

The Netherlands and Anglo-German Relations

On the Influence of the Discussion About a Possible Inclusion of the Netherlands in the German Customs Union on the Relationship Between Great Britain and the German Empire, 1899-1906



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Many years ago I remember hearing that Prince Bismarck, on meeting the witty Dutch diplomatist Baron van Heeckeren at some German watering-place, put the following question to him: "I wonder whether your King would not agree to the incorporation of the Netherlands in the German Confederation? We would make him Commander-in-Chief of the German fleets." Baron van Heeckeren replied thus: "I scarcely think the King, my master, would consider that promotion."

William Lavino, Vienna Correspondent for *The Times*, 6 March 1902

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Abstract

Around the turn of the twentieth century, newspapers in the Netherlands and Germany openly debated the possibility of a customs union between the two countries. Such an economic union was generally assumed to be the first step towards a military alliance and perhaps even integration of the Netherlands into the German Empire. Through critically examining a large variety of sources, this thesis researches the influence of this discussion on Anglo-German relations and argues that it contributed greatly to growing antagonism between Great Britain and Germany during the years between 1899 and 1906. Although most Dutchmen were unwilling to enter into a customs union with Germany, the possibility triggered anxiety among the British, for whom the independence of the Netherlands was a traditional security principle.

Introduction

‘No Customs Union with Germany’ read the headline of *De Tijd* on Wednesday 19 July 1899.¹ The Dutch, catholic newspaper argued fervently against any economic union between the Netherlands and the German Empire. It had heard voices in favour of such an agreement from industrialists and tradesmen involved in the shipping on the Rhine. Despite acknowledging the possible economic benefits, *De Tijd* stated that one could not turn a blind eye towards the political consequences of a customs union with Germany. According to the newspaper, it would undoubtedly be the first step towards a military alliance and perhaps even full-scale integration into the German Empire, thus ending Dutch independence. Furthermore, other countries would instantly consider the Netherlands to have set aside its position of neutrality. Therefore, *De Tijd* concluded that a customs union would be ‘a disaster for the Netherlands.’²

The question of Dutch entry into the German Customs Union, the *Zollverein*, would be a recurring subject of heavy debate in the Dutch press until 1906, after which the subject would only occasionally appear. The discussion was not limited to the Netherlands, however. Journalists and publicists from Great Britain and Germany also got hold of the issue and did not shy away from voicing their respective opinions. The issue thus gained an international dimension and became a factor in European international relations. Simultaneously, the polarisation of Europe was starting to gain shape. In the twenty years between 1887 and 1907, the geopolitical map of Europe changed from a multi-polar system to a bipolar one organized around two alliance systems.³ Great Britain and Germany, the two most important neighbours of the Netherlands, were on opposite sides, since Britain was linked to France through the signing of the Entente Cordiale in 1904 and to Russia as a result of the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907. This alliance system did by no means directly cause the conflict that would eventually occur, but as Christopher Clark rightly puts it, it was ‘a crucial precondition for the war that broke out in 1914’, since it ‘structured the environment in which the crucial decisions were made.’⁴

¹ ‘Geen toverbond met Duitschland’, *De Tijd*, 19 July 1899. All translations in this paper from Dutch and German sources are my own.

² ‘Geen toverbond.’

³ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers. How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London 2012) 121.

⁴ Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 123.

Until ‘the guns of August’ started firing, the British and German peoples had never fought each other in a major war.⁵ Cultural, religious, dynastic and economic ties reinforced their traditions of political co-operation. For a long time, many people in Britain, especially conservatives, had regarded Germany as their ‘natural ally’ and the two nations had seriously discussed an alliance as late as 1901.⁶ Understanding what drove these two nations apart thus constitutes a fundamental part in understanding the outbreak of First World War in general. There exists, of course, an abundance of historical works investigating precisely that question. In most accounts of the pre-war Anglo-German relationship, however, a considerable dimension to that relationship often receives little attention: the Netherlands.

This paper investigates the significance of the discussion in the Netherlands concerning possible accession to the German *Zollverein*. To what extent did this discussion contribute to rising Anglo-German tensions in the years between 1899 and 1906? By nature of the country’s geographic location, the Netherlands were of immense strategic importance. The estuaries of the Rhine, the Meuse and the Scheldt all lay within Dutch territory. One great power increasing its influence over the Netherlands would undoubtedly provoke a response from another. Therefore, many historians have commented that, together with Belgium, the country constituted ‘the fulcrum of the balance of power in Western Europe.’⁷

With its hundred year anniversary, the First World War has gained widespread attention in recent years and spawned an array of publications, while already in 1998, one historian was far from exaggerating when he wrote that there are ‘far too many books about the First World War.’⁸ It is impossible for a single person to become familiar with everything that has been written on the subject. One can say, however, that when discussing the pre-war years, the tendency has largely been to focus on the countries that would end up as belligerents and all but ignore the small countries that remained neutral. For example, Paul Kennedy’s influential work *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, which is still the most prominent synthesis on the topic of growing rivalry between Britain and Germany, pays little attention to the issue of the Netherlands in this relationship.

