. This building allowed for the housing of 400 men but they slept on straw. The 1,100 housed in the barracks enjoyed the luxury of iron bedsteads.

Permission was given for the building of two wooden barracks on the parade ground behind the barracks. These were completed on 28 October and allowed all of the British internees to be accommodated on one site.³⁵



The camp at Groningen³⁶

The British had entered into the Netherlands as part of a military formation and the Dutch authorities encouraged them to maintain this form during their internment. The internees all came from three battalions of the Royal Naval Division, Hawke, Collingwood and Benbow. Each battalion was split into three companies, each company into four platoons and each platoon into four sections. In this way the officers were able

³⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.79.

³⁶ <http://www.greatwar.nl/> 24 August 2008

to keep control of their men. When the officers were not lodged at the barracks the battalions were controlled by a chief petty officer. The end result was that discipline was high amongst the British and, from the Dutch point of view the minimum number of men could guard them. This was in contrast to the situation in the Belgian camps.

Unlike many of the Belgian internees the British entered the Netherlands only as part of a military formation. They had no families with them and so did not present the Dutch authorities with the additional headache of refugees that needed to be accommodated at the same location. They also enjoyed a great deal of support from firstly the authorities in Great Britain and secondly from the British civilian communities, both at home and in the Netherlands. Supplies of 'extras' such as food, books, and sporting and musical equipment were swiftly forthcoming making life in this camp far more enjoyable.

The German Camp

Like the British internees, those Germans that found themselves interned in the Netherlands for the duration of the war were fully supported by their own government. The new site for their internment camp was at Bergen and initially they were accommodated in tents, but more permanent wooden huts, paid for by Germany, soon replaced these. There was already an established community of Germans living within the Netherlands and they offered a similar level of support to that provided by the British expatriate community to the British internees. The proximity of Germany, just over a land border also made it easier to receive supplies from the home nation, something that would be of more significance once the increased submarine war made

links to England more problematic and reduced the supplies to the British internees. The relatively small number of Germans that were interned by the Dutch compared to the larger groups of Belgians and British internees also made the Germans easier to administer and to provide for. In addition the German officers, like their British counterparts, also felt a responsibility for their men and actively participated in looking after their welfare and addressing any disciplinary problem that arose.

Bergen was, even by comparison with the British camp at Groningen, a very small camp. Its population was rarely over 200 and this fluctuated because of the relatively high number of internees that were released. Once the German government had agreed to let its officers accept parole the officers moved out to live in Rotterdam, an area designated by the Dutch government as 'German', (the British area was The Hague). The rest of the releases were German soldiers who, after investigation were found to be deserters.



The Camp at Bergen for German internees.³⁷

³⁷ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/refugees/vluchtelingen/militairen.html> 24 August 2008

Vlissingen

A more unusual camp with a small but significant population was the one at Vlissingen. Under the control of H Piper, a police inspector, this camp was for internees that had committed a criminal offence.³⁸ More a prison than a camp, Vlissingen had a steadily increasing population during 1916. The number of Belgian internees increased from 73 in January to 93 in December whilst the British had 12 men there in January and 16 in December ,although the number of British prisoners dropped as low as 4 in July. Most prisoners served only a few months in Vlissingen, some returned on more than one occasion and the escape attempts that were made over the years were all foiled.³⁹ Although intended only for those who had committed a criminal offence, Vlissingen was used in the later years of the war to house persistent escapees following the closure of Urk and only when the punishment cells in the normal internment camps were full.

Conditions in the Camps

Following the fall of Antwerp and the enormous influx of Belgian soldiers it became apparent that a more formal organisation was required to handle all aspects of internment. As a consequence the Afdeling Interneering (Department of Internment) was brought into being on 19 January 1915 and placed under the control of Generaal-majoor M. Onnen. A retired officer himself, brought back into general service by the

³⁸ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.57.

³⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.1135. See also Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.833.

war, Onnen was an engineer by background. He was to remain in post until the last month of the war when ill health forced his (second) retirement and his sudden death in December 1918 robbed him of the opportunity to enjoy it. Although Onnen is a key man in the history of Dutch internment very little is known about him and little has been written about him. Much of the documentation that might have shed more light onto his personal influence over internment had been destroyed. We are left with a vague view of him as a hardworking, loyal and honest public servant.

His office was part of the General Headquarters of the Ministry of War and he was given a staff of nine officers and eighteen writers, of which four were Belgian internees.⁴⁰ The creation of the Department of Internment and Onnen's appointment concentrated attention on internment and, now that the panic of October was over, more attention was given to formalising the administration of the camps. 1915 brought a flurry of paperwork, as guidelines were issued to all and sundry regarding every aspect of the treatment of internees. Decisions were now made more on a national basis rather than local commanders reacting to local conditions.⁴¹

Food and Clothing

Housing the internees was only one of the more practical problems faced by the Dutch authorities. Feeding and clothing them were also aspects of internment that had to be

⁴⁰ De Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten*, p.38.

⁴¹ A good example of the type of instructions that were issued during 1915 are the '*Instructions for the commandant of an internment camp*' and the '*Instructions for the commandant of a special internment camp, designated for internees, whose presence in the other internment camps is considered unwelcome*'. Issued on 20 February and 31 May respectively. *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* P.13-21.

dealt with. Initially this responsibility fell to the local authority into which the internee had originally entered the Netherlands. Once he was placed in a more permanent camp then this responsibility was taken over by the central government.

At the beginning of the war the food allowance given to internees was identical to that provided for the Dutch military; even the menus used were taken from the Dutch military.⁴² Unfortunately, whilst at this stage in the war there were few complaints made about the quantity of food being served, there were many complaints about the quality. Dutch military menus, whatever their reception by Dutch soldiers, were not popular with the internees. Traditional Dutch meals such as brown beans and bacon were not well received.⁴³ A logical and popular move was to hand the running of the kitchens in the internment camps over to the internees. The Dutch provided the rations and the internees could then produce meals that suited their own national taste.⁴⁴

A less easily solved problem was that many of the kitchens were inadequate for the number of men that they had to feed. In Amersfoort for example the kitchens could only turn out 4,500 meals, completely inadequate for a camp population that rose rapidly to 16,500.⁴⁵ In this case, as in other similar instances, outside contracts were given for staples such as bread in order to relieve the pressure on the camp kitchens. Even here efforts were made to meet the tastes of the national groups. For example, contractors in Groningen were asked to produce whiter bread because this was more to the taste of the British internees than the normal brown loaf eaten by the Dutch.

⁴² Laporte *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.61.

⁴³ Laporte *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.66.

⁴⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.150.

⁴⁵ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.60.

According to Oosterman, once these adjustments had been made, then the internees received excellent food throughout the entire period of their internment. Whilst this cannot be seen as an impartial opinion it is clear that the number of complaints about the quality of the food did decrease in 1915. Later on in the war, however, complaints once more increased but this time over the quantity of food as the national shortages meant that all ration allowances were reduced. In 1918 the rations for the Belgian internees were so small that there was serious concern for their health, especially those working in heavy industry and mining. This has to be seen, however, against the food shortages throughout the Netherlands at this time.⁴⁶

There were some local variations in the quantity and type of food provided to the internees as efforts were made to keep costs down by using local produce, but these were minor. A typical day's ration in 1914, intended to provide food for three meals was,⁴⁷

600gr bread

20gr butter

50gr rice

220gr beef with bone

65gr meat fat (sometimes replaced with bacon)

2 litre potatoes (sometimes replaced by brown beans)

6gr coffee

2cts treats

⁴⁶ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.62-65.

⁴⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.150.

For those who, for exceptional reasons, did not receive their rations directly in food then an allowance of 35ct per day was made with the possibility of up to a further 25ct per day at the discretion of the issuing authority. This was not a generous allowance. For example in 1915 an egg cost 7 cents and a roll 10 cents. As food became scarcer these prices increased.⁴⁸

Initially given the same amount of food as the Dutch soldiers, it soon became apparent that the ration allowance for internees was unnecessarily generous given their inactive and sedentary lives. The basic ration was therefore cut, although not by much, and the extra money that this made available was used to buy luxury goods, for events such as Christmas, without having to raise the overall expenditure.⁴⁹ The daily rations were also supplemented by food donated by charitable organisations. The Red Cross parcels are one example but many other smaller groups also devoted themselves to the welfare of the internees. A group in Liege, for example, applied to the Dutch Consulate in that city for permission to send food boxes to internees in the Netherlands that would be 'no more than 5kg in weight and contain such things as chocolate and *pain d'epice*'.⁵⁰ Permission for such acts of charity was rarely refused.⁵¹

The clothing worn by most internees at the time of their internment was in a very poor state. This was principally a problem for the Belgian internees. The British were looked

⁴⁸ Laporte *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.67.

⁴⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.154.

⁵⁰ A sort of spiced fruit bread.

⁵¹ ARA 2.05.04 inv 742 No 32446 Letter from Dutch Consulate in Liege to Foreign Affairs dated 20 November 1914 and reply from Ministry of War to Foreign Affairs giving permission dated 23 November 1914.

after directly from the UK. New supplies of uniforms for all British troops interned in the Netherlands were sent over almost immediately at the request of the Dutch authorities.⁵² The Germans were also provided with all necessary items either from stocks taken from casualties and passed on by the Dutch Red Cross or from German sources within the Netherlands. Occasionally extra supplies were also sent directly from Germany. As the numbers of British and German internees were always considerably less than the number of Belgians then clearly the problems of supply were also always going to be less. As far as the Belgians went, however, the problem was twofold. Not only were there more of them, but the German occupation of Belgium made it impossible to obtain more supplies from the home nation. The bulk supplies of Belgian army uniforms were held in an area of Belgium that was now occupied by the Germans. In a letter dated 9 November 1914 the Belgian government, now located in Le Havre, refused to allow the Dutch government to approach the Germans with a view to utilising these supplies. Instead they merely assured the Dutch that new uniforms would be provided ‘ at the earliest opportunity’.⁵³

The stocks of the newly mobilized Dutch military were also very low, and so any supplies that could be obtained from Dutch sources were minimal. An issue of underclothes was made, but new outer clothes were slower to come. Even when they were available the Dutch authorities were forced to stop issuing the Belgians with

⁵² ARA 2.05.04 inv 742 No 30998 Letter dated 28 November 1914 to Minister of Foreign Affairs from his opposite number in London confirming that 2,000 spare uniforms would be sent over immediately.

⁵³ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 30998 and 27727 Correspondence between the Belgian Government in Le Havre and the Ministry of War dated 9 November 1914.

surplus Dutch military clothing as this only made it easier for any internees making an escape attempt.⁵⁴

In December 1914 the Belgian government went a long way towards solving the clothing problem by giving its permission for Belgian uniforms to be made in the Netherlands and issued to the internees. Shoes were another problem and shortages led to many of the Belgians being given clogs to wear. Unfortunately the wet winter of 1914/15 left many with unbearable blisters.⁵⁵

By July 1915 the Ministry of War was sufficiently well organised to issue a list of clothing and personnel effects which should be issued to each Belgian internee below commissioned rank.⁵⁶

tunic	1
trousers	1
cap	1
overcoat	1
working trousers	1
working smock	1
shirt	2
underpants	2

⁵⁴ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.157 and Laporte *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.69.

⁵⁵ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.157 and Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.69.

⁵⁶ *Gegevens Betreffende Interneering 1915* p.93. The order was signed by the Secretary General of the Ministry of War, A J Doorman.

socks	2pr	
vest	2	(If deemed necessary by the camp commandant)
shoes	2pr	(Of which one pair were clogs)
towel	1	
mess tin	1	
comb	1	
spoon	1	
fork	1	
clothes brush and shoe brushes as available		

Even if every Belgian internee was in receipt of his full clothing allowance then maintaining personal hygiene was still difficult. With only one spare set of underwear and only one spare shirt, washing clothes (and more importantly getting them dry again) was a constant problem. In the unheated barracks internees often had to wear everything they owned in an effort to stay warm during the winter. This, combined with the straw mattresses, meant that lice were a constant problem.

The uprising at Internment Camp Zeist

Unlike POWs, the internees in the Netherlands had no further contact with the enemy they had been fighting. Where soldier captured by the enemy on a battlefield, and subsequently imprisoned, still sees his enemy on a daily basis and has a focal point for whatever anger or dissatisfaction that imprisonment generates, the internees had no

means to carry on the conflict, however ineffectively.⁵⁷ Forbidden by their own governments from escaping, again the prerogative of a POW, the internees, and especially the Belgian internees that had effectively been abandoned by their government, led a frustrating existence.

The atmosphere in each of the camps was dictated by many different factors. The living conditions, the location of the camp, the health and well-being of the internees. The character of the camp commandant was also an influencing factor. In Harderwijk the camp could reasonably be described as contented. The internees were prepared to work with the Dutch engineers to ensure the speedy completion of areas of the camp that were still under construction. In return the internees were given a limited amount of extra freedom. They were, for example, allowed to meet their families outside the camp and to go with them into the local town. In Zeist the opposite situation existed. The sterner character of the camp commandant led to conflict with the internees and a loss in cooperation. The internees at Zeist would not help with the construction work and as a result did not receive extra privileges.

By the end of November 1914 most of the essential building work at Zeist had been completed, but this had been done without the assistance of the camp occupants. The Belgian soldiers refused to work, claiming that as they were not POWs they could not be forced to work. Whilst they were not prepared to help with the official construction work, they did steal large quantities of the building materials to make extra items for their own barracks; chairs, tables and the like. Besides being a breach of discipline,

⁵⁷ Audoin-Rouzeau, Stephane & Becker, Annette., *1914-1918 Understanding the Great War*, (London: Profile Books, 2002),p.81..

which brought the wrath of the Dutch authorities down upon them, this also created delay in the construction work as new supplies had to be obtained. The occupants of the camp were, in any event, not in a very satisfactory state of mind. Food was available but at this stage still based more on traditional Dutch recipes rather than Belgian fare. The Belgian government had decided, unlike its British and German counterparts, that heating in the sleeping barracks was a waste of money and would not be good for the health of the internees. The internees had been issued with some replacement uniforms but clothing was still scarce. Many only owned one set of clothes and, with no heating in the barracks, it was almost impossible to get washing to dry as winter set in. Shoes or boots were very scarce and those worn by the internees were either in a poor state of repair or had been replaced by wooden clogs, which caused very bad blisters. Events outside the camp did little to lift the mood. Their own government was calling them all deserters; their officers were reluctant to take responsibility for their men and preferred to live outside the camps in private accommodation. In Harderwijk the internees for the most part looked at the positive side of events, they were fed, housed, and away from the war with their families in the near vicinity if not actually housed with them. In Zeist, under a more oppressive camp commandant and with no officers to intervene on their behalf, the collective view of the internees was a lot more pessimistic.

Matters came to a head on 3 December 1914 outside the camp canteen. The building that would eventually house the canteen had not yet been completed. It had been given a low priority and instead a large tent had been erected to serve as a temporary canteen. Large though it was, this tent was not large enough to accommodate all of the internees. As they were not allowed to go to the nearest town it was also the only place that the

internees were allowed to meet their families. The internees were given an allowance of 10 cents a day but this did not go very far. On the evening of 2 December 1914 there was a great deal of discontent in and around the temporary canteen. The Belgians started to air all of the grievances. The situation escalated until the Dutch guards were forced to fire a number of shots into the air to disperse the crowd. This had the desired effect and the grumbling Belgians returned to their barracks. The following day, however, the situation remained tense and the Dutch authorities were concerned enough to put an extra fifty guards on duty. Even this did not stop a crowd of internees congregating outside of the canteen to continue the complaints of the previous evening. The size of the crowd depends on the report. Many sources put it at around 100 to 150, whilst Bosboom, in the official government report into the disturbance, claims that it involved half of the camp. Attempts were made to disperse the crowd by addressing them in both French and Dutch. This was unsuccessful and the situation soon escalated and the commander of the guard, Lieutenant G. A. Mallinckrodt, acted upon the permission given to him by the camp commandant Generaal-majoor J.H.Knel, to open fire if necessary. Three volleys were fired before the Belgians realised that this time the Dutch were not firing into the air and that some of their number had been hit. Five died immediately, one shortly afterwards, one in hospital later the same day and one the day after. A further eighteen were injured.³⁸

The death of eight Belgians at the hands of their Dutch guards generated, predictably, a lot of attention. Questions were asked in the Dutch Parliament on 5 December 1914

³⁸ Hendrickx- Van der Avert, M.L.C., *De opstand in het Interneringskamp Zeist op 3 december 1914*, Amersfoort, (1985) unpublished dissertation p.40 ARA library 168 D87.

requesting an official enquiry. Bosboom agreed and the investigation he initiated made its report on 2 January 1915 saying;

Only this timely and powerful intervention, however sad the result, prevented worse events from happening. With different action, certainly the resistance would have developed into a stronger force and this would have led to more serious breaches of discipline.⁹⁹

The results of this report were generally derided in the press and by the Belgian authorities, but it seemed that only the press wanted to pursue the matter further. The Dutch government wanted the matter to be swiftly forgotten and the Belgians, understandably, had more concerns about their troops fighting on the front line than those interned in the Netherlands. It was suggested that, given the problems with discipline, Belgian officers should be brought into the camps to control their own troops. This idea was rejected by the Dutch government who did not want Belgian officers in positions of authority taking orders directly from the Belgian government and implementing them in the camps without the knowledge or consent of the Dutch authorities. A more acceptable solution for the Dutch was a suggestion from General Dossin, the Military Attaché at the Belgian Embassy, that the internees be given more to occupy them, especially more physical activities.

Had the Belgian government been more concerned about the death of six of their soldiers in the Netherlands at the hands of the Dutch army then this incident would have generated more diplomatic activity than it did. As it was, the Belgian government

⁹⁹ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.99.

considered all of those killed to be deserters anyway. It was less than two months after the fall of Antwerp, the government had been unseated from Brussels and had been forced to retreat to Le Havre, the whole of Belgium was in a time of crisis and these eight soldiers were a very long way down any Belgian officials' list of concerns. Likewise the Dutch were still into their first half-year of mobilisation and could be forgiven for believing that the Belgian internees, recipients of large amounts of Dutch aid in the preceding two months, had brought this retribution onto their own heads. Both governments were content to let the matter drop as quickly as they could.⁶⁰

Whilst this episode was certainly regrettable, and perhaps predictable, there was one positive aspect to come out of all of the press coverage. The situation that the internees found themselves in became public knowledge, not only in the Netherlands but in other countries as well. This prompted an immediate increase in the amount of aid that was offered to benefit those in internment camps. Charitable groups and committees all over the world had found a new target for their good work.

⁶⁰ In 1920 the Belgian Government had to reopen the case because they were facing a request for compensation from the victims' dependants. They were forced to approach the Dutch Government for details of the incident as no official records were held in Belgium. ARA 2.05.04 box 763 inv nr 9383 various documents, October 1920.

~ Chapter 5 ~

The middle years of the War; Consolidation

With the completion of the infrastructure of the new camps at Zeist, Harderwijk and Oldebroek and a lot of ingenuity elsewhere, the Dutch government had gone a long way towards fulfilling its obligations with regards to the internees. All had some sort of roof over their head, all had a place to sleep and regular meals and, from the point of view of international law, all were either behind barbed wire and prevented by their Dutch guards from rejoining the war or had given their promise not to escape. Quite clearly, however, the Dutch authorities could not now turn their attention to other matters and leave the internees to sit it out until the end of the war. As the new year opened it was becoming more obvious that the conflict in Europe would not be quickly resolved and that the war, with all its accompanying problems, could last for some time. The complaints from Gaasterland that had prompted the visit of the Minister of War were a taste of the problems to come, once the internees had recovered from the trauma of their retreat into the Netherlands and started to take stock of their new surroundings. Criticism came not only directly from the internees. Foreign journalists in the Netherlands found the internees to be very newsworthy and their reports were not always favourable towards the Dutch government.¹

¹ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 746 No 25970 Press clipping from South Africa commenting unfavourably on the Dutch treatment of internees. 1916. See page 81 for more details about the conditions in Camp Gaasterland.

Here again the different manner in which the different nationalities viewed their internments greatly affected the way that the camps were organised and the daily routine of the internees. The German and British internees had, for the most part, reached the Netherlands in the company of their officers or senior non-commissioned officers. The established discipline and command structure that governed the lives of these soldiers before they became internees was not altered once they were placed in an internment camp. The British and German officers, even when not living in the camps with their men still considered them to be their responsibility. Whenever appropriate they would intervene on their behalf. This relationship between the officers and their men, coupled with the support from the home nations, made the day to day running of the camps for British and German internees at lot less problematic for the Dutch authorities.

The Belgians were another matter. The majority crossed into the Netherlands without their officers. They were convinced that their officers had abandoned them during the fall of Antwerp. The previous military command structure was in tatters and this made organising the Belgians in their camps far more difficult for the Dutch. It is hard to establish with any certainty why the Belgian officers were not housed with their men, at least initially. There was certainly a view amongst the Dutch military at the time that the animosity between the Belgian soldiers and their officers would only lead to further unrest if they were housed together. The messages from the Belgian government were also confused. They alleged that almost everyone involved in the fall of Antwerp and now in the Netherlands was a deserter and their lack of initial concern for the welfare of their soldiers did little to mend bridges between the ranks.² The Belgian

² Not all Belgian officers were despised by their soldiers. Luitenant-kolonel P.J.de Pauw was held in

governments primary concern appeared to be establishing which officers could be tried at Courts Martial rather than which officers could be used to command the Belgian internees. In *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918* Bruijnseels blamed the organisation within the Belgian camps for their monochrome lives.

It is a shame that a similar arrangement was not made for our interned soldiers and that from the beginning they were not left under the command of their own officers with supervision by higher Dutch military authorities. The boring life in the internment camps behind the barbed wire, with the communal walks was unnerving enough for our unhappy boys. Was the fear of international involvement maybe the cause of this?³

Without doubt there were differences in the living standards enjoyed by the Belgian internees at the start of the war compared to the internees of other nationalities. The reason for this is open to debate. In searching the Dutch archives I have found the records to indicate that this deficit was largely due to the unwillingness of the Belgian government to provide for its soldiers. Laporte, who takes most of his information from Belgian sources puts more of the blame on the Dutch authorities.⁴ The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle and must also be viewed against the unfolding situation in Europe at the time. The internees were not a priority for either government.

Zwolle along with other Belgian internees. When he died there was general sadness amongst his men and he was buried with full military honours by the Dutch army. Zegers, *Een levendig Geschiedenis van Zwolle en de Grote Oorlog*. p.33.

³ Bruijnseels, *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918*, p.x.

⁴ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*.

Numbers

The number of internees in the Netherlands during the First World War was not constant. New internees were arriving all of the time. Not in such great numbers as in 1914 but as a steady flow of individuals, often from downed aircraft and small groups that crossed the land borders. Such large groups as there were, and compared to the numbers in 1914 these were still very small, were interned as the result of naval action when a whole ship's company was landed at a Dutch port. A decrease in the number of internees was mainly due to the release of internees who were no longer liable for internment. Some internees were released or transferred because of ill health and a few died during their internment, of either natural causes or injuries sustained before they entered the Netherlands. A number escaped, although given the relaxed attitude to guarding these were surprisingly few. One area that perhaps deserves more attention than it has received is the number of soldiers that crossed the Dutch border with the help of underground organisations in Belgium. If these had been escaping POWs then they would not have been liable for internment, but Belgian or British soldiers who had been cut off by the German advance and wanted to make their way back to their units via the Netherlands and a boat to England should most certainly have been interned. The large numbers of Belgians make identifying any that entered Holland by this means hard to spot but the British should have been easy to pick up. The official figures, however, show no increase in internment numbers for Britons entering by this route. There clearly was a route, and a very active one, as the death of one of it's operatives, Edith Cavell, attests to. She was not alone; many Belgian nationals were also sentenced to death for helping allied troops to cross the border into the

Netherlands, although the soldiers they helped do not show up in the Dutch internment figures.⁵

By the start of 1916 the combined efforts of the Department of Internment and the Red Cross had resulted in a far more accurate record of the internees being available. The Dutch authorities now knew exactly how many men they had in their charge, who they were and where they were all located. Such discrepancies as there were resulted mainly from individuals who, for whatever reason, did not want their true identity known and lived in internment under an assumed name. It is impossible to estimate how many of these there were, but it is a safe assumption that there were a few. Official Dutch (incomplete) figures for the year are as follows:⁶

Date	Belgian		British		German		French		Total	
	Off	Other	Off	Other	Off	Other	Off	Other	Off	Other
01.01.16	373	30097	51	1454	7	134	2	-	433	31685
31.03.16	372	30098	50	1493	8	141	2	-	432	31732
31.06.16	379		56	1487	8	128	4	-	447	
31.09.16	374	29997	58	1461	9	141	3	-	444	31599
31.12.16	385	29813	53	1484	10	128	0	-	448	31525

⁵ Marguerite Blanckaert was sentenced to death by the German authorities in February 1916 for smuggling people across the Dutch/Belgian border. General von Blissing commuted this to life with hard labour and Madame Blanckaert survived the war. MRA Doos 2, Nr 11.

⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.667.

The greatest change during the middle years of the war was not the total number of men deemed to be interned in the Netherlands but their location. In 1914 all of the non-commissioned internees were kept in camps and the officers who were not in camps were allowed to live out but only under very tightly controlled circumstances. By the beginning of 1916 the camps were emptying as more and more internees took up local employment and lived in what the Dutch authorities called 'work groups'. This could be any thing from a handful of internees with just one guard living in civilian accommodation to the larger groups of several thousand attached to the mines. As a result several of the camps were closed, Oldebroek in August 1916 and Gaasterland in December 1916.⁷

The few remaining internees from these camps were transferred to other camps, primarily Zeist and Harderwijk. These two places became the central locations for the Belgian internees although even their population was less than in 1915.

The only camps to be closed for the other nationalities were those designated for officers. With more clarity in the guidelines relating to parole given by the home governments, many officers felt that they could now choose to live outside of the camps again. Even those British officers, who had been considered a high risk and interned in Urk, were allowed to give their promise not to escape and were released into the community. In this way Wierickerschans and Urk were almost emptied. The Belgian officers that had been interned in Urk were allowed to move to The Hague, as did most of the British officers. This left just six officers in the camp at Urk, three

⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.667.

British who refused to give their promise not to escape and three French officers who held the same position. The French Ambassador made many complaints about the standard of the accommodation on Urk and the Dutch authorities made some initial enquiries about converting a fort near Lent or at Muiderslot into a more suitable place for interned Allied officers. It was estimated that this would cost Dfl 14,200.00, a figure that the Dutch government judged to be far too high for a camp that would hold just six internees. It was then decided that Urk would be closed and that a special barracks would be built within the camp boundary at Zeist. This could then be given extra guards and the total cost of the operation could be kept under Dfl 5000.00.⁸ By October 1916 all three French officers had escaped and the order was given to close Urk and transfer the remaining internees to Zeist. Although the camp was officially closed it was left with a skeleton maintenance staff so that if required it could be brought back into operation very swiftly.

Whilst the emptying of the camps improved the daily life of the internees and provided Dutch industry and agriculture with a much-needed work force, it created a major headache for the elements of the Dutch army charged with guarding the internees. The creation of a lot of smaller work groups meant an increase in the number of guards needed. At the same time the commander of the Dutch armed forces, General Snijders, was anxious to ensure that he had the best men mobilized and positioned on the Dutch borders in case of attack. In December 1915 he instigated a survey to identify those Dutch soldiers and officers involved with guarding the internees that were fit to serve on the borders, and those soldiers who, through age or infirmity, were not suitable for active service. In addition to a shortage of man power there was also a shortage of

⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.668.

suitable accommodation for the guards responsible for internee work groups. It was decided that when a soldier was identified as being unfit for active duty he would, where possible, be allocated a guarding duty close to his home. In this way both the manpower and the accommodation problem would be solved. To a certain extent this was successful but problems developed, especially in the camps, where responsibility was given to guards who were either too young and inexperienced or too physically weak to deal with belligerent internees of all ranks who were older, fitter and wiser than their guards.⁹

Welfare and Education Committees

There was no doubt at all that the Dutch authorities were obliged to feed, clothe and shelter their internees and this they did. What was more problematic was the responsibility for keeping the men occupied within the camps. From the Dutch point of view it was clearly beneficial to keep the internees entertained. It required little imagination to predict the sorts of problems that could occur when thousands of men were shut up for long periods of time with nothing to occupy them. Many of the Belgians were suffering from depression, and the feeling amongst the Dutch authorities was that depressed men were more likely to attempt to either escape or incite some sort of trouble. The dispute in Zeist on 3 December 1914 is a prime example of this¹⁰. The internees were in an unusual situation. In common with many of the soldiers in the First World War they were often simply civilians in uniform with no experience of military

⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Internering* p.673.

¹⁰ For further information on this incident see Hendrickx- Van der Avert, *De opstand in het Interneringskamp Zeist op 3 december 1914*.

life that extended back earlier than July 1914. Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker assert that many of these newly created soldiers, once placed into imprisonment, kept stronger ties with the home front, where their real lives were, than with the actual war. They claim that the evermore tattered uniforms worn by many of those that were imprisoned en masse during the first few months of the war symbolised their mental return to being civilians rather than soldiers, now that there was no longer any requirement for them to fight.¹¹

In early November 1914 the matter of keeping the internees occupied was addressed by the Dutch academic Dr F. Buitenrust Hetterma who laid the basis for what was to become the 'Algemeen Comité tot Ontwikkeling en Ontspanning van de Geïnterneerden in Nederland' (General Committee for Development and Recreation for the Interned in the Netherlands). This was also known as the 'Zwolsche Comité' (Zwolle Committee) and to avoid confusion with other committees with similar names it will henceforth be referred to as the Zwolle Committee.¹² The aim of this committee, which was an independent civilian organisation, was to provide education and relaxation for all of the internees. In reality, however, it was aimed primarily at the Belgians as the British internees received support directly from Great Britain and British sympathisers in the Netherlands, and the many Germans who were themselves resident in the Netherlands met the German needs.¹³

¹¹ Audoin-Rouzeau & Becker, *1914-1918 Understanding the Great War*, p.71.

¹² Gemeente Archief Zwolle CA037. I am grateful to Maartje Abbenhuis for passing on this short insight into the workings of the Zwolle Committee. See also Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.122.

¹³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.264

The Zwolle Committee faced two main hurdles in its attempts to achieve its somewhat ambitious plans. The first was money. In providing for the 'basic human needs' of the internees, the Dutch government felt that it had complied with all that was required of it by law, and it was disinclined to provide more money for entertaining internees when it had its own mobilized troops to consider. It supported the work of the committees in principle, but as it was unclear whether the costs of providing entertainment and education, potentially a substantial amount, would be reimbursed by the parent governments in the same way as the costs of the basic food and shelter would be, or if the Dutch government would find itself hugely out of pocket at the end of the war.¹⁴

In the event, as a gesture of goodwill towards the Belgian internees, Bosman made Dfl 4000 available on behalf of the Dutch government. In addition to this an appeal was made on behalf of the internees and a further Dfl 12,000 was raised, primarily from large corporations. Not all funds were raised from large institutions. In the archives of the Dutch Army Museum in Delft there are various examples of fund raising activities aimed at individuals.¹⁵ The second problem faced by the Zwolle Committee was one that would be a major headache not just for them but also for all of the wartime committees dedicated to helping the internees. This was obtaining agreement from the Dutch army for the implementation of occupational schemes. This was an intransigent problem. Whilst the Dutch military could see the advantages of a camp population that was usefully occupied (as opposed to discontented and therefore more likely to generate disorder), it was not about to relinquish control of any area of the camp to a

¹⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.260

¹⁵ LM Q 194-40.

civilian organisation.¹⁶

Following the riots at Zeist on 4 December 1914 several prominent Belgians in Brussels expressed concern about the boring existence of the Belgian internees and on 15 December 1914 decided to initiate some form of trade education in the camps. In January 1915 the Belgian socialist politician and writer Camille Huysmans and a colleague visited the camps with the permission of the Dutch authorities. At the same time the Belgian government also began to show some concern for the welfare of its troops in the Netherlands. A slightly surprising move as it considered most of them to be deserters. A committee was formed with the lead being given to Baron Fallon, the Belgian Ambassador in the Netherlands from 1910-1919 and General Dossin, the Military Attaché at the Belgian Embassy.

The aims of this committee were very similar to those of the newly formed Brussels group so that on 21 January 1915 the two joined forces under the title of 'Centrale Administratieve Commissie der Werkscholen', (Central Administrative of Trade Education). The chairman was Baron Fallon and the Belgian educationalist Omer Buyse was the organiser of the work schools. On the basis of Huysmans report in early February an ambitious plan was launched to bring both practical and theoretical education to the internees. On 1 March 1915, on the initiative of General Onnen, the Belgian and the Dutch committees met and, in the hope of a more efficient organisation, agreed to combine their efforts into one committee, the 'Centrale

¹⁶ Laporte alleges that relations between the Belgian internees and their Dutch guards remained strained throughout the entire war p.86. The Dutch Ministry of War did agree to some Belgian officers being allowed into the camps in order to teach or to supervise military training such as gymnastics. ARA 2.05.04 box 742 nr 9348. Letter from Ministry of War to Foreign Affairs dated 03 March 1915.

Commissie voor Ontwikkeling, ontspanning en Werkverschaffing' (Central Committee for Development, Recreation and Employment) which was formed on 22 March 1915.¹⁷

The chairman, General Onnen, and the secretary of this new committee were Dutch military men. The remainder of the members comprised five civilians from the Zwolle committee and nine Belgian representatives from the two Belgian committees. Sub-committees were installed in all of the internment camps with the camp commandant as chairman and the general members made up of prominent local civilians and Belgian officers.¹⁸ Unfortunately, whilst the merging of the three committees into one may have made sense from an administrative point of view, the various factions within the committee were unable to reconcile their interests in order to produce a combined plan of action. The chairman, General Onnen had complete right of veto on any proposal that he felt went against the interests of the Dutch military or Dutch security in general; a fact resented by the Belgians especially as the majority of the money at the disposal of the committee had been raised in Belgium. An appeal for the Dutch government to increase its original grant of Dfl 4,000 had been refused. The former members of the Zwolle Committee felt themselves to be thwarted at every turn. Essentially against the military dominance of the committee, they also felt themselves to be outnumbered by the Belgian members. Caught between these two opposing factions, arguments within the committee reached such a peak that in December 1915 the members of the Zwolle Committee left. Out on its own once again the Zwolle Committee could continue to adhere to its original principles that the help it provided should be for all nationalities and without influence from governments or the military. Whilst it continued its work

¹⁷ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.124 and LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.266.

¹⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.264.

until the end of the war it found it very difficult to raise sufficient funds for any major projects and had to content itself with providing books and the occasional teacher.¹⁹

This departure left an uneasy balance between the Dutch military members and the now entirely Belgian members. Not that the Belgians presented a united front. There were constant disputes between the Belgian civilians, who felt that the education provided to the internees should be aimed at equipping them for a return to civilian life after the war; and the Belgian military, represented by General Dossin, who wanted the training offered to be of a more military nature such as physical fitness and marching.²⁰ The biggest conflict, however, was between Buyse, who wanted to be given overall control of the workshops, and the Dutch military that refused to surrender its authority. Citing the poor discipline record of the Belgian internees this was one issue on which the Dutch authorities held firm. Whilst cooperating with Buyse wherever possible they still maintained over all control.

Despite all of the policy differences within the committee, by now calling its self the 'Centrale Administrative Commissie (Central Administration Committee), considerable progress was made in finding occupations for the thousands of interned Belgians. It had, in addition to the funds raised in the Netherlands, a further BF 100,000 available to it. Half was a gift from the Belgian King and half from the city of Brussels. The actual cost of providing education in the three purpose built internment camps at Zeist, Harderwijk and Oldenzaal was relatively inexpensive. Accommodation was free as the need for classrooms and workshops had been taken into account the initial building

¹⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.269.

²⁰ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.266.

plans and there were sufficient teachers to be found amongst the internees. These were paid an extra allowance for teaching of Dfl 1, 2 or 3 a week depending on whether they taught for 3, 3-6 or more than 6 hours a week. Only the materials for the lessons had to be paid for and the estimated cost for education in these three camps was set at BF 32,000 per quarter.²¹

In June 1915 following the successful establishment of the schools in Zeist, Harderwijk and Oldenzaal a further BF12, 000 was set aside for the provision of education at Gaasterland. This, however, was a more expensive and problematic venture as there were no existing classrooms and all of the required accommodation had to be built.

A feature of the classes provided for the Belgian internees was the high demand for basic literacy skills. Many who started the war unable to read or write returned to Belgium in 1918 fully literate. Although these classes were also made available to the other nationalities interned in the Netherlands, the take up amongst the Germans and the British was far less simply because the basic levels of literacy were already higher amongst these troops.

²¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.266.



A lesson in Camp Zeist.²²

The German and British internees required entertainment more than enlightenment. To this end both nationalities had well developed sporting activities in the internment camps, which not only kept the troops occupied, but also maintained a degree of fitness should the internees be able to return to their military duties. The British also showed a keen interest in theatrical pursuits. A band was formed and was provided with musical instruments by the Comité voor de Engelsche Geïnterneerden (Committee for the English Internees) that had been established in October 1914 in Amsterdam. (This committee had already provided much of the sporting equipment used by the British internees).²³ This same committee funded the building of camp theatre at Groningen and “The Timbertown Follies” began its performances there. This group became so

²² Postcard offered for sale on Ebay 24 August 2008.

²³ ARA 2.05.04 box 762 inv 12772 A booklet produced in 1920 outlining the wartime activities of the soon to be disbanded Comité voor de Engelsche Geïnterneerden.

well known that it was regularly invited to perform in The Hague and other cities.²⁴ A visiting American journalist wrote in the Philadelphia Press on 6 June 1915 of the British internment camp in Groningen; 'The camp...is the most healthy and well-situated internment depot in this country. The spirit and discipline of the men is very high, they are on excellent terms with the Dutch authorities'.²⁵



Tug-of-war competition at the sporting grounds of Camp Groningen (1916).²⁶

There is a great deal of pictorial information available concerning the internees. The most common illustrations can be found on picture postcards which depict all aspects of camp life, some are sketches and some are photographs. It could be argued that the authorities tasked with producing these photographs would choose only the better

²⁴ Several programmes from performances by the Timbertown Follies can be found in the Dutch Army Museum in Delft. LM Q194-40.

²⁵ ARA 2.05.04 box 743 inv 28088 Copy of press clipping.

²⁶ <http://www.wereldoorlog1418.nl/englishcamp/samenvatting/index.htm> 24 August.2008.

aspects of camp life, but these are supported by photographs in picture magazines of the time and personal scrapbooks. In these pictures the work of the various charitable committees is very evident. The Army Museum in Brussels (MRA) has a particularly fine collection that includes photographs of well-stocked libraries, workshops, social facilities and theatres. Sporting events such as sailing races, athletic meetings, gymnastics and the inevitable inter-camp football matches feature heavily as well. Whatever complaints were raised about the conditions under which the internees were held these photographs attest to the fact that in many areas the facilities were excellent.²⁷



Bicycle race on the bicycle track built by the Belgians in Camp Harderwijk²⁸

Only a month after the fall of Antwerp there were already calls for the establishment of an institute of learning to enable the more highly educated amongst the internees to continue with their education. Joseph Schrijnen, a senior lecturer at Utrecht University

²⁷ MRA B.1.105-107 Assorted photographs and postcards.

²⁸ IISG BG A25/18 13 October 1918.

proposed the creation of a Belgian university in Amersfoort, then considered the most Belgian town in the Netherlands.²⁹ Within a matter of weeks around thirty Dutch and Belgian academics had made themselves available to teach at the new institution. It was opened on 19 January 1915 in an old but roomy merchants house. This house was equipped with classrooms, an auditorium and a library that was furnished with books donated by other universities. Initially attracting 91 students, the University proved to be very popular, offering a variety of courses. As the rules governing the movement of internees within the Netherlands became more relaxed, however, it became largely redundant. By January 1916, it had lost 137 potential students who were by then studying at established Dutch Universities; the majority were following technical subjects at Delft and taking advantage of practical facilities that could not be offered in Amersfoort.³⁰

Officers' Parole

An aspect of the law pertaining to neutral internment that was entirely different from the law with regard to POWs was the regulation that allowed officers to be paroled. Unlike all POWs who, for obvious reasons, were kept in camps, commissioned officers that had been taken into internment were allowed to give their word not to escape and could therefore be permitted to live outside the camps. The first few internees who held a commissioned rank were placed into the camp at Alkmaar; but with the move to Gaasterland and Bergen the opportunity was given for parole to be taken. In the case of

²⁹ F.Collard, *L'Université belge d'Amersfoort*, Utrecht 1915 p.6 from Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.169.

³⁰ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.306.

Gaasterland this was largely academic, as the camp covered such a large area that movement was unrestricted within its boundaries. The normal terms of parole were that the officers had to remain within the bounds of the local authority in which they chose to live, but had pretty much free movement within those bounds. Different local areas were allocated to different nationalities. Officers were given an allowance that was the same as that given to a Dutch officer of equivalent rank out which they had to provide for their own food and lodgings. With the enormous influx of internees in October 1914 the fact that the number needing to be accommodated within the camps could be easily and swiftly reduced by allowing the officers to make their own arrangements was embraced by the Dutch authorities. They, after all, were only complying with the letter of the law and the responsibility for preventing escapes by officers was then placed with the home nations who had to rely on the honour of their officers to comply with the regulations. In December 1914 the Dutch government passed a law which, amongst other things, included a clause that made escape, after promising not too, punishable by up to 6 years in jail. Whilst some punishments were given to failed escapees it was never as long as 6 years³¹

The rule allowing officers to accept parole was one which clearly had not been given very much thought by the home nations prior to the war and one which had little impact on the relations between the officers concerned and their commanders at home. This was to change, perhaps prompted by the first few escapes by officers who broke the terms of their parole in order to do so. Two German pilots, Leutnant Hesse and Aspirant Philippe, escaped from Alkmaar by breaking their parole and managed to reach Germany. On reporting to the authorities there, however, they were told that their

³¹. *Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.74 and *Staatsblad* No 666.

escape was viewed in a very poor light and that they would be returned to the Netherlands immediately.³² The Dutch had cause to complain about a British escape when on 2 November 1914 Flight Commander T.A.Rainy RN managed to return to England by handing in a fake parole form that was sufficiently close to the real thing not to be noticed by his Dutch guards. Although strictly speaking Rainy had not broken his parole, and the British were swift to point this out to the Dutch, they agreed with the Dutch opinion that the escape had been 'dishonourable'. Their solution was to discharge Rainy from the Navy rather than to send him back to the Netherlands. In the event neither punishment was inflicted as shortly after his return to Great Britain, Rainy was admitted to a lunatic asylum. The matter did not end there, however, as it appeared that Rainy had fled the Netherlands leaving several unpaid bills. These were settled on his behalf by the British government that was anxious not to cause any ill feeling. Rainy's bills were to his tailor and a local hotel where he had run up a bar bill. Unpaid bills were to be a regular feature of officer's escapes regardless of nationality and all of the home nations put considerable effort into ensuring that the bills were settled one way or another.

The British attitude to parole was the clearest. After the retreat from Antwerp the non-commissioned British forces found themselves placed in the camp at Groningen. The officers took parole and moved into private accommodation, some in the area around Groningen, others in The Hague. The exception to this was the senior British officer Commander Henderson who opted to remain in the camp at Groningen with his men. In November 1914, however, the Admiralty informed Henderson that they considered

³² ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 34944 Letter from the Dutch Ambassador in Berlin to Foreign Affairs in The Hague dated 8 December 1914 passing on an enquiry from the German authorities concerning the punishment that the two pilots would receive upon their return to the Netherlands.

the officers' actions in not sharing the men's confinement to be 'contrary to the customs of the British Navy' and that he would be reprimanded on his return to the UK for allowing the situation to occur.³³ Henderson for his part then informed the camp commander at Groningen that all parole was revoked and that the officers should be moved back to the camp immediately. This, however, was not possible. A hurried correspondence between the commandant at Groningen and the Ministry of War resulted in the British being told that although the Dutch accepted their decision to rescind parole for the British officers, they could not do so without sufficient notice in order to allow appropriate accommodation to be prepared.³⁴

The Admiralty agreed to the construction of new barracks at Groningen at a cost of GBP 8,000, which were expected to be completed in mid December 1914. On 4 December, unwilling to wait any longer Henderson unilaterally informed the Dutch government that all deals were off and the British officers no longer considered themselves bound by the terms of their parole. Some of the officers were housed in the camp at Groningen to assist with the non-commissioned internees. In January 1915, following an escape attempt by 15 of the British officers who had rescinded their parole, 38 of those that were considered to be most likely to attempt an escape were sent to the fort at Wierickerschans near Bodegraven. Only eight of the 15 escapees were recaptured. It appears that these officers were assisted in their escape by sympathetic Dutch civilians.³⁵ Urk, now a fishing village on the side of the IJsselmeer, but in 1914, before the land reclamation programme, a small island in the Zuider Zee, was used to

³³ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 8509 Letter from Henderson to the commandant at Groningen dated 20 November 1914. Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.810.