In fact, until relatively recently, the topic of the international relations of the Netherlands before and during the First World War has stayed mostly under the radar. Even Dutch historians did little to improve this, some exceptions being C.B. Wels’s *Aloofness & Neutrality*, which includes broad studies on Dutch foreign relations and policymaking

⁵ The phrase is taken from Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York 1962).

⁶ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism 1860-1914* (London 1980) 211.

⁷ Amry Vandenbosch, *Dutch Foreign Policy since 1815. A Study in Small Power Politics* (Den Haag 1959) 3.

⁸ Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London 1998) xxiv.

institutions, and J.C. Boogman's short synthesis 'The Netherlands in the European Scene, 1813-1913.' Moreover, until the 1990s, research on these years was often almost exclusively done with the Second World War in mind, the assumption being that this period was only worthy of investigation in order to explain the naïve and idealistic attitude of the Dutch government towards Nazi Germany in the 1930s. This was particularly due to the influence of Loe de Jong, a Dutch historian well-known for his fourteen volume work on the history of the Netherlands during World War II. In the first two volumes, he described the early twentieth-century history of the Netherlands solely in the context of the country's defeat in 1940.⁹

The prominent three-volume work of Cornelis Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (The Netherlands in World War I), also suffers from this teleological view. Published in the early 1970s, the work was based on years of archival research by Smit, who had previously published many diplomatic documents from the Dutch and other foreign ministries. Smit has been widely praised for these source publications, which are of tremendous value for every historian researching the period. His narrative, however, never found much appreciation and has been sharply criticised for being too descriptive and for not taking account of economic factors and domestic affairs.¹⁰

Since the 1990s, various publications have tried to overcome Smit's shortcomings. Examples are Paul Moeyes, who with an accessible book argued convincingly that the First World War was also for the Netherlands a period of significant developments, and H. Pruntel's dissertation on the Anglo-Dutch relations.¹¹ Of particular importance has been *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande* (The First World War and the Netherlands), in which the German historian Marc Frey looks at the role of the Netherlands in the international system and how the country had to cope with the political and economic demands of the major powers. All these publications, however, focus on the events of the First World War itself and not on the years leading up to it.

A work that does centre on the pre-war years is André Beening's particularly enlightening dissertation *Onder de vleugels van de adelaar* (Under the Wings of the Eagle). It focusses on the German foreign policy towards the Netherlands, mostly from 1890 to 1914, and the question of Dutch entry into the German *Zollverein* forms a key component of

⁹ Ismee Tames, 'Oorlog voor onze gedachten.' *Oorlog, neutraliteit en identiteit in het Nederlandse publieke debat, 1914-1918* (Hilversum 2006) 12-14.

¹⁰ A.F. Manning, 'Nederlandse neutraliteitspolitiek', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 90 (1977), 122-126.

¹¹ Paul Moeyes, *Buiten schot. Nederland tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam 2001); H. Pruntel, *Bereiken wat mogelijk is. Besluitvorming in de Brits-Nederlandse betrekkingen, 1914-1916* (Enschede 1994).

Beening's analysis. Regarding Dutch-German relations, Horst Lademacher's more general, but impressive study *Zwei ungleiche Nachbarn* (Two Unequal Neighbours) also deserves to be mentioned. In both works, however, the British dimension is largely left out of the equation. A short work by Hermann von der Dunk does encompass the triangular relationship between Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, but he mostly depicts events from the Dutch perspective; that is, he rarely describes how the Netherlands figured in the foreign policy of Britain and Germany and influenced the Anglo-German relationship.¹² Therefore, to what extent the threat of German economic and political control over the Netherlands led to British concerns and thereby contributed to deteriorating Anglo-German relations has not yet been fully researched. Through focussing on the question of Dutch entry into the *Zollverein*, this paper makes a first attempt to fill this gap in the historiography.

Researching the influence of possible Dutch inclusion in the *Zollverein* largely presupposes that there was some trend of rising Anglo-German antagonism in the years leading up to the First World War to begin with. However, some recent publications have seriously questioned Paul Kennedy's conclusion in his aforementioned work that this was the case.¹³ These historians claim that France and Russia were far greater rivals to Britain, in the imperial domain especially, than Germany. Kennedy is above all criticized for his deterministic outlook, since in his view, Anglo-German rivalry made war principally inevitable. However, denying the inevitability of war between Britain and Germany does not require discarding the notion of Anglo-German antagonism altogether. After all, Kennedy provides ample evidence that tensions between the two countries did rise during the pre-war years and while these did not make a future conflict unavoidable, they did contribute in making war a possibility.

This explorative study aims to chart the potential of studying the Anglo-German relationship through both countries' relations with the Netherlands and, by focussing on the discussion about the *Zollverein*, offer some provisional conclusions. While still mostly relying on the primary sources published by Smit, some documents from the Dutch legation in London found at the Dutch *Nationaal Archief* have also been illuminating. This paper will first introduce the concept of growing Anglo-German antagonism during the pre-war years, detail the position of the Netherlands in the international system, and focus on Dutch-German

¹² Hermann von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel zwischen Kaiserreich und Entente* (Wiesbaden 1980).

¹³ Examples are Ferguson, *The Pity of War*; John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power 1874-1914* (London 1999). For a broad discussion on the relevance of Kennedy's interpretation of Anglo-German relations, see Jan Rüger, 'Revisiting the Anglo-German Antagonism', *The Journal of Modern History* 83 (2011) 3, 579-617.

economic relations. The discussion in the Netherlands and Germany about a possible Dutch entry into the German Customs Union will then be thoroughly discussed, after which this paper will turn towards Britain's perspective and analyse the British attitudes and responses.

Chapter 1

The International Context

The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism

On 9 February 1871, in a speech to the House of Commons, the British, conservative statesman Benjamin Disraeli reflected on the consequences of the Franco-Prussian War and proclaimed that ‘the balance of power has been entirely destroyed, and the country which suffers most [...] is England.’¹⁴ Though often cited as a prescient vision of a future war with Germany, Disraeli was primarily concerned about Russia.¹⁵ In fact, many people in Britain argued that a strong and united Germany was actually beneficial to Britain’s position in Europe.¹⁶ For example, the conservative weekly journal *England* called Bismarck ‘the greatest man in the world’, for he had ‘formed a great and invincible confederacy in the heart of Europe, which is a bulwark against the restless chauvinism of France and the perfidious aggression of St. Petersburg.’¹⁷ Therefore, during the 1870s and 1880s, Anglo-German relations, though far from completely harmonious, were relatively unproblematic.

This would change in the 1890s, however. Starting with the removal of Chancellor Bismarck from office, which the British Prime Minister Salisbury confidentially described as ‘an enormous calamity of which the effects will be felt in every part of Europe’, Kaiser Wilhelm II started to tighten his personal rule.¹⁸ However, the most important change, as far as foreign policy and relations with Britain are concerned, came in the summer of 1897, when the Kaiser appointed many new imperial officials, of which the most important were Bernhard von Bülow as State Secretary for Foreign Affairs and Alfred von Tirpitz as State Secretary of the Navy, the *Reichsmarineamt*. These men would affect a change in German foreign policy. From this point onwards, Germany ceased to proclaim itself as a saturated nation, which it had traditionally done under Bismarck, and inaugurated what was termed *Weltpolitik* (world policy).¹⁹

¹⁴ ‘Address to her Majesty on her most Gracious Speech’, http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1871/feb/09/address-to-her-majesty-on-her-most#S3V0204P0_18710209_HOC_17 (9 December 2015).

¹⁵ ‘Address to her Majesty.’ According to Disraeli, the prime consequence of the destruction of the balance of power was the untethering of Russia from the Crimean Settlement of 1856, which was supposed to prevent Russia from building up a fleet of warships in the Black Sea. See Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 136.

¹⁶ Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, 36.

¹⁷ Cited in *ibidem*, 79.

¹⁸ Cited in *ibidem*, 204.

¹⁹ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 198.

Proponents of *Weltpolitik* wrote that Germany stood at a crossroads. The country could either through intense effort of its own become a world power, or it would be forced to accept a position as a second-rate power. As Bülow put it, Germany could either be ‘the hammer or the anvil.’²⁰ Beyond the rhetoric, however, the precise purposes of *Weltpolitik* have been a subject of heavy debate among historians. Some, like Fritz Fischer, have viewed it as a German bid for world domination, while others, like Wolfgang Mommsen, have seen it as a policy that served a primarily domestic function.²¹ Regarding the rise of Anglo-German antagonism, however, British perceptions of *Weltpolitik* are perhaps even more important than what it precisely meant to Germany. Eyre Crowe, a contemporary British diplomat whose observations have often been cited, noted that it was ‘the openly avowed policy of Germany to make herself so strong that in all matters in which she considers German interests to be involved, she will have her own way.’²² However, the great German design was ‘in reality no more than the expression of a vague, confused, and unpractical statesmanship.’²³ In other words, the British perceived that Germany had huge ambitions, but were largely unsure as to how Germany would act in order to achieve those goals.