³⁴ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 8509 Several letters between the British and Dutch governments concerning the accommodation to be provided for the British officers, all dated 1917.

³⁵ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.227.

house those few British, Belgian and later French officers who were considered to demonstrate a very high risk of escaping.

In the meantime, and faced by the stream of complaints from those officers interned at Wierickerschans about the 'unsanitary and cramped' standard of accommodation there, the Admiralty were clearly having second thoughts. Complaints reached such a peak that the Dutch government sent in an inspector. The report by Generaal-majoor Quanter of the Dutch Army Medical Corps found no major cause for concern, although work was underway at the time of his inspection to improve conditions.³⁶ In a letter to Johnstone dated 28 December 1914 the Admiralty talks of 'a proper proportion' of the officers being stationed at Groningen and the rest being allowed parole.³⁷ There should also be some rotation of duties to prevent monotony. On 20 January the situation was made clearer in a telegraph to the senior officer at Wierickerschans, Commander F.V.Fargus, from the military attaché at The Hague confirming that any officers wishing to retake parole would be allowed too.³⁸ Immediately 14 officers, 13 from Wierickerschans and 1 Lieutenant, who was at that time hospitalised in Utrecht, submitted applications for parole.

The German attitude to parole was very similar to the British. Initially the matter was not addressed at all. Then, like the British, there was a period when the acceptance of parole was considered to be dishonourable but, ultimately, the same compromise was

³⁶ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 6398, a selection of correspondence relating to conditions at Wierickerschans. 1914-1915.

³⁷ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 8509. Letter to Johnstone from the British Admiralty dated 28 December 1914.

³⁸ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 8509. Telegraph to Fargus from British Embassy in The Hague dated 20 January 1915.

reached as for the British officers.³⁹ Some officers would remain in internment in a command function and the rest would be allowed to take parole. In late 1914 two German officers escaped from the Netherlands breaking their parole and were returned by the German authorities but only after enquiries about the severity of the punishment that they would receive.⁴⁰

For those British officers who had rescinded their promise not to escape, there was now nothing to keep them in the Netherlands and many escape attempts were made, a substantial proportion of which were successful.⁴¹ The Dutch authorities, swift to complain when escapes were made breaking parole, seemingly had little problem with these 'honourable' escapes, even forwarding the mail of escaped officers to England.⁴²

The Belgian government was even less consistent than the British and German governments when it came to the internment of its officers. Many of the individual Belgian officers felt that they could not accept parole, as it was their duty to escape and rejoin the war. Some that were considered to be 'high risk' potential escapers were sent to join their English colleagues at the camp on Urk.⁴³ Some took parole and still made an escape attempt. An attempt was made by the Belgian government to exempt Belgian officers from the terms of parole by arguing that Belgium had not entered the war voluntarily but only because her own neutrality had been compromised. This appeal fell on deaf ears and so the Belgian government declared that any officer who escaped

³⁹ But not until April 1917. Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.818.

⁴⁰ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 34944. Letter from the German Ambassador to The Hague to the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 8 December 1914.

⁴¹ *Het Vaderblad* dated 11 January 1915 speaks of an escape by seven British officers of which two had already reached England.

⁴² ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 8509 Letter from Johnstone to Loudon dated 15 February 1915 thanking him for forwarding on the letters of four officers who had escaped.

⁴³ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.54.

from Holland having broken the terms of his parole would be stripped of his rank and dismissed from the army.⁴⁴ Unfortunately news quickly spread of two Belgian army officers who escaped in November 1914 breaking their parole. They had rejoined their unit on the front and had been welcomed back as heroes.

In addition to the problem of parole for its officers the Belgian government was also trying to discipline officers that it felt had not fulfilled their duty. On 1 December 1914 a Belgian Royal Edict removed the rank of five officers interned in the Netherlands alleging that they had retreated into Holland before the situation required them to retreat. It requested permission from the Dutch government to mount a full investigation into the actions during the fall of Antwerp of the three hundred or so Belgian officers, including five senior officers, who were now interned in the Netherlands. The Dutch government refused to give permission for such an enquiry claiming that it would infringe its neutrality.⁴⁵ The Dutch authorities also anticipated that should any of the interned Belgian officers be reduced in rank or dismissed from the army as a result of the investigation, it would then place the Netherlands in a very difficult position both diplomatically and administratively. As a result the Belgian government agreed that the officers already reduced in rank could still be paid the allowance due to their old rank. Their request that the Belgian officers be used to command the Belgian troops in internment was refused. Given the hostility between the commissioned and non-commissioned ranks in the Belgian military the Dutch felt such a move was inadvisable but did agree to use more Belgian officers in administrative

⁴⁴ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.810.

⁴⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.270.

functions.⁴⁶

Employment and Work Groups

It would be wrong to assume that the internees were kept locked up behind barbed wire all of the time. This, in fact, had never been the case. Given the way in which the numbers of internees suddenly increased after the fall of Antwerp the Dutch authorities spent much of the first year of the war struggling to provide the basic necessities of life for the internees and although security and guarding were given some priority, they were not at the top of the list. Holland wanted to keep as many soldiers as it could on the borders against the chance of an invasion and was reluctant to release many for guarding duties. The articles of international law did not state that the internees had to be imprisoned, just that they had to be prevented from re-entering the war.

The responsibility for ensuring that soldiers did not re-enter the war lay as much with the home nations as it did with the Netherlands. Officers were allowed to live out of the camps on parole and other ranks were extended the same courtesy but on a shorter time scale. On the basis that they promised to return, they were allowed out for an afternoon to visit a local town, or more importantly, family. This attitude, that imprisonment was a possible but not an essential element of internment was crucial to allowing internees to take up paid employment during their time in the Netherlands. Paying the internees for work was not a new thing. During the construction of the new internment camps at Harderwijk and Zeist, the internees had been offered the chance to earn a very modest

⁴⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.273.

wage and speed up the provision of facilities by helping with the construction work. This offer, in the aftermath of the Zeist incident, was refused but later other options were found to be acceptable. Internees that accepted positions in the newly formed training schools, for example, were paid according to the number of classes they taught. By 1915 the Dutch authorities were also prepared to consider allowing internees to take up employment outside the camps for third parties.

Initially the available jobs were locally based, helping nearby farmers or industry. In these cases the internees would still live at the camp but would go out to work every day. Guards were sent with these groups but it was a notional tactic, only one guard for every ten internees. Requests were made by Dutch industry for workers to replace men who had been mobilized into the Dutch army. This idea that internees could be allowed to work outside of the camps was of most relevance to the Belgian internees and that was simply because of language. Bossenbroek asserts that by the end of 1916 some 10,500 Belgians were working outside the internment camps and that by the end of the war this figure had risen to 15,000.⁴⁷ Very few, if any, of the British and German internees could speak Dutch and so they were restricted to manual labour or tasks that did not require any great contact with Dutch speakers. This was also a problem for the French-speaking Belgians, but their Flemish-speaking countrymen found it very easy to integrate into working life in the Netherlands. There is some evidence that a few of the internees were even able to work for the same company that they had worked for before the war in Belgium. When a Dutch branch of a Belgium company became aware that one of their former employees was amongst the internees then a letter to the appropriate authorities was usually sufficient to allow the individual to leave the camp

⁴⁷ Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.58.

and take up employment with the Dutch arm of the business. Similarly, as the range of skills held by the internees was quite broad then Dutch companies were able to ask for specific workers. The new employers were made responsible for housing and feeding the internees as well as paying the internees. An appropriate amount was then deducted from the internee's wages to cover these costs. The remaining wage, however, was not paid directly to the internee because it was felt that men with money at their disposal were more likely to attempt to escape. Instead a small allowance, little more than pocket money but slightly more than the allowance received in the camps, was paid to the individual at the time and the remainder was placed into a savings account and was to be made over at the end of the war. With the removal of men and equipment from Belgium by the occupying Germans that occurred after 1916 it was now often more desirable to remain in Holland and work than to return to Belgium where work was scarce and unemployment high.⁴⁸

By 18 August 1915 some 2,144 internees were living outside the camps in work groups spread all over the Netherlands. These men were guarded by 245 Dutch soldiers and 6 officers. Not only were the internees allowed to live outside the camps if their work required it, a further 141 were based at the universities of Rotterdam, Utrecht and Delft as students.⁴⁹

Preference for outside employment was given to married internees who had a family that was also living in the Netherlands. This was a double advantage for the Dutch authorities who up until that point had not only been responsible for the upkeep of the

⁴⁸ Chambers, F.P., *The war behind the war 1914-1918. A history of the political and civilian fronts*, (London: 1939), p.215.

⁴⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.296.

internees but had also had to provide financial support for their families, many of whom had entered the Netherlands as refugees. Those men that had a family to support were allowed to keep more of their wages than the single men. Next in order of priority were the married men whose families still lived in the home country and last were the single men. A disadvantage of being allowed to keep more of their wages was that some of the internees now became liable for Dutch taxation, both income tax and local council taxes.⁵⁰

In the early stages of these work groups the workers were spread out over 27 locations. This changed once the internees were identified as a source of labour to replace mine workers who had been mobilized. The move to employ the internees in the mines is not so surprising when two facts are considered. By mid 1915 it was clear that whilst supplies of coal had not yet reached the critical levels that were to occur in 1917 and 1918 all was not well. Trade with Germany, Holland's main supplier of coal, was being affected by the Allied embargo and yet the need for coal was increasing as the war progressed. Large numbers of miners, although by no means all, had been conscripted for the army and the mines were finding it difficult to achieve full production. Not only were the internees seen as a large untapped source of labour, they were also a pool of skilled labour. Many of the men now interned in the Netherlands as Belgian soldiers had been miners in Belgium before they too had been conscripted. Once at the mine the men were split into three shifts and signed in with work contracts that were the same as those for civilian workers. According to Oosterman many of the Belgians found work in the Dutch mines to be far harder than the work they were used to in Belgian mines

⁵⁰ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.104.

and asked to be transferred back to the internment camps.⁵¹

Those that had families living nearby the mines were allowed to go and live with their families but only after completing three months of satisfactory work in the mines.

During this probationary period they were allowed two or three night passes a week to stay with their family but were still bound by the rules of the work group. Once permission was given for them to live out, they were released from the necessity to attend roll calls and instead had to sign in once a day. Their wages were adjusted to meet the change in circumstances so that those living with their families received 7/8th of their salary less deductions, with only 1/8th being sent to the savings fund in The Hague. Those mine workers with families living in the Netherlands but not near to the mines were allowed to keep 3/4 of their wages in order to support their families.⁵²

This arrangement was ideal for both the internees and the Dutch authorities. The mines obtained workers to replace the Dutch workers that had been mobilized. The Dutch authorities reduced their financial commitment to the internees by requiring the costs of clothing, housing and feeding the internees to be met either by the employer or directly out of the internee's wages, and as an added bonus it reduced the financial drain of the refugees associated with the internees by providing the means for internees to support their own families. For the internees themselves, especially the married ones the life style provided was as close to normal as they could achieve without actually returning to Belgium.

⁵¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.575.

⁵² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.576.

Once the precedent was set for internees to be allowed to live with their families requests were then received for families from the unoccupied part of Belgium to be allowed to join their fathers and husbands in Holland. Generally these requests were well received and, dependent on the financial position of the internee and the housing situation in the local area, many families were allowed to settle in the Netherlands. In some instances the employers, keen to hold on to their newly acquired workers and generally sympathetic to the situation that the Belgians found themselves in, provided accommodation.

In 1917 more and more British and German internees began to take up employment outside the camps. Concern was expressed that the employment of foreign workers should not be at the expense of the Dutch. A conference was held between the Director General of Agriculture, Head of the Department of Internment, the Chairman of the Organisation of Employment Offices and the Director of Unemployment Insurance.⁵³ The aim of this conference was to set down guidelines for the employment of internees in agriculture. There was still a great deal of anxiety concerning the employment of internees in all areas. Dutch workers claimed that internees were given priority for jobs because they were prepared to work for a lower wage. In December 1917 the Dutch unions made a request to the Department of Internment for the removal of internees from the metal industry. The prevailing shortages of coal, iron and steel meant that production had dropped and Dutch workers were being laid off.

At the end of 1917 the army command decided to allow internees to work alongside or for the Dutch military, an area of work that they had so far been banned from. At the

⁵³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1075.

Army barracks in Millingen internees were used for menial work that would otherwise have had to be undertaken by Dutch soldiers. The internees were paid the same bonus for this work as Dutch soldiers were.

On 21 June 1917 the miners at the underground coalmine in Heerlen responded to a call from the Dutch Socialist Mineworkers Union (Socialistischen Nederlandschen Mijnwerkersbond) and went on strike over pay and conditions. Not all of the mineworkers struck, members of the Dutch Christian Mineworkers Union (Nederlandsche Christelijke Mijnwerkersbond) did not support the action. Nevertheless, over half of the morning shift, which included internees, took part in the strike. Laporte estimates that some 90% of the internees were involved.⁵⁴ The area around the mine was immediately returned to the status of Staat Van Beleg and 984 striking internees were ordered back to Camp Zeist. After their departure some 199 internees remained, 67 above ground workers and 132 miners who had not struck, 39 of these had not taken part in the strike because they were officially sick. In addition to the internees left at Heerlen there were also 311 family members who were not transported back to Zeist with their husbands and fathers. The socialist leanings of the internees were not obvious to all and whilst the Dutch authorities appeared to have little problem with the growth of socialism amongst the internees, the Belgian government and the Catholic Church were dismayed that their worst fears were now being realised.

The strike ended on 5 July and the question was posed as to whether the striking internees should be allowed to return. The Directors of the mine had concerns but

⁵⁴ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p160. See also . Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' and Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.831.

ultimately little choice. The shortage of civilian labour meant that the only way that the mine could operate fully was to use internees. The government, concerned at the crisis in coal supplies, took the decision out of the hands of the mine directors and ordered the internees back. Even with this drastic action only 660 of the original 984 returned.

In September 1917 a number of internees took part in a strike at a factory in Zwolle. All of the internees, even those living out with their families, were immediately returned to camp. At the request of some of the internees' wives, who were suffering not only the loss of their husbands but also missing their income, a number were allowed back. This return was under the strict understanding that they returned to work. On arriving at the factory, however, the men again refused to work and were, inevitably, sent back to camp.⁵⁵

A direct result of the strikes in the coalmines was a parliamentary discussion concerning the rights of an internee in relation to employment in the Netherlands. The socialist parliamentarian Albarda put forward a proposal that would give internees the right to join Dutch professional organisations. This was passed by 53 votes to 17 and immediately some of the Belgian internees joined Dutch professional organisations or trade unions.⁵⁶ Support for the internees joining Dutch trade unions or participating in strikes was far from universal. In a letter to general Snijders dated 25 August 1916 the Minister of War, Bosboom, had anticipated a situation where internees would be caught up in a Dutch workers strike and he clearly states that internees who join a strike must

⁵⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.1082.

⁵⁶ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.162 and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.59.

be returned to their internment camp.⁵⁷ He goes on to say that internees should be strongly discouraged from joining Dutch unions, although he does not forbid it completely. His concern is that the balance of the Dutch economy would be upset by the influence of the foreign workers. Discussions in the Dutch Parliament regarding the budget for 1917 contradicted this position. In the light of the growing shortages, the contribution made by these foreign workers was recognised and it was decided that in the event of future strikes the internees would not be automatically sent back to their camp but would be kept in the local area. Likewise it was also decided that the internees must be paid the same rate as a Dutch worker, although they would not be given their pay, the bulk of the money would be invested in a savings account until the end of the war.⁵⁸

A branch of the Organisation of Belgian Workers was instigated with its base at Camp Harderwijk. This was achieved with the permission of the camp commandant at Harderwijk. Such permission was not forthcoming when attempts were made to set up a similar group at camp Zeist. An appeal was made to Snijders who agreed to the establishment of such a group only provided that a Dutch officer attended all meetings.

The employment of Belgian internees in Dutch industry was, on the whole, considered a good thing by all of those involved. One aspect, however, attracted much correspondence from the Belgian government. They were concerned that Belgians were being employed in factories that were producing goods that would ultimately find their way to Germany. Belgian diplomats in the Netherlands were constantly bringing to the

⁵⁷ ARA 2.13.70 . Letter from Bosboom to Snijders dated 25 August 1915.

⁵⁸ ARA 2.13.70 No 1829, Ministerial Decision dated 16 April 1917.

attention of their government firms that were, usually indirectly, supplying goods to Germany.⁵⁹ In 1918 the Belgian Foreign Minister forbade any Belgians from working on either the Dutch railways or in shipbuilding as he claimed that the German government was a beneficiary of both of these industries.⁶⁰

Savings Fund

In August 1914 when the initial decision was made to allow internees to take up paid employment outside the camps, a decision was also taken about the rate of pay they should receive and whether they should be allowed access to their pay while interned. Unlike the internees who were employed inside the internment camps as cooks, cleaners, teachers etc, who received little more than extra pocket money for their efforts but continued to be housed and fed at the cost of the authorities; internees in outside employment were paid a fair market rate for their labour. In return they were expected to contribute towards their upkeep. Once a percentage had been deducted for bed and board, however, this often left a reasonable sum of money over, far more than the minimal allowance paid to non-working internees. The Dutch government decided that this balance was not to be paid to the internees as the money could be used to facilitate an escape. Instead it proposed a savings fund, to be paid into during the war and to be paid out after the end of the war when the internees were released. The Belgian government was in agreement with this as it would give those internees returning to Belgium a financial start that would make them less of an immediate drain on government resources. Significantly, there was never any question that this money

⁵⁹ Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog* p.58

⁶⁰ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.165.

should be used to offset the costs of internment or to improve the conditions under which the internees were held. The savings fund was always intended to benefit the internees as individuals at the end of the war.

The Fund was established in August 1915 and by 28th of that month Dfl 1826 had been paid in.⁶¹ By 15 September 1915 this was Dfl 16,000. It was decided to put the administration of the Fund into the hands of a bank and the *Nederlandsche Handelmaatschappij* was appointed. It agreed to pay an exaggerated rate of interest on the fund, 4% in place of the then normal 11/2%.

By March 1916 the Fund held Dfl 364,633 and the Bank declared that it could no longer afford to pay 4% over such a large amount and the rate was reduced to 2%. As other investments at the time were making 3% other investment opportunities were sought. General Snijders was keen to invest the money in areas that, although more risky, would show a greater return. This idea was rejected, the view held was that this money represented the future of many of the internees and that must be safeguarded. In May 1916 Dfl 610,000 was placed in promissory notes.

As the fund grew it became an attractive target for groups related to the internees that needed funds. For example, an attempt was made in 1916 to utilise Dfl 100,000 of the Fund to the benefit of Belgian refugees but this was rejected as not being in the best interests of the internees.⁶² Likewise a request from the Belgian Ambassador in Holland

⁶¹ *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.819.

⁶² *LM Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.820.

to use the Fund to the advantage of Belgian POWs in Germany was also rejected.⁶³ By the end of 1916 the capital amount in the fund stood at Dfl 1,949,923.57.

During 1917 there was very little change in the way that the Savings Fund was administered. By 1 January 1918 the balance stood at Dfl 4,503,097.91 with the interest for the whole year at Dfl 88,124.79 and average of 3%.⁶⁴ In mid 1917 consideration was given to the method that would be used to distribute this money amongst the internees at the end of the war. No problems were anticipated in paying either the German or the British internees. They were relatively few in number. The greatest problem was likely to be the Belgians. It was clear that the Belgian internees, still smarting from earlier allegations of desertion, did not want the money from the Savings fund handed over to their government for distribution. Investigations were made in to the possibility that a Dutch bank in Belgium could handle the matter. The option seemed feasible but very expensive. It was decided that the Dutch Internment Office would handle the payments and General Snijders passed the following message to all Belgian internees.⁶⁵

‘Payment of money to internees will be after the return to Belgium. A Dutch committee will make payment in Brussels, Gent, Luik, Namen and Charleroi. Notices will be placed in Belgian newspapers giving the times and places. All internees must provide proof of identity’.

In anticipation of this each employed internee was provided with an identity and

⁶³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.821

⁶⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1098.

⁶⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1199.

address card. It was estimated that a committee of two people would need two months to handle the distribution at a cost of Dfl 1,500. This cost could very easily be met out of accrued interest. ⁶⁶

Further discussions were held concerning whether a proportion of the money in the Savings fund should be reserved and set against the costs of feeding and housing the internees. The home governments were liable for the costs and would be formally billed at the end of the war but should the internees also pay a proportion? It was considered unfair that those internees who had taken up the option of paid employment during their time in the Netherlands should have their earnings abated as a means of supporting those who had chosen not to work. Similarly the point was made that the intention of the savings fund was to benefit the internees at the end of the war, not the home governments. In April 1917 it was decided that the total value of the fund would be distributed to the internees, nothing would be withheld to meet costs.

Another financial question was raised in 1917 and this concerned the profits made by the canteens situated in the camps and in the larger work groups. During 1916 the profits made by the canteens had been substantial and it was expected that by the end of the war there would be a considerable sum to be disposed of. In April 1917 the Minister of War and the Military Commander, Bosboom and Snijders, proposed that at the end of the war the canteens should be liquidated, all creditors paid off and the remaining balance should be added to the savings fund and distributed equally amongst the internees. Before a final decision could be reached by the army questions were raised over the legitimacy of the Dutch government's right to decide on the distribution

⁶⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1100.

of the canteens profits. Camp commandants were asked to report on the manner in which the canteens had been started. The canteens had, on the whole, been intended to benefit the internees as a group, not as individuals. The Minister of War then made another suggestion, that the money be placed into a special fund under the control of the Belgian government and used to benefit soldiers that had been victims of the war. Discussions based on legal and moral arguments continued but no real conclusion was reached beyond the decision that as there was no armistice in sight the matter was not urgent.⁶⁷

Camp Groningen ~ 1916

Whilst the camps housing the Belgian internees were emptying rapidly during 1916, this was not the case at Camp Groningen. Principally because of language difficulties very few of the British internees took up outside employment other than seasonal work on local farms.⁶⁸ At the end of 1915 only 10 British internees were located out of the camp as part of a work group. By the end of 1916 this number had increased but only to 140, approximately 10% of the non-commissioned internees. The camp population increased in January when the crew of the submarine E17 were interned followed by a further 9 men from submarine H6. Three internees died of ill health during 1916.

The majority of the officers lived away from the camp. Only a few, usually four or five, were based in the camp at any one time to assist with the discipline and welfare of the

⁶⁷ No final decision was reached until after the end of the war when all profits were given to charity. This is dealt with more fully in chapter 8.

⁶⁸ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande', p.836.

men. This presence, and the quality of the British non-commissioned officers, meant that the Dutch considered this to be an easy camp to guard. The main problem that the Dutch guards had to deal with was alcohol, as the British internees regularly used their passes to the local town as an opportunity to get drunk.⁶⁹ This led to some inevitable clashes with the local population although generally relations with the local Dutch residents were good.