However, one clear and definite aspect of *Weltpolitik* was that Germany aimed at possessing a large navy. Tirpitz had told the Kaiser after his appointment in 1897 that ‘for Germany, the most dangerous enemy at the present time is England’ and, therefore, the former needed ‘a certain measure of naval force as a political power factor.’²⁴ It was a policy that contributed greatly to rising Anglo-German antagonism, since the British perceived their security and that of their empire to depend on their naval supremacy.²⁵ Though Germany never came close to achieving naval parity with Britain, many imagined this at the time to be a real possibility. The Dutch envoy in London wrote in April of 1900 that most experts predicted that ‘German and British naval strengths would offset each other’ within a few years.²⁶ Far from achieving British respect and securing concessions, Germany’s naval expansion was thus creating a lasting enmity.²⁷

²⁰ Cited in *ibidem*, 11.

²¹ See Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Düsseldorf 1962); Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Der autoritäre Nationalstaat* (Frankfurt 1990).

²² Cited in Charmley, *Splendid Isolation?*, 250.

²³ Cited in *ibidem*.

²⁴ Cited in Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, 224.

²⁵ Pruntel, *Bereiken wat mogelijk is*, 105.

²⁶ Nationaal Archief, The Hague, 2.05.44, Nederlandse Gezantschap /Ambassade in Groot-Brittannië (en Ierland tot 1949), 1813-1954 (henceforth: NL-NA-GB), inventory number 502, letter 30 April 1900, envoy Baron Gericke van Herwijnen, London, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Willem de Beaufort, The Hague.

²⁷ Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, 418.

The attempts to establish an Anglo-German alliance, which lasted until 1901, thus encountered a huge contradictory trend. Bülow and Tirpitz did not really want an alliance and the latter told the Kaiser that ‘a really honest and trustworthy Anglo-German alliance’ was irreconcilable with Germany’s naval expansion and ‘more or less [meant] the renunciation’ of it.²⁸ Joseph Chamberlain, Britain’s Colonial Secretary who had been the prominent campaigner for an alliance, had already remarked before the alliance talks failed that ‘if this idea of a natural alliance with Germany must be renounced, it would be no impossibility for England to arrive at an understanding with Russia or with France.’²⁹ The failure of establishing an alliance, therefore, meant that the relationship between the two countries further deteriorated.³⁰

Another contributing factor to Anglo-German tensions was that as the nineteenth century came to a close, Britain’s status as the world’s number one superpower was no longer unchallengeable. The country could not keep up with the speedy economic and industrial growth achieved in Germany and the United States.³¹ Therefore, while Germany was a country on the rise, Britain was relatively declining and consequently anxious about the future. Kennedy remarks that if any country besides Austria-Hungary wanted to freeze ‘the territorial and power-political *status quo*’, then it would have been Britain.³² Germany with her *Weltpolitik*, on the other hand, wanted to alter it.

All of the above contributed to a growing British conviction after the turn of the twentieth century that there existed a ‘German threat’ or ‘German challenge’ that had to be countered. Widespread fears about pan-Germanism strengthened the notion that Germany was Britain’s ‘most persistent, deliberate, and formidable rival.’³³ As Frey points out, the German policy of *Weltpolitik* combined with Germany’s economic success led to ‘a structural rivalry with Great Britain.’³⁴ This rivalry manifested itself in both countries’ relations with the Netherlands.

²⁸ Cited in *ibidem*, 226.

²⁹ Cited in *ibidem*, 234.

³⁰ Klaus Hildebrand, *Das vergangene Reich. Deutsche Außenpolitik von Bismarck bis Hitler 1871-1945* (Stuttgart 1995) 220.

³¹ Duco Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld. Buitenlandse politiek van Nederland* (Houten 2010) 56-57.

³² Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, 229.

³³ *Ibidem*, 253. For British fears about pan-Germanism, see for example ‘Pan-Germanism’, *The Economist*, 8 February 1902.

³⁴ Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 362.

The Position of the Netherlands

With six million inhabitants and a small army and fleet, the Netherlands were not a power of much significance in the international system of states around 1900.³⁵ Since the secession of Belgium, the Netherlands had fallen to the ranks of the small states.³⁶ Especially during an age where many political observers, like the German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, declared that ‘the time of the small state [was] over’, Dutch foreign policy took on a primarily defensive character.³⁷ Unable to defend itself against a major European power, Dutch national interest demanded a policy of neutrality. The country was determined not to enter into an alliance with any one of the great powers and desired to remain neutral if the interests of those powers were to conflict in Europe or overseas.³⁸ As the Dutch Foreign Minister Willem de Beaufort declared, the Dutch had to remain true to the rule laid down by the statesmen of the last period of the Dutch Republic: ‘A good understanding with all powers, but no close relations with any one of them.’³⁹

As C.B. Wels rightly comments, the Dutch could only lose by a change in the *status quo* in Europe.⁴⁰ Furthermore, due to the country’s enormous empire in the East Indies, a result of its former position as a world power, the Netherlands were territorially satisfied and did not need to participate in the scramble for overseas territories in which nearly all European states were taking part. The Dutch derived their sense of security from their geographic position. The Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta was an area of enormous strategical importance, which is why it was generally assumed that no great power would accept the acquisition of this area by another.⁴¹

It was not unusual for Dutchmen to take pride in their country’s strategical position, since it provided the former great power with a huge sense of purpose: the maintenance of the balance of power in Europe. For example, Jacobus den Beer Poortugael, a member of the Dutch Council of State, wrote that the Netherlands were ‘an indispensable chain in the European state system’ and that the interests of the other states demanded ‘the continued

³⁵ Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 20.

³⁶ C.B. Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality. Studies on Dutch Foreign Relations and Policy-Making Institutions* (Utrecht 1982) 43.

³⁷ Cited in Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel*, 12.

³⁸ Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality*, 57-60.

³⁹ ‘General Report on the Netherlands for the Year 1906, 15 April 1907’, in: C. Smit (ed.), *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland, 1848-1919, Derde periode, 1899-1919, Zesde deel, Buitenlandse bronnen, 1899-1914*, Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën, Grote serie 128 (The Hague 1968) (henceforth ‘RGP 128’), 244-252, 244.

⁴⁰ Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality*, 60.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

independence' of the Netherlands.⁴² Furthermore, he declared that 'we are of so much importance [and] have such an intrinsic power', that war would immediately break out if the Dutch abandoned their policy of neutrality and flocked to the side of one of the major European powers.⁴³

The Dutch also started to use ethical arguments to support their course of neutrality. A tendency arose to attribute this policy not to the Dutch national interest, but to what Wels has termed the 'mission of Holland.'⁴⁴ The Netherlands were supposedly predestined to be aloof and neutral, qualities eagerly associated with unselfishness. In contrast to most other nations, who were mainly guided by considerations of power politics, the Dutch foreign policy was determined by moral principles. This notion led to the conclusion that the Netherlands were of much greater importance in the world than other small states.⁴⁵ Though in some ways this mission of Holland appeared to be internationally recognised when the Permanent Court of Arbitration was established in The Hague after the First Hague Peace Conference in 1899, in reality, Dutch foreign policy was far less idealistic.⁴⁶

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, the Dutch policy of neutrality was implicitly pro-British. Britain had been intimately concerned with the creation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands after the Napoleonic Wars, which is why a special relationship developed between the two countries.⁴⁷ Although this relationship was severely damaged by the unwillingness of the British to prevent the separation of Belgium, it was still generally assumed that Britain would intervene in the case of an infringement of Dutch territorial integrity.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the Dutch had little choice. For the defence of their colonies in Southeast Asia, they were completely dependent on Britain, the mightiest sea power.⁴⁹

However, certain developments started to affect the implicit pro-British orientation of Dutch foreign policy. The unification and subsequent economic rise of Germany created a new situation for the Netherlands. The country was now confronted with an immensely powerful eastern neighbour.⁵⁰ In combination with the relative decline of Britain, this led many Dutchmen to wonder whether the Netherlands could still count on British support,

⁴² Cited in Pruntel, *Bereiken wat mogelijk is*, 136.

⁴³ Cited in *ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality*, 60.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 61.

⁴⁶ Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, 65.

⁴⁷ Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality*, 30.

⁴⁸ Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, 66.

⁴⁹ Wels, *Aloofness & Neutrality*, 101.

⁵⁰ Jacco Pekelder, 'Nederland en de Duitse kwestie', in: *Ibidem*, Remco Raben en Mathieu Segers (ed.), *De wereld volgens Nederland. Nederlandse buitenlandse politiek in historisch perspectief* (Amsterdam 2015) 59-80, 59-60.

especially since the Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902 appeared to make the Dutch East Indies an excellent target for Japanese expansionism.⁵¹

In 1901, the protestant politician Abraham Kuyper became Prime Minister of the Netherlands and during his time in office, which lasted until 1905, he strongly interfered in the country's foreign affairs.⁵² Kuyper was known to have pro-German sentiments and his trips to Germany caused international uproar, because the press interpreted these visits as signs that Kuyper was steering the Netherlands away from its policy of neutrality and that he was looking for closer relations with Germany. Several historians have been highly critical of Kuyper, claiming that his behaviour made the German General Staff decide to include the Netherlands in their war plans as the country was not going to resist a march through Limburg.⁵³ What Kuyper's true motives were remains subject to debate, but whether he wanted an alliance of some kind with Germany or not, he did not succeed in fundamentally altering Dutch foreign policy.⁵⁴