After the British government made assurances that all escapees reaching England would be immediately returned, the area in which the British internees were allowed to roam without a Dutch escort was increased. Sport and physical fitness training had always been a major feature of life at Groningen and this continued to be the case in 1916.⁷⁰ The sporting facilities were improved and football matches were arranged every week against local teams.

Camp Bergen ~ 1916

In many ways Bergen, the camp for German internees, followed similar trends to the camp for the British. Inhibited by language very few of the internees left the camp to take up employment in the Dutch community and life within the camp followed patterns established during 1915. Like their counterparts in Groningen, support from the home nation was good and building work continued during 1916 to the tune of Dfl 19,000 in an effort to make the camp more comfortable. The total number interned at Bergen remained more or less constant over the course of the year but there the

⁶⁹ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande', p.834.

⁷⁰ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande', p.836

similarity with the British ends.

In January 1916 the camp strength was 7 officers and 133 other ranks.⁷¹ By December of that year it was no officers, 112 other ranks and a further 14 living out of the camp in a work group. There had been, however, a further 1 officer and 112 other ranks taken into internment during the course of the year. The reason that the total number of internees at Bergen did not increase significantly was because a total of 127 Germans left the camp. All eight officers were moved to Wierickerschans, one inmate died, 8 escaped and 4 were released from internment on appeal.⁷² The remainder, 100 other ranks, were released after an investigation, which confirmed their status as deserters.⁷³

The number of German soldiers crossing into the Netherlands and claiming to be a deserter was increasing. Some, depending on the attitude of the border guard they first encountered never made it into internment, some crossed in civilian clothes and remained unchallenged but officially those that claimed to be deserters had to be interned until their correct status could be determine. The German government had made it quite clear that it would not reimburse the Dutch government for any costs incurred by these deserters so the interests of all parties were best served by their speedy discharge. Tensions between these deserters and the regular German internees ran high and in June 1916 the decision was taken to build a separate barrack to house

⁷¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.619.

⁷² Oostermans has slightly different figures, Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande', p.836.

⁷³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.993.

them.⁷⁴ Close enough to the existing camp at Bergen to share many of the facilities but far enough away to prevent any contact between the two groups of Germans.⁷⁵

Following the first four escapes, by internees that had promised not to escape, the Dutch government imposed a more ridged regime on the Germans. This was eased for those with no history of escapes, but re-imposed after further escapes in October. The Dutch authorities demanded the return of all escapees and threatened to withdraw the privileges of the remaining internees if they were not returned.

Escapes

The official government account of internment is very confusing with regard to escape attempts. Some are described in great detail, usually those where the escapee was at fault by breaking a promise not to escape; or those where they were either assisted by the home government or the home government failed to return them as requested. Other escapes are merely given as numbers and in almost all instances the numbers do not add up. It is therefore impossible to say just how many internees did escape. Oosterman in *Geschiedenis der Interneering* does give some figures for Belgian escapes as does Laporte but what is unclear is how many of these escaped back to Belgium and how many simply wished to remain in the Netherlands but not as a formal internee.⁷⁶ With the erection of the wire fence between Belgium and the Netherlands in 1916 it is reasonable to assume that more 'escapees' were opting to stay in Holland as passage to

⁷⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.993 and Roodt, Evelyn de., ' Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', Andriessen, Hans., Ros, Martin., and Pierik, Perry., (Eds), *De Grote Oorlog, Kroniek 1914-1918, Essays over de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, (Soesterberg: Uitgeverij Aspekt, 2002).p.140.

⁷⁵ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.836.

⁷⁶ Laporte, *Belgische Geinterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.88.

Belgium was very difficult, if not impossible. It is a fair assumption, however, that certainly as far as the British and the Germans were concerned the numbers were relatively small, less than thirty, each year. In the case of the Belgians the numbers were almost certainly greater but are impossible to discover. The proximity of a Belgian land border and an ability to speak Dutch were two main advantages that must have helped many Belgians to return home. Belgian soldiers that managed to enter the Netherlands without being interned and then made their way to either Great Britain or Belgium must also be considered as escapees. Some estimates put the number who managed this after the fall of Antwerp at 7,000 but again, this is impossible to confirm. Snijders was concerned that if the Netherlands was being seen to be failing in its attempts to try and stop these escapes then Germany might consider it to be in breach of its neutral responsibilities. In January 1915 he issued orders that obliged the authorities at all Dutch ports to stop any Belgian of military age from crossing to England until it could be ascertained that they were not liable for internment.⁷⁷ An effort was made to understand why internees would want to escape. The Commandant at Camp Zeist produced a report in July 1915, which concluded that there were four main motivations for trying to escape⁷⁸

- i) To return to the front.
- ii) To obtain well paid employment in the Netherlands.
- iii) To obtain well-paid employment in Great Britain, possibly joining family that had already fled there.

⁷⁷*Gegevens betreffende de Interneering* p.13 and ARA 2.13.16.nr 279. Orders from General Snijders dated 15 January 1915.

⁷⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.337 and Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.89.

- iv) The chance of promotion. It was well known amongst the Belgian internees that sergeants and above who were sent to the front received rapid promotion to Sous-Lieutenant. The number of NCO's attempting to escape was proportionally higher than other ranks⁷⁹

It is perhaps surprising that a wish to escape because of dissatisfaction with the conditions of internment does not figure on this list. It should be remembered that the list was compiled by the interning authority and may not represent the true feelings of the potential escapers. Laporte cites concern for family back in Belgium as the main reason for escape attempts amongst the Belgians. Surprisingly, even though he is very critical of the way in which the Belgians were interned even he does not give dissatisfaction with the conditions of internment as a major motivation for escape.

Once it became generally known that Belgian soldiers from the most recent intake of conscripts were being used as workers in the ammunitions factories rather than being sent to the front as soldiers then the number seeking to escape to return to the front declined. The forced movement of labour to Germany from Belgium that started in 1916 also deterred many escapers who knew that if they returned home they would have to rejoin the Belgium army or face unemployment and the German draft.⁸⁰

The number of escape attempts increased with the introduction of 'uitgangskarten' (exit passes) in December 1914. These allowed the internees to leave the camps for a short period, usually an afternoon or evening, on the condition that they return. The

⁷⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.339.

⁸⁰ Chambers, F.P., *The war behind the war 1914-1918*. p.215.

NCO's received more of these than the enlisted men, which may also account for the higher number of escape attempts by the higher ranks.⁸¹

The Dutch authorities took various steps to stop the escape attempts succeeding. They increased the use of censorship, both of letters and telegrams.⁸² They were also on the look out for parcels that might contain civilian clothes. Up to June 1915 sixty-six parcels were withheld because of their contents and when these measures were extended to cover parcels sent by rail and tram a further 50 civilian suits were discovered.⁸³ One of the most important factors in the number of escape attempts from internment was the amount of outside help that the escapees were given. Dutch civilians were very sympathetic to the internees. Many gave active help in the form of food and shelter and even those that did not get quite so involved were willing to turn a blind eye and not report an escapee to the authorities. The number of internees that escaped and then chose to remain in the Netherlands demonstrates this. A number of escapees were later found in the main industrial areas in the Netherlands. The Dutch public was not the only source of help when escaping. The Belgian and British Consulates were also willing to offer assistance to soldiers who wanted to travel to England. While publicly supporting internment law and promising to return any internees that escaped in breach of a promise not to escape, they were still happy to issue visas without enquiring too closely into the applicant's circumstances.⁸⁴ Van

⁸¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.340.

⁸² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.566. Censorship of post started in May 1915 and continued through out the war.

⁸³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.346

⁸⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.334 also ARA 2.05.04 Inv 744 No 57070 .A letter from the Head Commissioner of the Rotterdam Police to General Snijders dated 22 November 1915 explaining how easy it is for internees to present themselves at the Belgian Consulates for help. In this case he cites the consulate in Breda. Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.90.

Stryendonck, the British Vice-Consul in Vlissingen was caught giving civilian clothes to internees from Amersfoort. When challenged he claimed not to be assisting escapees, but merely distributing clothes from charitable organisations in Great Britain who wished to help the destitute Belgians in the Netherlands. The matter was brought to the attention of General Snijders who clearly believed the story (or did not want to make diplomatic waves) and no action was taken beyond instructing the Dutch area commander to tighten up security.⁸⁵

In an effort to halt the spread of escape attempts in February 1916, the Dutch government began to fingerprint and photograph all internees. The speed with which border guards were informed about escapes was also increased. In 1916 there had been 49 escapes by Belgian internees. In 1917 this increased to 105, of which only 18 were returned by the Belgian government. In the year up to 1 June 1917 only 1 escape out of 99 had been returned as a result of the Belgian policy decision that declared that only those who escaped after breaking a promise not to escape and those who had escaped after 3 June 1916 (when the Belgian government officially ordered its soldiers to abide by promises not to escape), would be returned. Monthly lists were prepared by the Ministry of War and sent to the Belgian Attaché alerting them as to which internees had escaped.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 743 No 14462 A military 'Process Verbal' was held to look in to the incident. Its report is dated 25 March 1915.

⁸⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1063. These figures are difficult to substantiate from any other source.



AT THE BORDER BETWEEN NEUTRAL HOLLAND AND BELGIUM⁸⁷

In the second half of 1917 the situation became more complex as an increasing number of Belgian internees began to escape to Germany. Attracted by promises of high wages in German industry and by what the Dutch records of the time call ‘other reasons’ which may well have been the rising socialist movement. The Belgian government issued a strong warning to its internees not to do this, calling all those who escaped to Germany deserters and making it a treasonable offence. Whether this warning had any great effect is doubtful. What had perhaps more impact was the Dutch statement that it had been informed by Germany that a Belgian internee who had crossed the

⁸⁷ Cartoon by Albert Hahn published in 1917. <http://www.greatwar.nl/> 28.08.2008

Dutch/German border in error had been placed in jail.⁸⁸

By 1916 all Belgian officers bar two had given their word not to escape. The remaining two were left on Urk until agreement was reached with Belgium that they would be sent back following an escape attempt regardless of whether they promised not to escape or continued to refuse to make such a promise. One area of uncertainty remained. What happened to Belgian internees who escaped and made their way to France or Great Britain? Had these countries any responsibility to return internees of other nationalities?

In November 1917 one of the two Belgian officers who had refused to give a promise not to escape did escape. At the time he was housed in the special barracks at Camp Zeist along with a French pilot who escaped on the same day. Neither man was returned and the Dutch press reported that the Belgian pilot had rejoined the Belgian army and was fighting the Germans. Some months later it was reported in the Dutch press that this pilot had been killed in action. Dutch records note that he was mourned by all of those that had known him.⁸⁹

On 13 April 1917 the German Attaché informed the Dutch government that German officers would now be allowed to give a promise not to escape. As a result all 13 German officers in Wierickerschans were released. Ten went to The Hague, two to Amsterdam and one to Rotterdam. The German men in Bergen were now also allowed more freedom. On 20 and 21 April two officers on leave in Germany did not return

⁸⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.1067.

⁸⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1173.

claiming that they had amended their promise forms and as such were not obliged to return. The German government would have no truck with such methods and sent both men back, although it was on the understanding that they would not be severely punished. A report raised on 21 November 1917 informed the German authorities that seven NCOs and soldiers were missing. Five were located and returned by the German authorities.

As a result of the more formalised agreements with the home nations regarding the return of escapees, the number of guards used at the various camps was reduced.

~ Chapter 6 ~

1917: Deserters, Politics and Religion.

It is clear from the differing concerns of the Dutch government in 1917 compared to 1914, that the attitude and requirements of the internees had now changed. The issues being dealt with were no longer the basics, food, shelter and clothing; but more complicated matters that had greater potential to compromise Dutch neutrality. Provided that all nationalities received the same amount of food, that their home governments were happy with the accommodation provided and the clothing worn there was little to generate a diplomatic incident. Now that the internees were more settled, however, and their immediate needs catered for they were turning their attention to areas that had far more scope for causing political upset, politics and religion being chief amongst them.

In 1917 the general pattern of more camps closing as an increasing number of internees took up employment in the local community continued. All internees, whether part of work groups or still resident in a camp, were allowed a greater amount of freedom. The rules governing release on a promise not to escape had now been established and tested. With a very few exceptions they were found to work. The number of internees notionally interned in the Netherlands but actually resident in another country also increased as more applications for extended leave were received and approved.

The main camps were now Zeist, Harderwijk, Groningen and Bergen and although there were a few other smaller camps at Zwolle, Heerlen and Vlissingen the main centres were these four. The overall numbers of internees changed very little over 1917, a few were released from internment on health or compassionate grounds and a few, mainly downed airmen or shipwrecked sailors, were interned. The only significant change was the increase in the number of German soldiers crossing the Dutch borders and the high proportion of these that claimed to be deserters.¹

With the increased stability in the internment organisation more attention was then devoted to individual concerns. The Belgian government was still in dispute with the Dutch authorities over the fate of four Belgian officers and twelve men who had been interned in 1914 after the fall of Antwerp. These Belgian troops had taken a boat and headed out along the Schelde, aiming to reach Ostend. In the confusion they had in fact ended up landing in the Netherlands and had consequently been interned. The Belgian government objection was based on the treatment given to a group of German soldiers who, having lost their way in a fog, had inadvertently crossed the Dutch border. When stopped by the Dutch border guards the Germans explained their predicament and were allowed to turn around and re-enter Germany without being interned. The similarities between the two cases are obvious but the Dutch argument for not releasing the Belgians from internment was that the Belgian authorities had not protested at the time of their internment, as the German soldiers had done. This lack of protest when originally interned, argued the Dutch, showed an implicit agreement to the imposition of the status of internee. A neutral state can authorise passage over its land if requested,

¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1041.

but in this case, unlike the German example, no request was made.

This case makes clear the Belgian government's views on the internment of its troops. It would comply with international law as far as that went but it would use every means within that law to obtain the release of as many soldiers as it could. The war was still being fought on Belgian soil and with a substantial part of its army interned in the Netherlands, Belgium had a severe manpower shortage. What is not clear from the documents available is the viewpoint of the individuals concerned. We have only the Belgian government's opinion that their landing in the Netherlands was an error. Many of the soldiers who retreated from Antwerp were accused of being deserters and a return to Belgium would result in disciplinary action. Many were indeed deserters, or simply soldiers who considered that they had done their bit and preferred to spend the rest of the war, however long that might be, in the relative comfort and safety of a Dutch internment camp rather than in a muddy trench on a Belgian battlefield. Had these particular individuals taken it upon themselves to escape from the Netherlands and return to Belgium it is unlikely that the Belgian authority would have made very strenuous efforts to have them returned and yet, as far as can be seen from existing records, none of these men did take advantage of the increasingly lax guarding regime to return home.²

A further case concerning a Belgian soldier also illustrates that not all, if any, had any strong desire to be repatriated. A Belgian soldier was released from internment because the promised investigation into his status had not taken place within the 2 1/2 month limit imposed in this instance. On his release he appealed against the decision and

² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1042.

asked to be allowed to return to the internment camp. As there was no doubt about the basis for the appeal, that he was a serving Belgian soldier, the appeal was upheld and he was returned to internment.³

The German government also made appeals. In one instance seven German soldiers had crossed the border to buy food and although they had every intention of returning they were interned. They were eventually released because they had not been given the option of returning to Germany at the time that they were first stopped, as required by Dutch standing orders. Germany faced the same problem as Belgium. Not all of its interned soldiers actually wanted to be repatriated. An example of this is the case of two German internees who were arrested on a charge of smuggling and were being transported to Gennep from Bergen. A mix-up in the orders resulted in their guards believing that they were due for release. One was handed over to the German border guards but the other declined the chance to go home and opted to remain in the Netherlands.⁴

The Dutch authorities were also concerned regarding the threat to Dutch security from foreign soldiers, principally German soldiers, who entered the Netherlands claiming they were either going shopping or seeking rest and relaxation. In March 1915 Snijders issued orders to his border guards to the effect that although these Germans should be allowed into the Netherlands, and as they were in civilian clothing they were not liable for internment; they were not to be allowed to remain in the area close to the southern borders of the Netherlands. The inference is clear, genuine visitors were welcome but

³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1043.

⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1044.

potential spies were not.⁵

Internment Costs

By the end of 1917 the Dutch government department that dealt with general accounting, the Algemene Rekenkamer (General Accounting Office) was able to correspond with the Ministry of War with a view to producing an invoice for the costs of internment for the year 1914. Discussions were held to determine how best the costs could be accounted for and how and when these bills would be presented to the governments involved.

The idea that all genuine costs were the responsibility of the home nations and not of the interning authority was fixed in law, but there was still room for argument over what exactly constituted an internment cost. The invoices for 1914 were calculated against the following numbers of internees;

Belgians	15,380
Germans	145
British	1,181

This resulted in invoices being raised in the following amounts;

Belgium	Dfl 3,483,398.30
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⁵ ARA 2.13.70 Inv 178, Letter from the commander of the Field Army to General Snijders dated 29 March 1915.

German	Dfl 53,641.72
Britain	Dfl 153,032.491/2
France	Dfl 3.58

These figures are quite absurd. It is impossible to find an accurate figure for the number of internees held in the Netherlands during 1914, much less account for their upkeep to a half-cent. It does, however, show just how important the Dutch government believed it was to not only act fairly and scrupulously but above all to be seen to be acting in that way.

Having raised these invoices for 1914 it was made clear that no payment would be required until the end of the war, as prescribed in The Hague Convention. This was welcomed by Belgium and Germany but not by Great Britain. They had already requested that they be allowed to pay off some of the costs in May 1917 and had a history of disputing bills on the grounds of insufficient information.⁶

German Deserters

The number of German deserters entering the Netherlands increased dramatically in 1917. De Roodt estimates that the number tripled in 1917 but actual numbers are hard to estimate and even harder to substantiate.⁷ Carsten quotes the German Chief of Staff

⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1051.

⁷ De Roodt, 'Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.123 and 128 and LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*. p.1055.

who said in October 1917 that conscripts were now leaving Germany 'in droves'.⁸ Those that found themselves stopped by the Dutch border patrols were sent initially to the camp at Bergen and then, after appropriate but swift investigation, the genuine deserters were released. Many offered themselves to foreign embassies as spies. Some did try to find work but these were in competition with Dutch workers and internees so they were not very successful. The Dutch were also concerned that released German soldiers would also spy in the Netherlands on behalf of the German army.⁹ Some turned to crime. The growing number of former German soldiers now living in the Netherlands without any official means of support was clearly a problem that needed addressing.¹⁰ The government decided as a matter of principle to place limits on their freedom of movement and to put them under police surveillance. In the absence of any specific orders from the government, Snijders issued firm orders to his troops that all deserters were to be kept under control and fully registered. He was also concerned about the cost of looking after these unwelcome visitors. In a letter to the commander of the Army in March 1917 he says, 'the deserter comes over the border against our wishes: only common humanity prevents him being turned back at the border or otherwise ejected. One has the right to ensure that the deserter causes as little cast as possible'.¹¹ The councils along the borders, where these measures were most stringent, complained that these new rules were unworkable. They did not have the resources to take on feeding and housing the deserters and, as most were unemployed and tended to move around, any form of control or registration was difficult. It was clear that a

⁸ Carsten, F.L., *War against War*, (Los Angeles: University of California, 1982), p.121.

⁹ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*, Part 2 p.33.

¹⁰ De Roodt, 'Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.143.

¹¹ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 51081 Letter from General Snijders to the Commander of the Army dated 12 March 1917 and De Roodt, 'Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.144.

national solution for the problem was needed, a camp specifically for deserters.¹²

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked the Department of Internment to undertake the task of erecting a tented camp to the rear of the existing camp at Bergen. Close enough to utilise the existing contacts at the camp but far enough away to be completely detached and remove any possibility of contact between the occupants of the two camps. The deserters were forbidden to enter the village of Bergen and the internees also had the area in which they were allowed to roam cut, to avoid any possibility of the two groups meeting. Even deserters that had been cleared by the border guards and released into the Netherlands were to be rounded up and removed to Bergen, unless they could show that they were capable of supporting themselves. In the areas close to the border that were in a heightened state of readiness this was even more important, and was given considerable attention by the army. The camp was established in the early summer of 1917, but in July of 1917 the military commander in Limburg still had not received any official notification that he could send deserters to Bergen to be interned.¹³ Although worried about the risk to Dutch security posed by the growing number of Germans attempting to settle close to the Dutch border regions, the Dutch authorities realised that these deserters were potentially a rich source of information themselves. Instructions were given for all deserters to be interviewed by the local police with a view to gleaning not only information that might be relevant to the overall national security of the Netherlands, but also details of smuggling routes and border

¹² ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 Nr 53044 letter from the army commander in Limburg to the commandant of the army dated 7 April 1917 and ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 51843 Letter from General Snijders to the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 22 March 1917.

¹³ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 58464. Letter from Commandant in Limburg to the Commander of the Army dated 10 July 1917.

crossing points.¹⁴

Almost as soon as the system was established for prospective deserters to be sent directly to Bergen, the procedure had to be revised to take into account the outbreak of the pox in Germany. Those crossing the German /Dutch border were now placed in quarantine before being allowed to proceed to Bergen. The deserters were kept separately from other groups such as POWs and internees in order to reduce the risk of infection.¹⁵ This all added a delay to the clearing process and lengthened the time before a deserter could be released. Not only German deserters were kept in quarantine. Escaping British POWs were also held for a time before being released.¹⁶ Now, however, only those deserters that could prove that they had the means to support themselves were allowed to leave Bergen. Even then they were still required to report to the local police on a regular basis. Those that had no means of support had to stay in Bergen. This was judged by the Dutch authorities as being the best and most cost effective way of maintaining some sort of control on a group of men with the potential to become a serious problem.

This new system did not, however, solve the problem completely. In a letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army dated 23 May 1917, the Commandant of the 2nd Division, Military Police expressed his concern about the number of released deserters that were still finding their way back to Limburg. He stated that many were still in their

¹⁴ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 48381 letter from the Commander Ist Division Koninklijke-Marechaussee to the Commander of the Army dated 2 February 1917.

¹⁵ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 61190, Letter from Commandant in Limburg to the Commander of the Army dated 27 August 1917..

¹⁶ Harrison, M. C. C., 'Through the Bathroom Floor', Durnford, Hugh, et al. *Tunnelling to Freedom and Other Escape Narratives from World War 1*, (New York: Dover publications Inc, 2004), p180.