If anything, the outrage in the Dutch press about Kuyper's supposed attempts at an alliance with Germany serves to show how neutrality had been elevated as a sacred dogma. The early years of the twentieth century, therefore, may justly be viewed as 'the heyday of Dutch neutrality.'⁵⁵ The rise of Germany and relative decline of England meant in effect that neither of the two was able to sufficiently defend the Netherlands, which is why an alliance with neither of them was in the Dutch national interest. As Queen Wilhelmina wrote in 1905, a naval power like Britain was unable to defend the Netherlands from an attack by a major continental power like Germany, while the latter was unable to defend the Dutch harbours and the colonies in Asia, which is why she thought it was unwise and even dangerous for the Netherlands to enter into any kind of alliance.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, not everyone was convinced that Germany's navy would remain incapable of challenging the British. Furthermore, in the economic sphere, Germany became far more essential to the Netherlands than Britain and this was bound to have its impact on Dutch foreign policy.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, 63-66.

⁵² E.H. Kossmann, *De lage landen 1780/1980. Twee eeuwen Nederland en België. Deel I 1780-1914* (The Hague 1986) 352.

⁵³ For example, A.S. de Leeuw, *Nederland in de wereldpolitiek van 1900 tot heden* (Zeist 1936) 70.

⁵⁴ Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, 67.

⁵⁵ J.C. Boogman, 'The Netherlands in the European Scene, 1813-1913', in: J.S. Bromley and E.H. Kossmann (ed.), *Britain and the Netherlands in Europe and Asia* (London 1968) 138-159, 153.

⁵⁶ 'Nota van Koningin Wilhelmina, 29 april 1905', in: C. Smit (ed.), *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland, 1848-1919, Derde periode, 1899-1919, Tweede deel, 1903-1907*, Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën, Grote serie 102 (The Hague 1958) 465-467.

⁵⁷ Hellema, *Nederland in de wereld*, 66.

Dutch-German Economic Entanglement

A constant factor underlying Dutch-German relations around the turn of the twentieth century and beyond was the economic entanglement between the two countries.⁵⁸ As will be argued below, this entanglement would become the prime argument used in favour of Dutch entry into the German *Zollverein*. Trade between the two countries was indeed extensive. Even though Germany was obviously the stronger party, the economic relationship between the two countries was one of interdependence.⁵⁹ In 1900, the total trade between Germany and the Netherlands amounted to 47 percent of Dutch overall trade and to 24 percent of that of the Germans. These percentages had risen to 48 percent and 31 percent respectively by 1913.⁶⁰

The most important part of this interdependence was the commercial relationship between the Dutch seaport of Rotterdam and the German industrial district of the Ruhr. In his recent dissertation, historian Joep Schenk describes how in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the ongoing and rapid industrialisation and globalisation made entrepreneurs in the Ruhr area increasingly dependent on distant markets to sell their produce and obtain the necessary raw materials, which is why they searched for a reliable and accessible port. Thanks to the Rhine, Rotterdam would become by far the most important transit port for the Ruhr area, which enabled the latter to further develop its industry and the former to become the most significant port in continental Europe.⁶¹ For example, between 1900 and 1914, up to 75 percent of pig iron from the Ruhr area was produced from iron ore delivered via Rotterdam.⁶² Conversely, 68 percent of all goods passing through Rotterdam in 1900 either came from, or were destined for, Germany.⁶³

The Dutch-German economic interdependence caused feelings of insecurity in both countries. The construction of the Dortmund-Ems Canal can be seen as an attempt by the Germans to reduce their dependence on the good will of the Dutch government to continue to obey international agreements regarding free shipping on the Rhine. The canal was supposed to stimulate the growth of German ports like Bremen and Hamburg. However, traffic through

⁵⁸ Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel*, 17.

⁵⁹ Hein A.M. Klemann and Friso Wielenga, 'Die Niederlande und Deutschland, oder verschwindet die nationale Ökonomie? Eine Einleitung', in: Hein A.M. Klemann and Friso Wielenga (ed.), *Deutschland und die Niederlande. Wirtschaftsbeziehungen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Münster 2009) 7-17, 11-16.

⁶⁰ André Beening, *Onder de vleugels van de adelaar. De Duitse buitenlandse politiek ten aanzien van Nederland in de periode 1890-1914* (unpublished dissertation University of Amsterdam 1994) 144. Percentages calculated by myself.

⁶¹ Joep Schenk, *Havenbaronnen en Ruhrbonzen. Oorsprong van een wederzijdse afhankelijkheidsrelatie tussen Rotterdam en het Ruhrgebied 1870-1914* (unpublished dissertation Erasmus University Rotterdam 2015) 5-6.

⁶² Schenk, *Havenbaronnen en Ruhrbonzen*, 6.