German uniforms and although they had changed the buttons and made other minor alterations they were still clearly identifiable as German soldiers. He asked the Commander-in-Chief to request that the civilian authorities not allow any more deserters to travel to Limburg unless they had employment in the area and could support themselves. It appears that his concerns were two fold; firstly he was worried about potential conflict with anti-German groups in Limburg and secondly, but most importantly, his concerns appear to be economic. In an attachment to the letter he gave a list of the numbers involved, which he split into two groups, those who were solely deserters and those who were deserters/smugglers.¹⁷ This concern about deserters turning to smuggling to support themselves was not new. In February 1917 he had already written a long letter to the Commander-in-Chief outlining the differences between the 'ordinary' deserters and the 'smuggler' deserters.¹⁸ A further economic concern was that many of the deserters were not alone. Some travelled with their families and some, those that had deserted directly from the front, were joined by their families at a later date. Many of the deserters were in no position to provide for themselves and certainly could not feed and house a family. Whist deploring this extra burden on Dutch resources there appears to have been little support for the idea of returning either the deserters or their families to Germany. The correspondence on the subject of the German deserters is sympathetic and centred on how to deal with the problem within the Netherlands.¹⁹

¹⁷ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 55615. Letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army from the Commandant of the 2nd Division, Military Police dated 23 May 1917.

¹⁸ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 49057. Letter to the Commander-in-Chief of the Army from the Commandant of the 2nd Division, Military Police, February 1917.

¹⁹ A good example of this dual idea of concern for Dutch security coupled with a sympathy for the plight of the deserters families is shown in the letter dated 9 March 1917 to the Commandant of the 1st Division Koninklijke Marechaussee in 's-Hertogenbosch from the Commandant of the 1st Division Koninklijke Marechaussee in Eindhoven. ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 50969.

By August 1917 the new camp for deserters in Bergen was full and the military commander was once more forced to write to the Commander-in-Chief asking him to ensure that all civilian authorities were made aware of this fact. As these deserters/smugglers could no longer be accommodated in Bergen they were sent to other areas outside of the controlled zone but these councils were simply turning the men around and sending them back to where they came from; the point where they originally entered the Netherlands.²⁰

The German authorities were also concerned about the growing number of deserters entering the Netherlands. They had already clearly stated that they would not accept any financial responsibility for deserters and in July 1917 they expressed their concern that not only were German soldiers entering the Netherlands of their own volition, they alleged that an organisation within the Netherlands was actively contacting German soldiers and inviting them to desert. Snijders immediately instigated an investigation.²¹ This not only compromised Dutch neutrality it also potentially increased the numbers of deserters that the Dutch would have to deal with. It is difficult to ascertain whether German soldiers were being enticed into desertion and if so whether their enticers were German or Dutch. The motivation to desert was mixed and there seems to have been no one overarching reason.²² On balance though it seems more were motivated by a desire to leave Germany (or at least the German Army) than a desire to live in the Netherlands. A significant number also chose to desert to Switzerland and Denmark.²³

²⁰ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 61189, Letter from the Military Commander of Camp Bergen to the Commander-in-Chief. 9 August 1917.

²¹ ARA 2.13.16 Inv 229 No 2572, Letter from the Commander-in-Chief to the Commander of the Field Army dated 10 July 1917.

²² Carsten refers to an organisation in Brunswick that was providing deserters with false papers so that they could cross the Dutch/ German border into the Netherlands. Carsten, *War against War*, p.121.

²³ De Roodt, 'Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog' p.126.

There were, however, organisations and individuals within the Netherlands that offered all manner of support to deserting Germans once they had crossed the Dutch borders. These ranged from an office in The Hague, staffed by German deserters, to more informal help from sympathetic Netherlanders.

Political Activity

It is perhaps unsurprising that the internment camps, with their large and often unoccupied populations, became centres of political activity. By far the most active on the political front were the Belgian internees, and because they were also the most numerous their political activities were the most noticeable. Laporte asserts that the rapid increase in political awareness was due to the lack of freedom, the poor living conditions and the lack of interest shown in the Belgian internees by the Belgian government in Le Havre.²⁴ The increased levels of literacy amongst the Belgians must also have been a factor. Many more could now be reached by using political pamphlets than had been the case before 1914. For the German internees the issue as the war progressed was not the conditions under which they were being detained in the Netherlands that raised political concerns, but the conditions that were prevalent in Germany. The increasing number of German deserters in the Netherlands and their socialist leanings was at times a major area of concern for both the Dutch and German governments. The deserters produced and distributed their own left wing news-sheets, *Der Kampf* and *Michel im Sumpf*. The Dutch kept a wary eye on these, afraid that their

²⁴ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog* p.59 See also Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.59.

own workforce would be corrupted.²⁵ The British had no problems with political activity in the camp at Groningen. The number of British internees was small and the level support from the home government was high. It would be too much of a sweeping generalisation to say that the British internees were too contented to involve themselves with politics, but there is little evidence of any activity other than promoting anti-German feeling. It is noted in the Dutch records, however, that many of the British internees were members of the Labour Party.²⁶

The Belgian authorities were very keen to prevent the distribution of any literature in the camps that could be seen as prejudicial to the internees 'discipline and love of their fatherland'. The Belgian aversion to any political activity in the camps can be seen in the following: on 28 November 1916 the Belgian Ambassador made a complaint to the Dutch authorities that an anti-Belgian and pro-German newspaper was being distributed in the camp at Zeist. He requested that the paper be immediately banned. In fact closer investigation showed that this was a paper published in Brussels, the *Bruxellois*, and contained an article by a journalist that had recently visited the camp.²⁷ He had sent a few complimentary copies to Zeist, which had generated very little interest in the camp itself. It demonstrates, however, the sensitivity of the Belgians to anything that might possibly be seen as anti-Belgian or pro-socialist.²⁸ There were newspapers distributed in the camps of which the Belgian government did approve. The *Stem uit België*, for example, and its French version *L'Echo de Belgique* were

²⁵ De Roodt, 'Duitse deserteurs in Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.151.

²⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.608.

²⁷ There were a large number of newspapers produced for or by the Belgians during the four years they spent in the Netherlands. Not all were politically biased but many were. Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.57.

²⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering* p.1087 and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.60

published in London by E. H. Flor Prims especially for the internees and refugees.²⁹ In an effort to curb political activity the Belgian government also requested that 'unsuitable' public meetings be banned. The Dutch authorities rejected this last request. They had little interest in seeing that the internees retained their love for their fatherland and could not agree with the Belgian authorities as to what constituted a threat to public order and discipline. A Dutch officer attended all meetings and that, as far as the Dutch were concerned, was as far as they were prepared to go.³⁰ Laporte asserts that polarisation within the Belgian internee community was far more clearly defined than in Belgium itself. He cites three main divisions, Waals v Vlaams, Catholic v Protestant and, somewhat surprisingly, pro-German v anti-German.³¹

The Belgian government was so concerned about political dissent amongst the Belgian internees, (most of whom it had alienated earlier in the war with the government assertions that they had deserted their posts at Antwerp), that it established an office in the Netherlands to promote the good name of the Belgian government. The 'Office de la Propagande Belge' or Belgian Office as it is usually referred to, was situated in The Hague and had many functions.³² A major role was to monitor activities in the Netherlands and to provide reliable reports for the Belgian government. Another major function of the Belgium Office was to constantly remind the Dutch people, the Dutch government and the Belgian internees that there was still a Belgian government, albeit not one currently located in Brussels, and that the government that was in Brussels was

²⁹ Bruijnseels, A., *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland tijdens de oorlogsjaren 1914-1918*, Deel III, p.49.

³⁰ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1088.

³¹ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.195 and Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.59.

³² Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.62.

an occupying army. This was achieved in several ways, one of which was patronage of artistic or sporting events. For example in April 1917 the Belgian government in L'Havre wrote to the Belgian Office in The Hague informing them that the Belgian Minister of Science and the Arts had allocated Dfl 1500.00 for an art exhibition in the Netherlands. The Belgian Office was asked to form a committee to organise such an exhibition and to ensure that Belgian artists from the occupied zone were represented.³³

As the Belgian internees became more involved with economic matters and employment they began to attract more attention from Socialist politicians.³⁴ The Belgian Office was run on behalf of the government by Modeste Terwagne, a socialist politician and doctor who was also politically active in Antwerp as a member, and later leader, of the Antwerp Council.³⁵ Despite Terwagne's socialist credentials he was despised by the other Belgian socialist politician who took an active interest in the Belgian internees, Camille Huysman. An original member of the group dedicated to improving the lot of the internees by the provision of education Huysman saw Terwagne as a government puppet whose main aim was to suppress the socialist movement in the internment camps. Laporte describes the Belgian Office as 'a chauvinistic and heavily anti-socialist propaganda and information service that, on the initiative of the Belgian government, must combat every form of anti-patriotism overseas'.³⁶ In contrast to Terwagne's anti-socialist stance Huysman actively promoted socialism in the Netherlands during the war.³⁷ He, along with several members of the *Belgische Werkliedenpartij*, (Belgian Workingmen's Party) helped form the *Bond van*

³³ MRA *Personalia II Van Puyvelde* 73.

³⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1085.

³⁵ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.197.

³⁶ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.197.

³⁷ Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.59.

Belgische Arbeiders in Nederland (Bond of Belgian Workers in Holland) known as the BBAN. This group was an attempt to get the Belgian internees to take some responsibility for their own welfare and also to provide a vehicle for counteracting the propaganda produced by the Belgian Office.³⁸ Fundamental to this group was the dual aim of international socialism and peace. Huysman's belief in international socialism and his stance that the German workers should bear no blame for their governments entry into the war brought him heavy criticism from some elements of the Belgian government. Terwagne in particular called him the 'spy from Berlin'.³⁹

The meetings of the BBAN that were held inside of the Belgian internment camps were well attended, a talk by Camille Huysmans in March 1917 at Harderwijk attracted an audience of 1,500, and even ordinary weekly meeting could reckon on drawing a crowd of around 1,000.⁴⁰ Aside from insisting that each of the meetings was also attended by a Dutch officer, the Dutch authorities do not appear to have interfered in any way with this show of political feeling. Any concern seems to have been that a large-scale gathering had implications for public order rather than any anxiety over any extreme political views being expressed.

The lack of concern shown by the Dutch government with regard to the activities of the BBAN and the Belgian socialists in general can be attributed to the fact that most of the complaints raised by the BBAN were levelled at the Belgian government, not at the host nation. Any complaints from the Belgian government that demanded the Dutch government take action against the socialists, whilst unwelcome, did not need such

³⁸ Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grootte Oorlog* p.59 and p.60.

³⁹ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.197.

⁴⁰ Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.202-203.

careful consideration as a similar demand from the German or British governments would have required. Belgium was no threat to Dutch security, the only doubtful issue was the question of repayment of internment costs after the war and, assuming Belgium was in a position to pay, such costs were clearly covered by international law. A further consideration was the Flemish question. The long-standing and thorny issue of the separation of the Flemish and French speaking areas of Belgium was not officially part of the Dutch government's agenda during the war but all interested parties, the Dutch included, must have speculated on what might happen under any post-war peace settlements. Smit asserts that the Germans were keen to win the sympathy of the Flemish speaking Belgians and tried to exploit the long-standing discord between them and their French speaking countrymen, but with little success.⁴¹ With an expectation of hosting the post war peace conference, as it had hosted the 1899 and 1907 conferences, the Dutch government had reason to be confident that it would be well placed to ensure a settlement that was favourable to all Dutch speakers. The issue of Flemish separatism did not disappear during the war. In Belgium, the occupying German government took active steps to separate the Flemish and Walloon areas with a view to creating a greater pro-German, Dutch speaking country. To this end an order was issued in 1917 by the Germans to create two completely separate administrative areas within Belgium, with the Flemish area being the more dominant one.⁴² The Belgian population in Belgium as a whole resisted this idea and the Belgian government wanted to ensure that the internees responded similarly. Political activity in the camps, whether socialist or not, fanned the flames of the debate. I have found no evidence to suggest that the Dutch government actively promoted calls for a separation of the northern part

⁴¹ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereld Oorlog*. Part 2 p.179.

⁴² Chambers, *The war behind the war 1914-1918*, p.216.

of Belgium within the camps but neither is there any evidence that they tried to suppress such calls and by allowing the BBAN to operate freely, the Dutch were complicit in allowing debate over the separation to flourish. The Dutch government offered no objection to the publication and distribution of newspapers and pamphlets that were aimed specifically at promoting the Flemish cause. These reached a greater audience outside of the camps than the Walloon equivalent simply because of the language they were written in. Most newspapers that were officially sanctioned by the Belgian government were written in French. Bossenbrook also alleges that the Vlaams question lay at the root of much of the Netherlands dealing with Belgium.⁴³

Movement of families

The shortage of accommodation in the vicinity of the internment camps and the increased prices and shortages in food and coal placed extra emphasis on the movement of families from Belgium to the Netherlands. The Germans placed restrictions on families leaving the occupied part of Belgium, but those from the rest of the country were free to move to the Netherlands. Once in the Netherlands the majority of these families were completely dependent on their husbands' salaries and if these disappeared then they would be destitute and wholly reliant on the Dutch authorities for their welfare. For this reason the Dutch government was no longer willing to sanction any further movement of families. At the end of 1916 a declaration was made to the effect that no more families would be allowed to move to the Netherlands unless they had asked for, and obtained, permission from the Dutch military prior to their move.

⁴³ Bossenbroek, *Vluchten voor de Grote Oorlog*, p.21.

Permission would only be granted to those families who could demonstrate that they had somewhere to live and adequate means of support. Those that arrived without the necessary permission were sent straight to a refugee camp.

Unfortunately this decision, taken on 21 November 1916 was not widely publicised and families continued to arrive. The International Office of the Red Cross was instrumental in helping many of these families, and even they were not informed of the new policy until May 1917. By the summer of 1917 the problem of providing for these families was so acute that the commission charged with overseeing the situation decided that the time had come to call in the Minister of Internal Affairs directly. Although some special villages had already been built adjacent to the camps, Albertsdorp and Elizabethsdorp near Amersfoort and Leopolddorp and Heidedorp near Harderwijk there were still three hundred families in Amersfoort and a further one hundred and twenty-five in Harderwijk that were homeless.⁴⁴ Despite the change in official policy the Minister of Foreign Affairs refused to sanction sending them back. He said that to do so would be against the Dutch tradition of hospitality and that a solution must be found. By subsidising rents in the private sector, the organisation of emergency aid by the Belgian Ambassador, and by sending some families to refugee camps, the immediate crisis was dealt with but the ongoing problems remained.⁴⁵

The Belgian government addressed the problem in two ways. Firstly it provided money for the building of new housing and secondly it increased the allowances that it paid to the families of servicemen. This did not give them sufficient income to live on without

⁴⁴ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog', p.103.

⁴⁵ LM *Geschiedenis der Internering*, p.1094.

the internee's wage but it did help ease the situation. Those internees that refused to work to support their families were immediately sent back to the camps. Those that were returned to the camps because of their own actions had all financial support for their families withdrawn, even housing.

The medical care of internees' families was covered by Ministerial Decree of 23 March 1915 (No 72) and by a later ruling in April 1916, which placed responsibility for the medical care of all internees' families with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁴⁶ In May 1917 responsibility on the ground passed back to the military when the Inspecteur der Volkgezondheid (Inspector of Public Health) asked the military medical services to take over the care of the poorest families. In the camp at Harderwijk the military was paid an allowance of Dfl 175.00 a month and given the assistance of a Belgian doctor. All costs for medicine were borne by the Belgian Red Cross.

The families that moved to the Netherlands from Belgium came almost exclusively from the unoccupied areas. The German authorities were very reluctant to allow any movement of individuals from their occupied area because of the security implications. Only in very exceptional compassionate circumstances were families from the occupied area allowed to move to the Netherlands.

Following the wider publication of the new Dutch policy on restricting family migration there was a spate of escapes from the camp at Heerlen.⁴⁷

Almost all of these were internees with families who were still in Belgium and it

⁴⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1115.

⁴⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1097.

highlighted one positive element of the family welfare crisis. The movement of families to the Netherlands resulted in fewer escape attempts being made.⁴⁸

Religion

Religion was an important aspect of everyday life. For those displaced by the war it had an even greater significance. Access to religious services was considered to be one of the basic provisions required for internees both by the Dutch government and the Churches themselves. Arrangements were made from a very early stage for all internees to be able to worship as they wished. For example, some of the internees in the British camp came from Scotland and spoke only Gaelic. A minister was brought over from Scotland to take services for them.⁴⁹ Anglicans were ministered to by a vicar who was normally based in Rotterdam, supplemented by a visiting vicar from England. When neither were available then a Dutch minister gave services, but as these were in Dutch they were poorly attended.⁵⁰ The Germans had services from a Protestant German priest who travelled from Amsterdam.⁵¹

The existing churches in the Netherlands also opened their doors to the internees or provided celebrants who would visit the camps and hold services there. Some priests had entered the Netherlands from Belgium as part of the general exodus and they too were able to conduct services and provide pastoral care. The Catholic Church quickly

⁴⁸ Further information on the camps for families can be found in Laporte, *Belgische Geïnterneerden in Nederland Gedurende De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, p.113-118.

⁴⁹ ARA 2.05.04 box 743 nr 28088 Press clipping from Philadelphia dated 06.06.1915.

⁵⁰ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.611.

⁵¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.630.

arranged for more priests to be sent to the Netherlands and, quite apart from offering spiritual guidance they also tried to improve the living environment of both the internees and the internees' families either outside of the camps or in the specially constructed family camps. The priests acted as negotiators, intermediaries and helped with more basic problems. In Den Bosch, for example, they opened a school, which started with 17 pupils in October 1915 but had grown to over three times the number by 1918.⁵²

In reading the accounts left by many of these priests it can be construed that whilst the Catholic Church was keen to assist those displaced by the war, it also saw the camps as an opportunity to convert new members or encourage those that had lapsed to rediscover their faith. In the large camps they had pretty much a captive audience. Far from home with little to do, church services were a distraction from the daily routine if nothing else. In some cases, however, the arrangements required to meet the needs of the internees required far more effort. The handful of French officers interned on the island of Urk requested the services of a French-speaking priest to perform a mass for them. The Very Reverend Soon had to leave Oldebroek the day before the service (Thursday), spend the night in Kampen, get up at 5am and take a two hour boat trip in all weathers. He then had to wait a further two hours on Urk before the French officers were awake and ready for Mass. All this was then repeated in reverse so that he could be back in time to perform the Sunday Mass in the camp at Oldebroek.⁵³

⁵² Bruijnseels, *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland*, deel 1, p.140.

⁵³ Bruijnseels, *Het Godsdienstig leven der Belgen in Nederland*, deel 2, p.54.

The Dutch support and tolerance with regard to political and religious activity in the internment camps worked very well. By refusing to ban any activity unless it either compromised Dutch neutrality or threatened to disrupt the good order in the camps, the Dutch government avoided bringing itself into direct conflict with the internees. Any criticism of the attempts to suppress political activity that were made by the internees (and this was mainly the Belgian internees) were instead directed at the home governments. Activities within the camps was an area over which the Dutch government had complete control. It could exert its authority and emphasise its neutral position without aggravating to any great extent the two nations that could end its neutrality, Britain and Germany.

~ Chapter 7 ~

Internment in a neutral country: the arrival of the Prisoners of War

The mass movement of foreign troops across the Dutch borders in 1914 forced the Netherlands' government into a position where it was obliged, under the terms of international law, to house and feed some 35,000 men, plus many of their families. In 1914 this was mainly a logistical problem for the then affluent and thriving country, and the government and the population of the Netherlands worked hard, and for the most part enthusiastically, to meet their obligations. In 1917 the Dutch government voluntarily offered to host a further 16,000 foreign troops as the result of a treaty concluded between Germany and Great Britain. This treaty allowed for the transfer of long-term and seriously ill POWs from captivity and into internment in the Netherlands. The Dutch population greeted this new influx with far less enthusiasm than it had the original internees. Whilst public sympathy for the individual soldiers remained, growing anger at the governments of the belligerent nations made many in the Netherlands question why, at this juncture in the war, such an undertaking had been entered into. In order to gauge the significance of this development in the eyes of the Dutch population, it is important to understand how much more intensely the European war was impacting on the Netherlands in 1917 in comparison to 1914. More so,

because this was an essentially voluntary commitment compared to the legal obligation to house and feed the original internees.

After three years of conflict the war was having an undeniable effect on the Netherlands. The economy was caught between the British blockade and the downturn in trade with Germany. In addition to these restrictions, the continued presence of both Allied and German submarines in the North Sea also affected trade with the rest of the world. The mood in the country was depressed. Fuel, especially coal, was in very short supply and food was also rationed. For Ritter, the crises in the shipping and fishing industries represented the crises that the whole country faced during what he calls 'the fourth mobilization year'. Ritter used the example of seven Dutch merchant ships that were sunk on 22 February 1917 by a German submarine with the loss of twenty thousand tonnes of flour 'while in Holland the bread ration is reduced'. He blamed not only the Germans, who launched the torpedo, but also the British who refused to allow the Dutch boats to leave the English port in sufficient time to beat the increase in German submarine warfare.¹

In an effort to stop the problems of supply spiralling out of control, the Dutch government placed Minister Posthuma in charge of ensuring that the situation was handled in the most efficient manner. In September 1917 he transferred all relevant departments including agriculture, shipping, rationing and industry from the Ministry of Trade to a new department called '*Crisiszaken*'. Literally translated this means 'crisis affairs'; and the name is indicative of the seriousness with which the Dutch government viewed their situation at the time. In addition to the existing departments

¹ Ritter *De Donkere Poort*, p.121 deel 2.

that were moved to the new ministry, a special section was created called the Bureau voor Mededeelingen (the Information Office). Mindful of the unrest that the economic problems and supply shortages was causing, the government was keen to ensure that the public was fully aware of the reasons why their new, often very stringent policies, were being imposed. Unfortunately, although efforts were made to explain why rationing was being imposed, (and later cut even further), this did little to deflect public criticism and Posthuma bore much of the brunt of this. Moeyes asserts that whilst Posthuma's personal integrity cannot be doubted, much of the blame for the subsequent crisis in supply can be laid at his door. Whilst Posthuma cannot be held responsible for the British and German trade policies that caused the initial problem, Moeyes does blame him for setting up a centralized system which was too cumbersome and crushed any opportunity that may have existed for spontaneous and flexible solutions, especially in the areas of agriculture, trade and food.² A valid point but one which neglects to consider that this new 'Crisis' department was a political as well as economic organ. By centralizing control it was easier for the Dutch government to be transparent in its dealing with both sides in the conflict. It may ultimately have resulted in less food and coal in the shops, but it did help underline the Dutch position of neutrality.

Coal was one of the big issues in 1917. Although The Netherlands had some coalmines, it was in no position to produce all that it required and was forced to import the rest. In 1913 it produced only two million tonnes of the twelve million it used.³ Supplies from both Britain and Germany were reduced in the early years of the war, but it was in 1917

² Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.285.

³ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.286.

with the growing economic crisis in Germany and the submarine war limiting the amount of coal that could be transported by sea, that the problem of coal supplies became such a major issue. The Dutch miners, who had left their mines in 1914 when the army was mobilized, were, to a large extent, replaced by interned Belgians who had left their own mines and joined the Belgian army following the German invasion. A situation not without problems, as the subsequent industrial disputes demonstrated, but it did mean that the Dutch were at least making the most of their own resources. To aid production in domestic mining, summertime was introduced in 1916 and the Catholic Church sanctioned working on Sundays.⁴

Unfortunately, by 1917 coal was not only used to power industry and heat homes it had also become a political tool. The Dutch government would not buy British coal as long as the British and Americans held Dutch grain ships captive in British and American ports. Germany would only export to Holland if it was given substantial credit in the Netherlands that it could use to purchase food and other essential supplies. The intricacies of these trade negotiations are beyond the scope of this thesis, suffice to say that the end result was a marked decrease in the amount of coal available for the Dutch domestic market.⁵ The Dutch people were cold and large numbers had lost their jobs, and therefore their incomes, when industry folded because it could not power its machines. They laid the blame not only on their own government, (and Posthuma in particular), but also on the belligerent nations. The shortage of coal impacted on the

⁴ Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.288.

⁵ There are numerous works that deal with the Dutch trading position during the First World War. The best known is perhaps Manan, *De Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij*. This is a very comprehensive and lengthy book. A far shorter overview can be found in Frey, Marc., 'Trade, ships and the neutrality of the Netherlands in the First World War', *International History Review*, 19,(Aug 1997), p.541-562. For the impact of the trade sanctions on the Dutch people, Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* and Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*, (1931) are the most informative.

population in many different ways. Some schools were closed: those that were open were also used as places of worship as churches were notoriously difficult to heat. Many local councils turned off their street lighting and places such as museums greatly reduced their opening times.⁶

If coal shortages had been the only problem, then most households would perhaps have been able to cope. Unfortunately, by 1917 many other basic needs were also not being met. In February of that year food rationing had been introduced. On production of an identity card obtained from the local council, coupon books were issued. Most basic foodstuffs such as bread, rice, sugar, coffee, meat, fat and potatoes were rationed. In addition to food, clothes and shoes were also rationed. As 1917 progressed the rations were reduced several times to the very minimum necessary.⁷ Although mass starvation was not an issue, many people were struggling to find enough to eat. In his diary on the 1917 Hague conference Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield says “After lunch – a somewhat skimpy meal for there is not much to eat here. It’s all very different to last year when it was abundant and excellent”. Clearly the food shortages were beginning to affect even the diplomatic process although it is also possible that the Dutch authorities were making a point by providing a ‘skimpy lunch’. Belfield’s diaries make it quite apparent that meals were an important part of his day.⁸ By early 1918 various charitable organisations had identified a need to assist the very poorest and the increasing number of homeless. Thanks to support from local businesses *centrale keukens* (literally ‘central kitchens’) were being opened all over the Netherlands where hot meals could

⁶ Ritter , *De Donkere Poort*, p.144 deel 2. Even the Rijksmuseum was partially closed.

⁷ Oosterman, ‘De Internering hier te lande’ p.831.

⁸ Imperial War Museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB 1/3. p.4.

be obtained for a very small sum.⁹ The *Koninklijke Nationaal Steuncomité* (Royal National Support Committee) offered to pay three quarters of the cost of these kitchens, provided that the food was not available free of charge. The cost to the dinners was small, 10 or 15 cents, but it was not free.¹⁰

A cause for great concern amongst the Dutch population, and one that became symbolic of the growing shortages, was the potato ration. Early in 1917 Posthuma declared that there were sufficient potatoes in store to last until the next harvest. By the end of February it was clear that this was not the case. Not only were supplies being used up too quickly, such potatoes that were in store were not of an ideal quality.¹¹ The potato came to represent all that was bad about rationing. Although the government tried to educate the Dutch housewives to serve other things besides potatoes, it was such a staple of the daily diet that most were either unable or unwilling to switch to something different. Every bit of available land was turned over to growing potatoes, but still the supplies could not meet demand. Public opinion turned against the government when it was disclosed that much of the Dutch potato harvest was being sent overseas. In exchange for fuel, mainly coal, the Dutch government was sending Britain and Germany a quarter of the harvest each. By 1917 the German concentration on munitions at the cost of supplying the nation with foodstuffs was hitting home and the German government was anxious to import food from wherever it could be

⁹ LM Q194-40

¹⁰ Bibliotheek Nederlandsch Legermuseum Q194-40 '*Eet Gij uit de Centrale Keuken?*' A short pamphlet concerning the provision of kitchens in Amsterdam. It is not clear who issued the pamphlet but it bears the crest of the Amsterdam Gemeente (Council). An interesting point is that out of some thirty-six distribution points for hot meals in Amsterdam, eight were designated as providing food for members of the Jewish faith.

¹¹ A member of Parliament even turned up to a session with a plate of potatoes to demonstrate that their quality was 'no better than pig food'. Ritter p.171.

obtained.¹² In the summer of 1917 a group of Rotterdam housewives gathered at the docks and confiscated a cargo of potatoes that was about to be loaded onto a boat for England. In Amsterdam another group of housewives, unable to buy potatoes in the shops because only half of the required supplies had been delivered, raided an unguarded warehouse full of potatoes and removed everything. This was just the start and in a few days at the beginning of July there was general unrest, led by the women, and many more warehouses were plundered. Posthuma eventually brought peace by promising regular and adequate supplies of potatoes but it was an uneasy truce.

As more and more workers lost their jobs because of the shortage of fuel to keep the factories going, many found that they were unable to pay their rent. Not only was fuel in short supply, building materials were also scarce and this, amongst other factors, had resulted in a shortage of rented accommodation. In turn this had pushed rents up far higher than their pre-war levels. Workers who still had jobs struggled to meet the new prices, the unemployed stood no chance, and many ended up on the street. Viewed against the increasing level of domestic hardship it would have been very understandable if the Netherlands had declined to host so many exchanged POWs.

Background to POW Exchanges

The idea of a neutral country volunteering to take on responsibility for sick and wounded soldiers from belligerent neighbours was not entirely new in 1917. The Swiss had been active in this area since 1914, but it was a feature of international warfare that

¹² Moeyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.298 and Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, p.349.

had not been even contemplated before the First World War. The idea stemmed from a proposal by the Swiss journalist Louis de Tscharner, who wrote on the topic in the *Berner Tageblatt* in 1913. Anticipating war, he suggested that Switzerland should offer to take care of an equal number of soldiers from each warring nation. Once recovered, these soldiers would be sent home. In return, the nations involved in the war would undertake to respect Swiss neutrality.¹³ In 1914 the International Committee of the Red Cross took up the idea and proposed to Germany and France that POWs who were too badly wounded to take any further part in the war should be repatriated, with the Red Cross acting as intermediary. It took until February 1915, and the intervention of Pope Benedict XV, before an agreement was finally signed.¹⁴ The first exchange of prisoners took place on 2 March 1915. By November 1916 a total of 2,343 Germans and 8,668 French soldiers had been exchanged.

Efforts were now made to help POWs who, though injured or sick, were not permanently incapacitated and could potentially return to the front once recovered. The Swiss solution to this was to suggest that after treatment these soldiers would not be returned to their homeland, but would instead be interned in Switzerland until the end of the war. With the example of the internees in the Netherlands to draw upon, it was clear that this was a viable option.¹⁵ With an agreement on the idea in principal

¹³ Speed, Richard, B., *Prisoners, Diplomats and the Great War. A study in the Diplomacy of Captivity*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) p.33.

¹⁴ There are several asides in the literature regarding the POW Exchange Treaties that refer to either Pope Benedict XV personally or one of his representatives. Unfortunately I have found little proof as to the scale of their involvement, influence or motivation. Given the Catholic Church's concern for the Belgian internees and refugees in the Netherlands, where efforts were made to strengthen the faith of existing Catholics and convert as many new recruits as possible, it could be surmised that this was seen as another method of creating a 'captive audience'. It could, however, be argued that any Catholic involvement was purely charitable. It is to be hoped that documents come to light in the future that can clarify a currently cloudy issue.

¹⁵ Moorehead, *Dunants Dream. War, Switzerland and the Red Cross*, p.203.

discussions turned to the details. Which medical conditions would entitle a soldier to be considered for internment? Where would they be held, and under what terms? By the start of 1917 there were around 27,000 soldiers interned in Switzerland. Mostly French or German they also included an increasing number of British and Belgian troops.¹⁶ Both of these countries had asked to join the scheme in early 1916.¹⁷

Co-operation with the warring nations to assist with sick and injured POW's was something that the Netherlands had been involved with for some time. As early as 1915, the repatriation of severely wounded soldiers from both sides had been taking place via the Netherlands.¹⁸ The Dutch government sanctioned an agreement between Britain and Germany, enabling German ambulance trains to enter the Netherlands and meet British hospital ships that had crossed to Vlissingen. Later exchanges were made via Rotterdam but the principles remained the same. Responsibility for administering these exchanges was placed with the Dutch Red Cross who appointed Jhr. Ernest van Loon to oversee the entire operation, with Dr.F Hymans as Chief Medical Adviser.¹⁹ The hospital trains would be met at the Dutch/ German border by members of the Dutch Red Cross, who would then travel with the sick and injured, undertaking complete responsibility for their care up to the port. The occupants of the train then swapped places with the injured that had been brought over on the British hospital ship.

¹⁶ There is a large collection of documents from the Belgian Embassy in Bern relating to the Belgian POWs in Switzerland now held in the MRA in Brussels. This includes many individual records of POWs as well as diplomatic papers. MRA Inventaris de Archieffonds 1914-18 II Personalia boxes 17, 18,19 & 20.

¹⁷ See Favre, Edouard (ed.), *L'internement en Suisse des Prisonniers de Guerre Malades ou Blessé 3 Vols*, (Geneva: Georg and Cie, Libraires-Editeurs, 1917,1918 & 1919), Annet, P., 'L'internement de soldats français en Belgique pendant la guerre de 1870', *Revue belge d'histoire militaire*, Vol 28, (Brussels, 1990).p.337-349. and Picot, Henry Philip., *The British interned in Switzerland*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1919). All give an excellent insight into the internment of exchanged POWs in Switzerland during the First World War.

¹⁸ Oosterman, 'De Interneering hier te lande' p.821. De Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten*, p.274.

¹⁹ Mandere, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Rode Kruis (1867-1917)*, p.163.

The Dutch medical staff then continued to travel with their patients on the boat to England. At the same time their colleagues, who had escorted the invalids from Britain would continue their journey by train, only relinquishing their charge at the German border. These exchanges were to a large extent carried out in secret. In order to be eligible to be exchanged, an individual had to have very serious injuries; triple amputations were not unusual, and neither Britain nor Germany were keen for the conditions of their soldiers to be made public. Some journalists were invited to witness the exchanges, but they were for the most part kept away from the injured. Articles in the press emphasised the good work being done by the Red Cross rather than the horrific state of their patients.

By mid 1916, however, the Dutch shipping company operating these hospital ships, the *Maatschappij Zeeland*, announced that it was no longer prepared to bear the risks that crossing the North Sea entailed and withdrew its ships from participating in the exchanges. Its place was taken by the British Great Eastern Railway Company (that also owned ships) and the *St Denis* became the new hospital ship. This new arrangement only lasted until February 1917, when the German announcement of an increase in the use of submarines made the crossings far too dangerous and they were effectively suspended. Nevertheless by the end of 1916 some 1,269 British and 774 German injured had already been repatriated via the Netherlands.²⁰

As well as facilitating the formal exchange of POWs, the Netherlands had always been willing to assist with individual exchanges on compassionate grounds, either of POWs or its own internees. As early as September 1914 diplomatic moves were made to

²⁰ Mandere, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Rode Kruis (1867-1917)*, p.163.

arrange the exchange of Belgian and German officers on compassionate grounds. Details are sketchy but it seems likely that they were aircrew that had been badly injured in crashes.²¹ For example, in November 1914 Petty Officer W.H. Webb of Collingworth Battalion was exchanged for Oberleutenant Zur See Klein. Klein was injured and had been hospitalised in The Hague, Webb had a dying wife and three children to care for. Initially the Germans were reluctant to agree to this exchange, the Dutch Ambassador in Berlin writing to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in The Hague about the exchange says, ' the unchivalrous way in which the British have conducted the war does not make the German military well disposed to such sentimental actions'.²²

The Hague Treaty of July 1917

In early July 1917, a treaty was put forward between Britain and Germany allowing a number of POWs to be released from their current camps and transferred to the Netherlands, along the same lines as the existing arrangement with Switzerland.²³ The conference to negotiate the treaty was held in the Netherlands and was hosted by the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs. Great Britain was represented by Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield KCB KCMG KBE DSO, the Director of Prisoners of War from 1914 to 1920, and a small group of associates from Great Britain. The main German negotiator was Major General Friedrich. The meeting was chaired by Van Vredenburg, the Dutch Ambassador to Scandinavia, on behalf of the Netherlands.

²¹ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 33783 Letter from Legation de Belgique to Loudon dated 18 September 1914

²² ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 33783 Letter from the Dutch Ambassador in Berlin to the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 29 November 1914.

²³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1059.

Belfield was clearly a great diarist and has left an interesting record of his impressions of both the Netherlands and the German negotiators. Of the Netherlands he says, 'It is outstandingly clean – roads, houses (especially the windows, which positively shine) and everything; but at first sight, anyway it seems uninteresting.'²⁴ He describes Loudon, their host on the first night as 'a charming gentleman who speaks English with ease'. His views of the Germans are less complimentary. 'The Germans seem to be agreeable and with us pleasant – but who can tell? Friedrich poses as one whose heart bleeds for the prisoners, but one must suppose that he is largely responsible for the brutal treatment to which they have been subjected.'²⁵ The Dutch efforts not to cause offence in any way, to either set of delegates, were apparent even from the beginning of the conference. The participants were seated with Britain on the left of the Dutch chairman and Germany on the right. This was explained by the chairman as being because '*Allemande precedes Grande Bretagne* in the alphabet'. Similarly no preference was given to any language. Belfield spoke in English, Friedrich in German and Van Vredenburg translated. When Van Vredenburg addressed the entire meeting he spoke in French.

Despite all of the efforts of the Dutch government to demonstrate their neutrality, Belfield clearly doubted that this was the case. He was convinced that the Germans had been allowed to break into the British delegation's rooms and have looked at all of their paperwork. He also had his doubts about Van Vredenburg, 'Van Vredenburg who is of more than doubtful neutrality and shows his German preference, notwithstanding his

²⁴ Imperial War Museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB 1/1 Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield diary, p.3.

²⁵ Imperial War Museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB 1/1 Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield diary, p.6.

attempts to conceal it, at every turn'.²⁶ Whatever the actual position of the chairman, and Belfield offered no proof of his bias, the treaty negotiations proceeded fairly smoothly. There was a considerable amount of horse-trading, compromises were reached on a number of issues, not only relating to potential exchanges, but also dealing with all aspects of the treatment of POWs. The treaties concluded before the war had been signed in the expectation of POWs, but in many areas were found to be too vague with too many loopholes. The 1917 Hague Treaty was, in many places, quite specific, and was a treaty born of experience rather than expectation. It was not, however, the first treaty to try and match actual events with diplomatic rules. A previous treaty signed between Germany and France had already addressed some issues although, according to Belfield, with only limited success.

We have been a good deal hampered by a previous agreement with regard to internment in a neutral country and exchanges concluded between France and Germany at Berne. This, besides being full of sentimental rubbish, was most favourable to Germany. The Germans are constantly referring to this agreement and we cannot leave it entirely. We have steadfastly refused to consider some of its worst features but we should have been better if it had not been concluded.²⁷

Eventually, an agreement was reached that provided for some 16,000 POWs to be moved to a neutral country (Holland) and for all costs incurred to be reimbursed by the home nations. Of the 16,000 authorised to be moved, 7,500 places were reserved for the sick and wounded, 6,500 for officers and NCO's who had spent more than 18 months as a POW, and the final 2,000 places were for sick civilian prisoners. Although this conference, and the treaty that resulted from it, were notionally to facilitate the

²⁶ Imperial War museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB 1/1 Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield diary, p.8.

²⁷ Imperial War museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB 1/1 Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield diary, p.11.

internment of POWs in the Netherlands, the actual document that was produced at the end covered far more. In setting down guidelines for the treatment of POWs in the Netherlands, this treaty effectively updated the regulations for all POWs, whether interned in a neutral country or held in a standard POW camp.²⁸ This new treaty did not replace the existing agreement to repatriate the very seriously injured through the Netherlands. The movement through The Netherlands of soldiers who were clearly too ill or injured ever to take any further part in the war continued. The new treaty was aimed at the moderately ill and injured, those who were likely to recover, and those who had been a POW for more than eighteen months.

Even after having completed his negotiations, Belfield still grumbled about German bias, as the German delegates were able to go home immediately. The British delegation, however, had to wait for an opportune time to make the crossing back to England. Belfield was forced to spend a few days amusing himself in The Hague, where he visited a gallery 'very fine (pictures) but the subjects are dull and I don't want to see them again' and the casino at Schreveningen 'the most hideous I have ever had the misfortune to see. The Hague is a place of outstanding cleanliness, stinking canals, plain women, beautiful flower shops, reckless cyclists and trams. The people look as flat as their country'.²⁹

Although the formal treaty was signed in July 1917, it would be a further five months before any exchanged POWs actually set foot in the Netherlands. The German and

²⁸ Parry. Clive. (Ed), *The Consolidated Treaty Series Vol 224 1918-1919*, (New York: Oceana Publications Inc, no date).

²⁹ Imperial War museum 1651 91/44/1 HEB Lieutenant General Sir Herbert Belfield diary, 1/1 p.19.

British negotiators, having reached agreement in principle, then had to hammer out the details. Britain initially wanted to nominate Hull as the embarkation and disembarkation port in England, but the German delegation could not guarantee the safety of ships making the crossing from so far north. Eventually, they reached agreement on Boston on the Wash as the port to be used. Likewise, there was much discussion concerning the route that the hospital trains would take from Germany to Rotterdam. They would travel through Belgium, but had to be diverted so as not to interfere with troop trains heading to and from the front.

Internment of the POWs

This delay between the treaty being signed and the arrival of the first POWs suited the Dutch. In October 1914, when over a million refugees and soldiers had crossed their border in a matter of days, the Dutch nation had risen to the challenge. Food, clothing, shelter and medical attention had all been provided both swiftly and willingly. In 1914, just after the start of the war, Holland was not yet experiencing any major shortages, and public sympathy for the refugees was high. In 1917 the situation was very different. Although the numbers were far smaller, the Netherlanders had far fewer resources to draw on and public cooperation could no longer be relied on. Many ordinary Dutch people had little enough for themselves and their families without being asked to share it with another group of foreigners, especially foreigners whose countries were largely responsible for the shortages in the first place.

The Dutch moved swiftly to set up an organisation to deal with the POWs. The Swiss had been accommodating POW exchanges for some time and so the initial action by the Minister of War was to send Generaal-majoor Onnen on a fact-finding mission to Bern.³⁰ He was accompanied by two medical doctors and his instructions were to glean all of the information he could. The three men spent two weeks in Switzerland as the guest of the Swiss Army Medical Services, who were in charge of all aspects of the POWs' lives. On their return Onnen presented a full report to the Minister of War. This three man commission had been tasked with investigating five specific areas; housing, freedom of movement whilst reducing escape attempts, costs, community life and lastly measures to restrict any possible attempts to use POW exchanges as a means of planting spies in the Netherlands.³¹

In Switzerland, all aspects concerning the care and welfare of the POWs lay in the hands of the Swiss Army Medical Service. This was not the way that the Dutch government wanted to proceed. In July 1917, Snijders had written to the Minister of War outlining his plans for a new organisation to oversee the care of the POWs. Although he envisaged a completely separate department to deal with the new arrivals, he still wanted to utilise the experience of internment acquired in the past three years by appointing Onnen as its chief.³² Snijders was given half of what he had asked for. Onnen was appointed head of the new Dienst der Geïnterneerde Krijgsgevangenen (Department for Interned Prisoners of War) but instead of being under the control of

³⁰ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 Item 800, a copy of the brief given to Onnen before embarking on his information-gathering trip on the internment of POWs in Switzerland, 2 July 1917.

³¹ ARA 2.05.04 Inv 742 No 24660. The final report of this trip can be found at ARA 2.05.42 Inv 1 dated 22 July 1917.

³² ARA 2.42.05 Inv 1 letter dated 27 July 1917.

the Ministry of War, and therefore Snijders himself, the new department was to come under the control of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.³³

On Onnen's return from Switzerland, although not yet formally appointed as head of the new organisation, he immediately began to address the more practical problems of housing and feeding 16,000 new internees. The new treaty allowed for ranks below the rank of officer to be accommodated in barracks, but both Britain and Germany had expressed a wish that no new barracks were built. Instead, all those who did not require hospitalisation would be accommodated, where possible, in a range of private hirings. Advertisements were placed in national newspapers asking for details of property for rent, and for retired Dutch military officers to come forward and volunteer to work for the new department as regional commanders.³⁴

It was decided that the POWs would be accommodated in 'areas'. Different nationalities would be allocated accommodation in different parts of the Netherlands in the hope of not only spreading the burden for accommodating the POWs, but also to try and prevent any outbreaks of hostility between men whose countries were still at war. To a large extent these areas coincided with areas where internees were already in camps or living in the local area as part of a work group. It was not the intention of the Dutch authorities to mix the two groups. The Hague was associated with the British and Rotterdam continued to be a base for the Germans. The medical services were instructed to ensure that there were adequate medical facilities in these areas to deal with the specific needs of the two nationalities. This was to be

³³ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 1 nr 329 Letter from Foreign Affairs to Ministry of War dated 15 September 1917.

³⁴ ARA 2.42.05 Inv 1 Clippings from the *NRC* dated 5 August 1917.

achieved in close cooperation with medical officers from both Germany and England. One of the important differences between the establishment of facilities for the internees and the preparations for the POWs was the involvement of the home nations at every stage, especially in all matters medical.³⁵

Despite the time lag between the signing of the treaty and the arrival of the first POWs, there were still delays in providing the facilities needed by the POWs. In late December 1917 the head of the Army Medical Corps wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs claiming that none of the medical facilities were ready, that no arrangements had been put in place to cover the cost of these facilities, and that this failing could be laid at everybody's door but his own.³⁶ This is perhaps an exaggeration, the Army medical officers were not pleased that they had not been given overall charge of the POWs in the same way that the Swiss Army Medical Corps had been in Switzerland. This dissatisfaction comes through in much of the correspondence of the time and whilst it would be going too far to say that the Corps was uncooperative, it does appear that it was less flexible and forthcoming than it might otherwise have been. As the medical care for those POWs that required it was left largely in the hands of medical staff from the home nations this ultimately had little overall effect on the level of care made available.