⁶³ Hein A.M. Klemann, 'Wirtschaftliche Verflechtung im Schatten zweier Kriege 1914-1940', in: Klemann and Wielenga (ed.), *Deutschland und die Niederlande*, 19-44, 23.

the canal was severely hindered by twenty locks and a boat lift, which made it unable to effectively compete with the Rhine. Therefore, when the canal was opened in 1899, the Chamber of Commerce of Rotterdam concluded that the canal formed no danger to its interests.⁶⁴ Far more threatening were the German plans in 1905 to reintroduce levy duties on the Rhine. Strong opposition came not just from the Netherlands, but also from the Ruhr area and its Chamber of Commerce. The outbreak of the First World War eventually prevented these plans from being implemented.⁶⁵ These two attempts, however, show that the Dutch-German economic entanglement had profound political implications. Some Germans, also in government circles, felt a desire to politically control areas the country needed economically.⁶⁶ Inclusion in the *Zollverein* could be considered a first step in possibly achieving this.

⁶⁴ Schenk, *Havenbaronnen en Ruhrbonzen*, 304-307.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 313-316.

⁶⁶ Pekelder, 'Nederland en de Duitse kwestie', 68.

Chapter 2

The Discussion in Germany and the Netherlands

The discussion about possible Dutch entry into the German *Zollverein* that broke out in the summer of 1899 was remarkable for its scope, yet it was by no means the first time these ideas were put forward. Already in the 1870s, following the unification of Germany, various German newspapers pleaded for a customs union with the Netherlands.⁶⁷ For Germany, the advantages of such an economic (and perhaps even political) union were self-evident. Besides giving Germany better access to the sea and more control over the transit ports that her industry in the Ruhr depended upon, it also provided the Germans with access to the vast colonial possessions of the Dutch in Southeast Asia.⁶⁸ German control over the latter was even necessary, many Germans argued, because the Netherlands would prove to be too weak economically to maintain the Dutch East Indies.⁶⁹ However, racial motives were also invoked. The *Alldeutscher Verband*, or Pan-German League, which counted many political heavyweights among its members, considered the Dutch to be ethnic Germans who needed to be incorporated into the empire.⁷⁰ For instance, Ernst Hasse, a prominent member of the *ADV*, wrote that it was ‘incomprehensible how [the Dutch] could feel themselves to be a separate nation.’⁷¹ He argued that without incorporation of the Netherlands into the empire, Germany would be like ‘a house without a door.’⁷²

In the Netherlands, a customs union with Germany was only a sporadic issue. During times of economic depression, some Dutch industrialists secretly wished for their country’s entry into the *Zollverein*, because even though it ran counter to their ‘sense of nationality, [...] we must live and we want to work.’ These statements, however, were very rare and the subject only occasionally appeared in the press.⁷³ This would change in the summer of 1899, however. After several German newspapers had written of the desirability of a customs union between Germany and the Netherlands, it did not take long before some Dutch newspapers got hold of the issue. The *Haagsche Courant*, which was known for its pro-German stance, declared that the time for such a union had come and it called upon the entire Dutch press to

⁶⁷ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 80; Lademacher, *Zwei ungleiche Nachbarn*, 64-65.

⁶⁸ Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftepiel*, 14.

⁶⁹ ‘De gezant te Berlijn Van Tets van Goudriaan aan de Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken De Beaufort, 4 april 1899’, in: RGP 100, 47-48.

⁷⁰ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 192-195.

⁷¹ Cited in *ibidem*, 194.

⁷² Cited in *ibidem*.

⁷³ Cited in *ibidem*, 126.

speak out in favour of the idea.⁷⁴ This call led to a wave of publications and a host of prominent figures giving their opinions. German officials reacted with enthusiasm. Even though they did not expect concrete results from this press campaign, they deemed it useful that the Dutch news-reading public was clearly faced with their country's 'existing economic dependence on Germany.'⁷⁵ Furthermore, they viewed it as a sign that the Dutch feelings of hostility towards Germany, which these Germans diplomats had experienced throughout the decades following the German unification, had largely disappeared.⁷⁶ When discussing the article of the *Haagsche Courant*, the German envoy in The Hague wrote that the Dutch were finally starting to acknowledge where they had to search 'for their true friends [and] their natural comrades.'⁷⁷

A Dutch newspaper that was particularly ready to acknowledge this natural friendship between the Netherlands and Germany was the *Utrechtsch Dagblad*. Its editor-in-chief, Valckenier Kips, was infamous for his pro-German views and his criticism of Dutch neutrality. Described by Dutch historian Henk te Velde as a 'proto-fascist', he had already in 1896 advocated a military alliance between the two countries.⁷⁸ In 1899, his newspaper firmly supported the idea of a customs union. According to the *Utrechtsch Dagblad*, closer relations with Germany were necessary not just for economic reasons, but also because the Dutch colonies lay under threat from Great Britain.⁷⁹ Regarding the second argument, the timing could not have been better, because war erupted between Britain and the Boer Republics in South Africa in the fall of 1899.⁸⁰

The outbreak of the Boer War, which lasted until 1902, unleashed a storm of anti-British sentiment in the Netherlands. The Boers were largely descendants of Dutchmen that had settled in the colony established by the Dutch East India Company at the Cape of Good Hope in the seventeenth century.⁸¹ However dated the ties of kinship had become by 1899,

⁷⁴ Lademacher, *Zwei ungleiche Nachbarn*, 83.