The Information Office of the Dutch Red Cross was also heavily involved in the internment of POWs in the Netherlands. Just as they had with the existing internees, the

ARA 2.13.70 No 503/II, Letter from Onnen to the head of the army medical corps dated 20 December 1917.

³⁶ ARA 2.13.70 No 271, Letter from head of the Army Medical Corp to the Minister of Foreign Affairs dated 21 December 1917.

Information Office was tasked with keeping a record of all POWs, including details on their locations and health as well as their names ranks and units.³⁷ This information was freely exchanged with the British and German information offices, as both a way of informing families about the well being of soldiers and also providing contact addresses. In fact, because under Dutch law letters to and from the Information Office were free from postal charges, it also became an unofficial post office. It was utilised not only as a means of saving the internees and their families postage costs, but also because the Information Office had the most up to date information on a soldiers whereabouts. This was especially useful for the British. One result of the increased danger in crossing the channel during 1918 was the length of time it could take for a letter posted in the UK to reach its destination in the Netherlands. The recipient of a letter could well have moved on. The Red Cross ensured that all mail was forwarded. It also, where necessary, ensured that the personal belongings of a POW were sent on to next of kin in the event of the death of an interned POW.

Despite the wishes of the British and German authorities that all POWs be housed in private hirings, this proved difficult to organise and all servicemen below NCO rank were put into camps that were in essence very similar to the original internment camps. The officers and NCOs were, for the most part, allowed to live out in the local community although with restrictions on exactly where they could roam. This was unpopular with the local Dutch population, as housing was difficult to find and the influx of POWs requiring accommodation served only to increase further the already high rents being charged by private landlords. Many of the British and German officers had private incomes that meant they did not have to rely solely on their military

³⁷ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 503. Letter from Minister of Foreign Affairs to Onnen dated 11 December 1917.

allowance and so could afford not only to rent good quality accommodation. They could also pay the prices demanded by the black market and ensure that they enjoyed the meals of meat and vegetables that ordinary Dutch citizens could not afford.

Although the majority of the POWs were accommodated in camps they were allowed a lot of freedom. Indeed it was expected that all servicemen, except officers, who were medically fit would take up some sort of employment. This was usually assisting with the building and maintenance of the camps. The same problem with language applied for the POWs as it did for the German and British internees, very few of them spoke any Dutch and this restricted the type of employment that they could undertake.

The official correspondence regarding POWs and the majority of the literature regarding the POW exchanges speak only of British and German POWs, and does not mention any of the other nationalities involved. In fact the 'British' contingent included a large number of Australian and Canadian servicemen who, although they came under the overall control of the British authorities, had their own senior officers and consular representation to look after their interests. A separate treaty had been concluded between Britain and Austria that allowed for 500 Austrian and Hungarian POWs to be interned in the Netherlands, but this was never utilised so it is reasonable to assume that any Austrians who were considered eligible for exchange or internment were moved to the Netherlands as part of the German allocation of places.

Not all Germans that were sent to the Netherlands for internment wanted to return to Germany after the war, and as signs that the end of the war might be approaching this

was a matter that the Dutch were keen to address. Given the large number of German deserters that were now crossing the border and taking up residence in the Netherlands, it was potentially a problem. The commander of the POW camp at Hatten wrote to General Onnen in July 1918 asking what he was to do with Germans who refused to be repatriated. In his camp, he said, there were many.³⁸ Unfortunately no reply is available in the archives, but it was an issue that occupied the thoughts of the Dutch authorities.³⁹ Not only did they have to plan for events at the end of the war but they now also had an increased number of Germans who were not liable for internment to deal with. The increasing number of German deserters who crossed the Dutch borders were being added to by a number of Germans who were deserting during their repatriation from Great Britain, or who were completing their repatriation to Germany and then immediately returning to the Netherlands as a legal entry rather than as a deserter. An example of this is the civilian Goldberg, also known as Neumann, who escaped from a transport ship to avoid repatriation to Germany. A police report into his whereabouts also included the details of Rudolf Rucker, a German POW who had been repatriated but who had then legally returned to the Netherlands.⁴⁰

Discipline had been an issue with the internees that had been in the Netherlands since 1914, but not a big one. There were numerous small breaches of discipline and the ongoing problem of preventing escapes, but overall discipline was not a big problem. The ever-decreasing number of guards is one indication of this, as is the relatively

³⁸ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 21 Nr 5 Letter from the commander of the POW camp at Hatten to General Onnen dated 08 July 1918.

³⁹ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 Nr 17 Letter from Foreign Affairs to Onnen concerning German POWs who do not wish to be repatriated and where they should be allowed to live in the Netherlands dated 30 May 1918.

⁴⁰ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 Nrs 12 & 14 dated 7 May 1918 and 8 May 1918. Correspondence regarding further examples of escapes by German POWs can be found at ARA 2.05.42 Inv 7 Nr 10 & 11.

small population of the camp at Vlissingen. This was the 'prison' camp for persistent and more serious offenders, but its population was rarely more than 75, which out of a total internee population of more than 35,000, was a very small percentage. With the POWs this was not the case. Discipline was very much an issue, especially amongst the British. Infringements of the rules varied from minor issues, such as the refusal by some British officers to salute officers of the Dutch military (as they were supposed to), to drunken brawls in the middle of Dutch towns. As a result of the constant breaches of discipline the camps at Urk and Wierickerschans were re-opened. Urk was for serial escapees and more serious offenders, Wierickerschans was clearly intended to be a drying out clinic for alcoholics, where the emphasis was on care and cure rather than punishment.⁴¹ To relieve the pressure on the Dutch authorities, a special detachment of the British military police was sent to The Hague specifically to deal with discipline problems.⁴² Discipline was not only an issue amongst the British. The commander of the German camp at Hatten requested the building of a separate camp for 'disruptive' POWs. He was concerned not only about the high number of escape attempts, but also an outbreak of thieving amongst the POWs.⁴³ Eventually Onnen issued an order to the German POWs making it quite clear that those POWs who attempted to escape would be sent back to England.⁴⁴

Despite the hard line taken with escapees, the Dutch government claimed that it had no responsibility to prevent the interned POWs escaping. In response to a query from the

⁴¹ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 821 and ARA 2.05.42 Inv 9 nr 1. Instructions from Onnen regarding the day-to-day regime at Wierickerschans.

⁴² ARA 2.05.42 Inv 20 nr 2. Letter from the Chief of Police in The Hague to the Minister of Justice dated 16 March 1918.

⁴³ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 6 nr 4 Letter from Commander of the internment camp at Hattem to Onnen dated 29 April 1918.

⁴⁴ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 14 dated 8 May 1918.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning the issue of whether the law relating to internees also applied to the POWs, Onnen replied that it did not and that no new laws were required because as part of the original treaty, both Britain and Germany had undertaken to return any escaped POWs and all other offences would be dealt with under existing civilian or military law.⁴⁵

The POWs benefited in many ways from the Dutch experience with internment during the first years of the war: one of the more significant advantages they enjoyed was the immediate assumption that they should be given access to education. As with the internees, this ranged from basic literacy and numeracy lessons to university education. The emphasis for many was on learning skills that could be used once the war was over, and, as an end to the fighting was now a possibility, many were motivated to acquire new skills and qualifications. Both Germany and Britain sent over instructors when none could be found either locally or amongst the POWs. For those, usually officers, who had started a university course before the war, provision was made for them to complete their study at a Dutch university.⁴⁶ The only restriction was regarding location on security grounds. German students, for example, were diverted away from studying at Utrecht University because of its proximity to the Dutch waterline.⁴⁷ British students were allowed to attend Utrecht University but their movements were restricted and they were required to wear uniform at all times.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 1 nr 287 Letter from Minister of Foreign Affairs to Onnen dated 13 September 1917 and Onnen's reply dated 13 November 1917.

⁴⁶ Delft, the Dutch technical university was especially popular. ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 40 List of German students proposing to study at Delft in the academic year 1918/19

⁴⁷ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 7 Briefing dated 06.04.1918. Also ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 26, April 1918.

⁴⁸ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 810 Letter from the military commander in Utrecht to Onnen dated 6 March 1918.

The Dutch authorities had already encountered problems in finding adequate accommodation for the families of internees who had been in the Netherlands since 1914. As more and more of the (mostly Belgian) internees found work outside the camps, more of their families travelled to join them in the Netherlands. To a certain extent this problem solved itself. If an internee was working, and remained in employment, then he was in a position to provide for his family and they did not become a burden on the state. Even so, in 1917, as the shortages of both food and accommodation became more of an issue, the government was forced to place a ban on any more families entering the Netherlands. Poor communication and lack of any effective deterrent meant that the flow of families of internees into the country did not stop, but it did slow to a more manageable level. As far as the POWs were concerned, the Dutch government wanted to discourage any families moving to the Netherlands on a permanent basis. Even visits, which were allowed, were to be restricted because of the food and housing shortages.⁴⁹ The Germans had a big advantage because they could easily enter the Netherlands. The British had further to travel and, even if families could find a place on a ship, they ran the risk of being attacked by German submarines. German families were so keen to see their loved ones that many travelled to Rotterdam to meet the hospital ships as they docked.⁵⁰ Although the Dutch did all they could to discourage the families of POWs from entering the Netherlands, once there, they were allowed to stay, without their husbands incurring any penalty.⁵¹ The government would not, however, take any responsibility for finding accommodation for these families. In March 1918, the military commander in The Hague wrote to Onnen confirming that no

⁴⁹ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 22 nr 6, Letter from Foreign Affairs to Baron Gevers (a member of the Dutch Government) concerning plans by the German government to arrange for visits by POW families dated 27 April 1918.

⁵⁰ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 30. Letter from Rotterdam area commander to Onnen dated 29 August 1918.

⁵¹ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 45 Letter from Minister of Foreign Affairs to Onnen dated 12 November 1918.

houses had been hired for use by the families of POWs.⁵² The Dutch government stated that even those families that were given official permission to move to the Netherlands would not be allowed to live with their husbands. This clearly affected the lower ranks more than the officers. Officers who had given their promise not to escape, especially those with private incomes, could make their own arrangements and would be allowed to live with their family.⁵³

Another solution to the problem of families visiting the Netherlands was to allow the POWs to return home on visits. This was initially only when there was a clear compassionate need, if either the wife or children of a POW were at risk of death, but as such a large number took advantage of this regulation it must be assumed that the provision of compassionate leave was abused and that the Dutch were complicit in this abuse.⁵⁴ It was not uncommon for internees to be given extend leave to return home permanently when exceptional circumstances required it. For example, a number of British officers that came originally from the colonies spent most of their internment in locations as diverse as New Zealand, Canada and Kenya. A frequent reason was the need to return home to run the family business or farm following the death of a father or elder brother. As they were not going to be participating in the war, and had made a promise to that effect, then approval was given. Eventually, all internees and interned POWs were given the right to return home for visits, regardless of whether there was a compassionate reason or not. This was not an option for Belgian internees whose

⁵² ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 750 Letter from Commander of the Hague area to Onnen 23 March 1918.

⁵³ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 751 Letter from Onnen to Hauptmann von Scheven, representing the German Minister of War, dated 12 February 1918.

⁵⁴ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 652 Letter from Foreign Affairs to Onnen dated 28 January 1918.

homes were in the occupied part of Belgium, even for those in the unoccupied part, getting past the German wire fence made home visits difficult if not impossible.

Throughout the period during which POWs were interned in the Netherlands, there was an undeclared aim to enable as many men to be repatriated as possible. Just as the medical criteria for eligibility for internment were gradually relaxed, so were the guidelines for establishing who should be interned and who could be sent directly home. For example, in June 1918 the British agreed to a German proposal that all former civilian POWs, of whatever nationality, who were interned in the Netherlands and who were over 45 years of age, should be immediately repatriated.⁵⁵ All POWs that were under medical care in the Netherlands were constantly monitored, and many were allowed to go home. The Dutch were especially keen to repatriate those with mental illnesses, as there were only limited resources available to treat these conditions in the Netherlands.

Just as the living conditions for the Dutch population deteriorated during 1918, then the same happened to the POWs. The Dutch government refused offers of extra coal and food from Britain and Germany that was intended for use by the POWs as this, it was felt, would cause friction between the POWs and the Dutch people. Instead the POWs were placed on the same rations as the Dutch population. The British government was not pleased and requested that the POWs be given the same rations as the Dutch military (which were more generous) but this request was refused.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 4 nr 24 dated 25 June 1918.

⁵⁶ ARA 2.05.42 Inv 2 nr 630. Letter from Major General Williams of the British POW department to Onnen dated 16 Jan 1918 and Onnen's reply dated 17 January 1918.

Although the Dutch government had agreed to take upwards of 16,000 POWs, they did not ever reach the maximum. Constant revision and downgrading of the regulations for full repatriation meant that many who would have been interned in the Netherlands now met the less stringent repatriation criteria and went straight home.

With the experience of three years of internment to call on, the organisation and execution of the plans to house and feed the POWs went very smoothly. The British and German governments had always been very co-operative and supportive of Dutch efforts regarding the internment of their countrymen, and this attitude was carried forward into the situation with regard to the POWs. If anything, the home nations were overly generous in their support. The Dutch government was put into the position of having to refuse extra supplies of food and fuel that were meant for the POWs because they did not want the POWs to be seen to be enjoying a better standard of living than ordinary Dutch citizens.

The destruction of much of the Dutch archives during World War Two means that it is difficult to establish what the Dutch motivation was for entering into an agreement to accept exchanged POWs at this stage in the war. The problem of a lack of official documentation is compounded by the tendency of Dutch politicians and diplomats not to leave a record of their years in office by publishing memoirs or even leaving their personal papers for posterity. It must be seen as significant then, that those few who did leave a memoir of some sort, (and prominent amongst these is Bosboom, the Minister of War), gave little or no attention to the POW exchanges. Even Ritter, who commented on all aspects of Dutch life during the war allocates less than half a page to

the Treaty Conference.⁵⁷ It is possible to assume that the 1917 treaty was seen as merely a natural extension of the already existing agreements regarding the exchange of wounded prisoners through Dutch territory. Who made the initial approach to the Dutch government to extend their aid to POWs is unclear. Indeed, it may have been a Dutch initiative. The treaty between Germany, Belgium and France, signed in 1915, which allowed for exchanged POWs to be accommodated in Switzerland was brokered for the most part by the Pope's representative in Switzerland. Given Papal interest in POWs and the strength of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands it is possible to surmise, (but not to prove), that there was Vatican involvement in this treaty. Other theories have been put forward. One theory that occurs frequently in literature concerning the POWs is that the Netherlands entered into the agreement in exchange for increased supplies of coal. I can find no substantiation for this theory at all, and given that the Dutch government actually refused additional coal meant for the POWs, I find it hard to accept. A more plausible alternative is that put forward by Klinkert, that the initial impetus came from the Norwegian businessman F.E.Steen.⁵⁸ This theory is supported (albeit somewhat tenuously) by the fact that the Dutch chose one of their ambassadors to Scandinavia, Van Vredenburg, as the chairman for the treaty conference,

There are obvious reasons why the chance to undertake the role of a humanitarian neutral might appeal to the Dutch government, but it was perhaps the identity of the two countries involved that contributed to the Dutch willingness to become involved. In dealing with Great Britain and Germany, the Netherlands knew that it would be

⁵⁷ Ritter, *De Donkere Poort*, Deel II p.206.

⁵⁸ Klinkert, 'Internering van vreemde militairen', p.2448.

dealing with governments who could, and would, deliver on any of the requirements that the Dutch might make both in terms of money and materials. Had Belgium been a prospective signatory to the treaty, then the Netherlands may well have been less willing to participate. The Belgian support for their existing internees was patchy at best and non-existent in many instances. Belgium was not in a position to provide material help in 1917 and might not, after the war, be in a position to repay any expenses incurred by the Dutch. The Dutch had already extended a large amount of credit to Belgium and may well have wanted to limit its exposure. Switzerland, which had been accommodating Belgian POWs since 1915 clearly held similar views and sent Belgium a monthly bill. It was not prepared risk losing money by keeping an open tab pending the end of the war.⁹⁹

~ Chapter 8 ~

Going Home

Only one day after the armistice, the British ambassador in The Hague wrote to the Dutch government declaring that, as the war was now over, all treaties concerning the POWs interned in the Netherlands and Switzerland were no longer valid. He therefore requested that all British POWs should immediately be released and allowed to return home. To this end the British proposed to send five ships to collect the approximately 5,000 British and Commonwealth men currently interned in the Netherlands.¹ The Dutch were in complete agreement. They had no wish to detain internees for any longer than was strictly necessary in order to make appropriate arrangements for their transport home. On 15 November 1918 the first British internees and POWs embarked for the short trip home.² The Dutch authorities took the British declaration of the invalidity of the internment treaties to mean that they now also had no obligation to intern any German servicemen, and they too were released in the week following the armistice.³ Their journey home was considerably easier as they had no sea to cross. Some, and it is hard to estimate how many, when released from internment opted not to go back to Germany but remained in the Netherlands.

¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1528.

² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1531.

³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1533.

Even with the recent addition of the POWs, the number of German and British internees was, compared to the Belgians, relatively small. The return of the Belgian internees was complicated by the fact that a significant area of Belgium was still occupied by the Germans, albeit Germans that were heading homeward themselves. Consequently, although no longer under an obligation to intern the Belgians, the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs wanted to wait for agreement from the Belgian government before activating the plans for sending the Belgians home. These plans had been drawn up in 1917 in anticipation of the end of the war and allowed for a systematic, but gradual, clearance of all of the camps. The internees were to be transported to the Belgian border by a fleet of trains. The general principle was that those who were not employed in the Netherlands would be sent home first, so as not to leave Dutch industry suddenly short-handed.⁴ The work groups would then be gradually withdrawn back to the camps, and they would then depart for Belgium from there. The internees would travel home alone; families were to be sent along later.

The first trains for Belgium left the Netherlands on 2 December 1918. The Dutch government picked the date of 15 December 1918 as the point from which it would cease to have any financial responsibility for the internees. Any that remained in the Netherlands after that date would have to look to the Belgium government to provide them with money to live on.⁵ The planning for the return of the Belgians was very detailed. Specific orders had been prepared dealing with everything from exactly how much luggage each man was allowed to take with him, to what would happen to the dirty sheets after the camps had been vacated (they were taken into store in Woerden).

⁴ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1529.

⁵ De Vries, 'Nederland als Non-beligerente Natie en de Internering van Buitenlandse Militairen Gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog' p.105.

The families of the internees were also sent back by train starting on 21 December 1918 and continuing through the Christmas period. All of the families were initially transported to a resettlement centre in Antwerp.⁶

Not all internees were able to travel home immediately. Special arrangements had to be made for the seventy or so prisoners who were currently being held in the military prison at Vlissingen. They were escorted home under armed guard and handed over to the appropriate authorities in their own country. A larger group that also needed special attention was the internees who were too ill to travel. They remained in the Netherlands until appropriate arrangements could be made. For some this meant a long delay. In February 1919 there were still twenty Belgians under the care of the Dutch Army Medical Services and a further forty Belgians had to wait until June 1919 before they were transferred to the military mental hospital in Selzaete, to the north of Gent.⁷

Not only men had to be returned. During the course of the war the Dutch had also interned a large amount of equipment. Some had been taken over by the Dutch military and the cost of this equipment was offset against internment costs. Some was prohibited by the terms of the peace settlement from being returned, such as the German aircraft and warships, but the majority had to be sent back. The Allies were keen to get their property and the Dutch wanted to clear out the hangers and sheds they had been using for storage to make room for their own equipment now that the mobilisation was over.⁸ Germany, Britain, France and America had their equipment returned during 1919. The Belgian material was returned in 1920. Horses had also been

⁶ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1550.

⁷ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1574.

⁸ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1576.

interned and had themselves generated further internment costs. These horses were all German and 14 were still alive at the end of the war and were returned. As the Dutch military had made good use of them during the war at the cavalry training centre it was agreed that the bill of Dfl 36,214.01 for their upkeep would be waived.⁹ Any equipment that could not be returned or was not wanted was put up for sale.

The Savings and Canteen Funds

Over the four years of the war, the internees that had been in full-time employment had been required to pay a proportion of their wages into a savings fund. Following the armistice the returning internees expected that their proportion of the fund would be paid out very swiftly. For many this was their only source of income and was needed to re-establish themselves in Belgium. Unfortunately the planned distribution did not take place as quickly as both the Dutch and Belgium authorities would have liked.

The initial difficulties were caused by the abandonment of the fund administration by the group of Belgian internees who were responsible for the daily bookkeeping. Their understandable haste to get home left the Dutch with no one to actually administer the fund.¹⁰ When the Belgian government's complaints about delays in the distribution prompted a Dutch government enquiry, it became apparent that the abrupt departure of the Belgian bookkeepers was only one aspect of the problem; there were also serious irregularities in the way that the fund had been managed. The Dutch officer in charge of the fund was disciplined, but there was little doubt that the irregularities were down

⁹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1579.

¹⁰ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1602

to his incompetence rather than any attempt at fraud.¹¹ This investigation, and efforts to correct matters, took time and by May 1919 only 6,500 Belgians had received any sort of payment, an amount totalling Dfl 2,430,164 . The problem was exacerbated by the number of Belgians who had not waited for the official transport back to Belgium and had simply left. These internees had not been issued with the correct identity papers with which to claim their share of the fund. The official government account of internment, *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, devotes a lot of space to this issue. It was clearly an embarrassment to the Dutch government and they wanted to make it clear that, although somewhat belatedly, the fund had been distributed correctly. Very precise details are given about what was paid out and to whom. Despite all of this, a sum of Dfl 12,688 was left after everyone had been paid. This money was quietly absorbed into the Dutch army fund. Over a thousand Belgians claimed that they had not been paid all that they were due, but as a condition of receiving any money was that recipients had to sign a form saying that they agreed with the amount paid and would make no further claim on the Dutch government, there was little that they could do.¹²

The issue of what to do with the profits from the various camp canteens had been addressed during the war, but never really resolved. Great Britain took the initiative by asking that the British share of the money be sent directly to an orphanage in Portsmouth. Germany followed suit and also directed its share of the money to a worthy cause. The Belgian government, beyond agreeing that their share would also go to a charitable organization, could not make up its mind which one. The money was put on deposit in The Hague as a temporary measure but when the matter dragged on

¹¹ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1603.

¹² LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1615.

beyond the limit of the Dutch governments patience the money was simply transferred to the Belgian government to deal with as they saw fit.¹³

Conclusion

In his book *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, Ogley poses the question that, if one accepts that it is better to abolish war than to legislate around it, does that therefore mean that neutrality, or nonalignment, is necessarily a betrayal of world order? This is a question that was certainly being asked about the European neutrals, both during and after the First World War. Ogley argues that the validity of neutrality as a stance depended on the nature of the war. In a conflict where there is a main aggressor, seen as a threat to world peace, he asserts that neutral or non-aligned countries can be regarded as traitors to the common good. Conversely, in conflicts between two equal aggressors, then being neutral or non-aligned can be construed as aiding the common good.¹⁴ During World War One the Netherlands found itself being criticized for remaining neutral during a time of international conflict, especially in the latter half of the war. Unfortunately, the Dutch status as a trading nation did not help this view. The Dutch were seen by some as not only evading their international responsibilities but also as making a profit out of it.¹⁵ The entry of the USA into the war and Woodrow Wilson's emotive speech to the US Congress decrying neutrality in order to justify America's entry into the war, did little to help the Dutch reputation. For the Dutch themselves, however, although this was a world war, their concern was with the two aggressors flanking its borders. Sandwiched between Great

¹³ LM *Geschiedenis der Interneering*, p.1594.

¹⁴ Ogley, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.6

¹⁵ In the first three years of the war there was an element of truth in this. The profits from Dutch industry increased significantly. Kossman, *De Lage Landen*, p.34 & 35 and Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.619

Britain and Germany theirs was a more local war and the stance taken fits rather neatly with the second of Ogle's justifications for neutrality, that of a nation caught between two equal aggressors.

The Netherlands was never going to be able to achieve the detached aloofness of the other European neutral countries simply because of its geography. Its proximity to the battlefields and the importance of its rivers and seaports meant that it was always far too valuable to both sides in the conflict to be simply left in peace. Switzerland and the Scandinavian neutrals were much better located to limit the impact of the war on their populations and as such they could afford to take a more rigid line when faced with demands from the belligerent nations, but even they faced measures that greatly reduced their sovereignty and self determination. As Ørvik has said;

The small neutral countries were not given much choice as to the maintenance of their neutrality. Squeezed, battered and beaten from both sides, they were compelled to do what was expedient, rather than what was desirable from their own point of view. But all neutrals did not submit to the same extent. Their actual bargaining power became the decisive factor in their gradual submission to the belligerent pressure. The weaker they were, the greater was their humiliation.¹⁶

Indeed Ørvik claims that the Scandinavian countries were in fact un-neutral. Despite their wish to remain unaffected by the war, their inability to resist the pressures applied by the belligerents (through lack of force rather than lack of will) meant that they were in fact participants in the conflict, albeit non-fighting ones.¹⁷ The Dutch position of neutrality from 1914 to 1918 was also not perfect. Despite all of the efforts made by the

¹⁶ Ørvik, *The Decline of Neutrality 1914-1941*, in Ogle, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.87

¹⁷ Ørvik, *The Decline of Neutrality 1914-1941*, in Ogle, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.95 & 96.

government to adhere completely to international law, many compromises had to be made over the four years of the war and the population certainly ended up more than a little colder and hungrier than it wanted to be. Kossman, considering these compromises, rather aptly describes Dutch foreign policy during the war years as 'supple and sober'.¹⁸

In August 1914 very few of those qualified to make an informed judgement would have given the Netherlands a realistic chance of surviving four years of European war whilst still maintaining a position as a neutral. The Dutch Commander-in-Chief, General Snijders, looking at the Dutch position at the start of the war from a purely military viewpoint certainly had no confidence in the official policy of neutrality.¹⁹ Many of the 1914 Dutch cabinet, although publicly supporting the government's neutral stance, were in private debating the relative merits of an alliance with either Britain or Germany.²⁰ In November 1918, therefore, the Dutch government could be forgiven a certain smugness for having maintained Dutch neutrality and thus avoided both of the main fears from 1914; the need to send its troops into battle to defend its borders against an invading army or being forced into an alliance with one or other of the warring factions. Either one of these options would have destroyed the longstanding Dutch policy of neutrality. Unfortunately for the Dutch, however, there was very little

¹⁸ Kossman, *De Lage Landen*, p.32.

¹⁹ Snijders repeated his request that the Netherlands formally align itself with one or other of the belligerents (preferably Germany) throughout the war. His requests were always refused. Kossman, *De Lage Landen*, p.31

²⁰ An attempt was made to reflect the decision of the Dutch cabinet in 1914 as a mathematical model and to use this as a basis for predicting the policy of neutrality. The conclusion was that the outcome could not be predicted, not because the sympathies of the individuals could not be determined but because 'the probability of the outcome determines the choice of strategy'. Gallhofer, I.N. and Saris, W.E., 'Strategy choices of foreign policy: Decision makers: The Netherlands 1914', *The Journal of Conflict and Resolution*, Vol 23 issue 3,(1979), p.425-435.

chance that at the end of 1918 they could revert to their pre-war status as if the war had never happened.

Whilst the Dutch government could celebrate retaining its neutral position, it could not claim that the Netherlands had been unaffected by the war. As Abbenhuis has said;

The Great War challenged and impeded upon many of the concerns which neutrality was suppose to safeguard for the Dutch, including their economic stability, sovereignty, defence and security.²¹

Certainly the Netherlands in 1918 was not the vibrant, economically flourishing country that it had been in 1914. International trade was conducted largely according to the whim of the British and German governments and as a result the Dutch population was hungry. Food rationing was a daily necessity and the scarcity of fuel meant many had lost their jobs because factories could no longer afford to operate. A lack of building materials and the subsequent housing shortages resulted in increasing numbers that were either homeless or paying exorbitant rents. The need to mobilize the army had meant that, even with the generous rules on home leave, many families had spent the entire war apart as husbands, sons and brothers were conscripted in an attempt to maintain the charade that the Netherlands was capable of defending its own borders.

And yet, for all of the misery endured by the Dutch population during the later years of the war, and despite the many compromises that the Dutch government was forced to make to both sides in the conflict in order to maintain the often very precarious status of neutrality, there is one undeniable fact that underscores the Dutch decision to remain

²¹ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.261

neutral at any cost. When the war ended and the Dutch troops were demobilized they all went home. Unlike the belligerents in the war, the Netherlands did not have to endure the grief of a missing generation. Dutch women did not have to face the prospect of a life without marriage because so many potential husbands had been left on some foreign battlefield and the country could look forward to an economic recovery built on the back of a full workforce.

The question that now needs to be asked is how did the Netherlands manage to remain neutral? Was it down to the political savvy of the Dutch government and the deterrent posed by the Dutch military or was it simply that the belligerents allowed the Netherlands to remain neutral? It is arguable that a neutral Netherlands was of more use to both Britain and Germany than a Netherlands that was occupied by either one of them. At any time during the four years of the war either of the two main belligerents could have decided to end Dutch neutrality. That said, there were good reasons why the Netherlands could realistically hope that this would not happen. In general terms, Britain, who had entered the war as a result of the violation of Belgian neutrality, would have found it hard to justify ignoring the Dutch declarations of neutrality merely to further its own war aims. In order for Britain to send its troops over the Dutch borders the Germans would have had to have made the first move, or at the very least there would have had to have been undeniable evidence that they were about to attack. Germany, on the other hand, had altered its original plan, the Schlieffen Plan, in order to avoid entering the Netherlands on its way to Belgium and France. The reasons for this major alteration in German battle plans were still sound. A further front would

have stretched German resources too far and they would have lost an important trading partner that would have been at worst neutral and at best pro-German.

Abbenhuis has argued that whilst the Dutch military deterrent was sufficient to prevent an attack by Germany in 1914, this decreased as the war progressed.²² Likewise, the economic reasons for the belligerents to promote Dutch neutrality in 1915 and 1916 had also waned by 1917. Abbenhuis asserts that the Netherlands geo-strategic position remained the belligerent's only consistent reason for respecting Dutch neutrality for the entire war.²³ Moyes, who agrees that the Netherlands owed its neutrality to the decision of the belligerents not to invade, rather than to the Dutch ability to determine its own fate, places more emphasis on the economic importance of a neutral Netherlands, especially for Germany. He calls the Netherlands the 'air pipe' for German trade, the link that prevented a complete blockade on German trade by the Allies.²⁴

The Dutch government was well aware that the precarious situation it found itself in could change very swiftly. It knew that in times of war both Britain and Germany paid only lip service to prevailing international law and would, if the need arose, have had no hesitation in ignoring it. As a result, the Netherlands adopted a policy of active diplomacy in order to protect itself. From the very beginning of the conflict the Netherlands government was willing to compromise and adapt in order to protect its neutral status. This was most evident in its trading relations with the belligerents. The imposition of trade controls by the British government was a clear infringement of the

²² For a view on the Dutch army's ability to provide an adequate deterrent along the border with Germany see Klinkert, W., 'Verdeding van de zuidgrens, 1914-19', *Militaire Spectator*, 156, (1987) p.213-219 & 250-257.

²³ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p261.

²⁴ Moyes, *Buiten Schot*, p.272-273

Netherlands' autonomy, but by insisting on transparency, so that the trading restrictions could be seen to be affecting trade with both sides equally, the Dutch used the British interference to their advantage. In the later years of the war the Dutch population endured the hardship of both food and fuel shortages because their government would not compromise its neutrality by accepting supplies from either Britain or Germany if it felt that those supplies could be in any way construed as being the basis for a diplomatic as well as financial agreement.

It can be argued, however, that the Dutch willingness to compromise over trade was not a brilliant diplomatic move but simply a necessary reaction to a situation that was well beyond their control. The British navy was quite capable of inhibiting Dutch trade; indeed it was entirely capable of stopping all traffic to and from Dutch ports. Likewise the impact of the increase in German submarine activity from 1917 onwards did restrict the Dutch ability to ply their trade at will, even though the Germans were not specifically targeting Dutch shipping. Had they wished to, the Germans could also have closed down all Dutch ports. Similarly, should they have wanted to, the Germans had the added advantage of also controlling land and river access to the Netherlands. Whilst economic considerations were certainly key to the preservation of Dutch neutrality, especially in the earlier part of the war, as Abbenhuis points out, much of the Netherlands ability to trade had disappeared by 1917 and this weakened the case for the belligerents respecting the Dutch position simply to ensure a steady supply of goods.²⁵

Dutch diplomacy was, arguably, its only consistent and realistic defence against a potential attack from one of the belligerents and internment provided an excellent

²⁵ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral* p.261.

opportunity for increased diplomatic activity. Unfortunately it also distracted a proportion of the already inadequate Dutch military away from their primary function. The need to guard camps and police sensitive areas placed under the emergency measures of *Staat van Beleg* or *Staat van Oorlog* did uphold the credibility of the Netherlands as a neutral state, but at the same time, such activities reduced the army's effectiveness as potential deterrent along the Dutch borders.

In complying with the new regulations concerning the internment of foreign soldiers the Netherlands achieved two things. Firstly, it underscored its position as a neutral. By scrupulously upholding the terms of the 1907 treaty with regard to internment it made a very public reaffirmation of the status of that treaty and the international laws that, it hoped, would ensure that the Netherlands neutrality was respected. As the host for the 1907 Peace Conference, the importance of the Netherlands as a neutral nation of standing was also tied up in the status of the treaty. If it failed, then the standing of the Netherlands would also be reduced and it would be considered as just another small European neutral. Secondly, the internment of soldiers from both sides of the conflict gave the Netherlands a reason to maintain strong diplomatic contact with both sides of the conflict, on terms that it could control. Unlike the diplomatic talks over trade, this was an area in which the Dutch held all of the cards and could, to a large extent, dictate the policy. As Ogley has said, 'Survival, for neutrals is not merely a question of dissuading any belligerent from invading: it is also a question of resisting demands that are not compatible with neutrality.'²⁶

²⁶ Ogley, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.16

When war broke out in the summer of 1914 the Dutch were not expecting to be forced to intern so many foreign soldiers. During the initial mobilisation of the Dutch army, no thought was given to allocating any troops for guarding duties. It was only when the first trickle of Belgian and German troops crossed the border that any attention was given to the issue of internment. The first few internees, apart from testing the existing laws concerning internment, were of little diplomatic significance. The numbers were small; it was no great hardship to the Dutch to provide internment and no great loss in terms of manpower to either of the nations whose troops were interned. The sinking of the British ships the Hogue, Cressy and Aboukir in September 1914 provided the first indication that the diplomatic ramifications of internment could be significant for the Netherlands. The initial internment and then later release of the surviving British crew was a legal, political and humanitarian success for the Dutch government. The government was able to capitalise on the bravery and quick thinking of its merchant marine in saving so many of the sailors from the three sinking ships. The Dutch presented themselves as a neutral power willing to rush to the assistance of anyone in need, regardless of nationality. At the same time, by interning the survivors, they showed themselves to be a nation standing firm to the dictates of international law, unwilling to be swayed by mere sentiment or compassion. The swift release of the sailors once the government had had the chance to fully consider the legal situation only reaffirmed this position, especially as the sailors were released against the wishes of Germany. This incident, so early in the war, provided the Dutch with the means of underscoring their position as a country that would not favour either of the belligerent parties but would only act according to the law. In considering this, however, it should

also be noted that neither Britain nor Germany were likely to go to war over such a (for them) minor issue.

Had there not been the influx of so many internees following the fall of Antwerp in October 1914, then the impact of internment as a tool for promoting Dutch neutrality would have been very limited. Both sides had more to worry about than the fate of a few soldiers whose incompetence at map reading resulted in their internment. The internment of around 35,000 troops, however, upped the stakes quite considerably. The Dutch were fortunate that the proportion of nationalities involved facilitated the diplomatic approach that was best suited to supporting a position of neutrality. The bulk of the internees were Belgian, and not only had the Belgian government very little interest in their welfare, it was also in no position to take any action against the Netherlands even if it was unhappy with the treatment its troops received. The numbers of British and German troops were far smaller, and therefore far easier to manage, but the diplomatic potential was far greater. The presence in the Netherlands of both British and German internees had two advantages. Firstly it allowed for new diplomatic channels to be opened and to be kept open. No matter what else was happening between either the Netherlands and Germany or the Netherlands and Great Britain, neither of the two home nations could be seen to be abandoning troops that they had very publicly declared to have the same status as POWs. For the Dutch, the second advantage was that it could use these new diplomatic channels to promote its neutrality confident that, in this area at least, it would not be challenged. This public display of humanitarianism and neutrality was enhanced further in 1915 by the agreement to allow the exchange of wounded through Dutch ports, and the logical extension of this

in 1917 to allow POWs to be interned in the Netherlands. In providing a diplomatic conduit for Britain and Germany to meet and discuss the welfare of their POWs, both in the Netherlands and elsewhere, the Dutch were also adding to the reasons why it was indispensable as a neutral and should be allowed to remain neutral. Having made a case for neutrality (in certain types of conflict) Ogle goes on to talk about the advantages of having neutrals. Commenting on Swiss neutrality in World War Two he says, 'if there is to be successful mediation in a conflict, it must come from neutrals'.²⁷ A different country and a different war but the principle is easily applied to the Netherlands in World War One. It is arguable that Switzerland or Denmark could have fulfilled this role just as well. By 1917 both had some experience of internment, but in this instance Dutch geography worked to its advantage, situated as it was between Britain and Germany. Abbenhuis says 'without the credible means of ensuring that the Dutch government kept its promises, the country's neutrality would be deemed worthless'.²⁸ Internment provided a vehicle for the Dutch to prove their reliability and reaffirm their adherence to international law and unbiased neutrality.

Laporte argues that it was only the need to promote Dutch neutrality that made the Dutch government look after the internees to the extent that they did. He argues that had there not been a diplomatic advantage to internment, then the quality of life for the internees would have been far worse than it actually was. To a certain extent this argument is supportable, but it is weakened by the fact that Laporte has only concerned himself with Belgian internees and, certainly in 1914 and 1915 when the internment camps were being built and organised, the Dutch government had no need to appease

²⁷ Ogle, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century*, p.9 ?

²⁸ Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral*, p.263

the Belgian government. What is more convincing is Laporte's assertion that the Belgian government used the internees as a political tool in its public relations campaign against the Dutch government. Using the internees as a political rather than a diplomatic tool is one of the few accusations that Laporte does not level at the Dutch authorities, which makes his criticism of the Belgian government more interesting. Unfortunately, perhaps because of his own position as a military officer, Laporte does not distinguish between the policies of the Belgian government and those of the Belgian military. In times of war these may be indistinguishable, and certainly between 1914 and 1918 the Belgian army had other things to keep it occupied, but after 1918, as the Belgian government reverted to its 1914 attitude of derision and abandonment of the internees, there is no indication of the views of the military.

In seeking to increase their diplomatic influence with the belligerents by agreeing to accept a further 16,000 POWs, the Dutch government also ran the risk of alienating its own population. Initially very supportive of the decision to mobilize the army, and sympathetic to the plight of the refugees and internees that entered the Netherlands after the fall of Antwerp, the people of the Netherlands were now suffering the effects of a war that they were not officially involved in. A further 16,000 mouths to feed and 16,000 more beds to find was a difficult idea for the hungry Dutch to accept, especially when those 16,000 came from the two countries which the majority of the Dutch held responsible for their hardship in the first place. Lacking the national unity engendered in a country at war, the Dutch government had to consider not only their international position but also their standing at home. If the war, and its unlooked for impact on the Dutch, had continued for longer, then this would have become more of an issue.

As the war drew to a close and it became obvious that the Netherlands would not be forced to join the fighting; the diplomats that had navigated the Netherlands through four difficult years turned their attention to another issue. As the host nation for the last two peace conferences there was an expectation, in the Netherlands at least, that The Hague would be the venue for the post-war settlement. This was not to be the case. By losing out to the French, who wanted the conference to be held at Versailles, the Dutch failed to achieve the influential and important role in post-war peace talks that they had envisaged.²⁹ Worried by Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points and the priority he was placing on self-determination, the Dutch wanted to participate in the Peace conference not only because they saw the role of chief European peacemaker as their due, but also to ensure that if any self-determination was to be allowed then it should not be amongst the Belgians at the cost of any Dutch territory. Fortunately for the Dutch, Belgium was also sidelined at the Conference as being too small and insignificant and its wishes were also largely ignored. The American president's desire to lower trade barriers was another major worry for the Dutch who, after four years of hardship and trade embargos did not want to see control of their profitable colonies slip from their grasp at the last minute on a tide of new liberal legislation.³⁰ Had the post-war settlement been, essentially, the third Hague peace conference then the diplomatic activity that preceded it, the Netherlands' success in keeping both sides talking to each other only a short distance from the front lines would have been put into perspective. The 1917 German

²⁹ The British were also keen for the Peace Conference to be held in a neutral country. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, p.35.

³⁰ Van Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914-1918*, p.617-620. For a more detailed account of the Woodrow Wilson's impute into the peace conference see Macmillan, p.12. It is interesting, that in this comprehensive book on the months immediately after the end of the war, how infrequently the Netherlands is mentioned.

British agreement on POWs would, arguably, have been seen as a stepping-stone to the final peace treaty. With the eyes of the world in 1919 and since focused firmly on Versailles, Dutch diplomacy during the war has been relegated to a domestic issue rather than an international one. The Dutch quickly discovered that, post-1918, not being a belligerent was a disadvantage. Marginalised and largely ignored, their input into the raft of post-war legislation was to reflect on their main contribution to the war as a whole. A small, vulnerable neutral that knew a lot about internment.

~ Appendix i ~

Dutch Cabinet 1913-1919

Prime Minister

C. van der Linden (29.08.13-09.09.18)

**Jhr.Mr.Ch.R.de Beerenbrouck (09.09.18-
18.09.22)**

Minister of Foreign Affairs Jhr.Mr J.Loudon

(27.09.13-09.09.18)

Jhr.Mr.Dr.H.A.Van Karnebeek

(09.09.18-00.00.22)

Minister of Home Affairs

C. van der Linden (29.08.13-09.09.18)

Jhr.Mr.Ch.R.de Beerenbrouck

(09.09.18-18.09.22)

Minister of War

N.Bosboom (29.08.13-15.05.17)

Jhr.Mr.B.C.de Jonge (15.06.17- 00.00.18)

Minister of Finance

A.E.J.Bertling(29.08.13-24.10.14)

Mr.S de Vries Czn (09.09.18-28.07.21)

Mr.M.W.F.Treub (24.10.14-08.02.16)

“ (22.02.17- 01.09.18)

Minister of Law

Mr.B.Ort (29,08,13-00.00.18)

Minister of Agriculture,

Industry and Trade

Mr.M.W.F.Treub (29.08.13-19.11.14)

F.E.Posthuma (19.11.14-00.00.18)

~ Appendix ii ~

Foreign Representatives in the Netherlands 1914-1918

Germany

Ambassador	F.von Muller (01.1908-03.1915)
	R.von Kuhlmann (04.1915-10.1916)
	Dr.F.Rosen (11.1916-05.1921)
Military Attaché	Lieutenant-kolonel Renner
Naval Attaché	Korvettenkapiain Von Muller

Great Britain

Ambassador	Sir A Johnstone (12.1910-02.1917)
	Sir W.Townley (02.1917-1919)
Military Attaché	Colonel Oppenheim

Belgium

Ambassador	Baron A.Fallon (07.1910-05.1919)
Military Attaché	General Dossin

France

Ambassador

H.Allize

(08.1914-10.1919)

~ Appendix iii ~

List of Internment Camps

Belgian

Alkmaar	Aug 1914 only
Amersfoort	Oct 1914 - Dec 1914
Assen	Oct 1914 - Feb 1915
Gaasterland	Aug 1914 - Dec 1916
Harderwijk	Oct 1914 - Dec 1918
Heerlen	Aug 1915 - Dec 1918
Kampen	Oct 1914 - Jan 1915
Leeuwarden	Oct 1914 - Feb 1915
Loosduin	Oct 1914 - Aug 1916
Nunspeet	Feb 1915 - Apr 1915
Oldebroek	Feb 1915 - Aug 1916
Zeist	Nov 1914 - Dec 1918
Zwolle	Oct 1914 - Jan 1915

British

Gaasterland (Used for the crews of Cressy, Hogue and Aboukir only) Sep 1914

Groningen Oct 1914 - Nov 1918

Leeuwarden Aug 1914 only

German

Alkmaar	Aug 1914 only
Bergen	Aug 1914-Nov 1918

Special Camps

Urk	Detention camp for persistent Allied escapers used until mid 1917 but kept open but unoccupied until the end of the war.
Vlissingen	Multi-national prison camp within a normal prison.
Wierickerschans	Officers camp, initially British then German, later used to house POWs.

~ Appendix iv ~



The Netherlands and Belgium (1910)¹

¹ <http://etc.usf.edu/maps/pages/1800/1811/1811.htm> 3.October 2008

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