⁷⁵ 'De Consul-Generaal te Amsterdam Gillet aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 23 augustus 1899', in: RGP 128, 9-11.

⁷⁶ Ibidem.

⁷⁷ 'De gezant te 's-Gravenhage Von Brincken aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 27 augustus 1899', in: RGP 128, 11-13. For a detailed discussion on the relationship between economic benefits and a reduced fear of Germany, see J. de Vries, 'De problematiek der Duits-Nederlandse economische betrekkingen in de negentiende eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 78 (1965), 23-48.

⁷⁸ Henk te Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en plichtsbefef. Liberalisme en Nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918* (The Hague 1992) 191; Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel*, 20.

⁷⁹ 'Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad van 29 oktober 1899', in: RGP 128, 22-26.

⁸⁰ Peter Henshaw, 'The Origins of the Boer War. The Periphery, the Centre and the "Man on the Spot"', in: Keith Wilson (ed.), *The International Impact of the Boer War* (Chesham 2001) 8-24, 20.

⁸¹ Martin Bossenbroek, 'The Netherlands and the Boer War. Their Wildest Dreams: The Representation of South African Culture, Imperialism and Nationalism at the Turn of the Century', in: Wilson (ed.), *International*

they were very real to contemporaries. For example, when the Dutch envoy in London, Gericke van Herwijnen, wrote about the ‘disaster’ that was the Anglo-Boer War, he continuously referred to the Boers as ‘the Dutch descendants’, implying that it almost felt as though the Dutch themselves were at war with England.⁸² The atmosphere in the Netherlands was described by Sir Henry Howard, the British envoy in The Hague, as ‘dreadfully and unreasonably anti-English.’⁸³

The war proved an opportunity for the German Empire to present itself to the Dutch in a positive light vis-à-vis the British. Since public opinion in Germany was also solidly in favour of the Boers, it was reasonable to think that the Boer War could bring the two nations closer together. The German envoy in The Hague, Friedrich von Pourtalès, wrote to Berlin that ‘nothing in the past few years has brought us and the Dutch closer together than the differences that we both have with England.’⁸⁴ The *Utrechtsch Dagblad* could not agree more. The newspaper commented in October 1899 that, at present, the Netherlands are unable to act against Britain, because ‘we know that the British whale will blow down our navy and continue on swimming with great satisfaction like nothing has happened.’⁸⁵ Therefore, a closer alignment with Germany was the only way for the Netherlands to stop the ‘Anglo-Saxon imperial lust for conquest’, concluded the newspaper.⁸⁶ It thus wholeheartedly embraced the political consequences of a Dutch entry into the German *Zollverein*.

Most other Dutch newspapers and commentators, however, rejected abandoning the Dutch course of strict neutrality, which according to many would be the automatic result of entering into a customs union with Germany.⁸⁷ Especially the catholic newspapers, like the aforementioned *De Tijd*, were vehemently opposed to entering the *Zollverein* and constantly put the dreaded image of a political union in the minds of their readers.⁸⁸ Herman van Karnebeek, a former Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs, observed that ‘a customs union cannot exist without close political alignment, which, of course, results in the loss of independence of the smaller party.’⁸⁹ Moreover, the enthusiastic responses in the

Impact, 123-139, 124. See also Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, *War of Words. Dutch Pro-Boer Propaganda and the South African War (1899-1902)* (Amsterdam 2012).

⁸² NL-NA-GB, inventory number 502, letter 21 November 1899, envoy Baron Gericke van Herwijnen, London, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Willem de Beaufort, The Hague.

⁸³ Cited in Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 23.

⁸⁴ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Pourtalès aan de Rijkskanselier Von Bülow, 6 december 1900’, in: RGP 128, 67-69, 68.

⁸⁵ ‘Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad van 29 oktober 1899’, in: RGP 128, 22-26, 26.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel*, 26.

⁸⁸ Lademacher, *Zwei ungleiche Nachbarn*, 84-85.

⁸⁹ ‘Uit de Pers’, *De Standaard*, 3 October 1899.

(pan-)German press only worsened these fears and German diplomats noticed that they had prematurely judged anti-German sentiments to have evaporated in the Netherlands.⁹⁰

Regardless of these feared political consequences, many people in the Netherlands were hesitant about a customs union with Germany on purely economic grounds. In an article published by the Dutch scientific magazine *De Economist* about a possible Dutch-German customs union, a whole range of experts offered their views and most of them were of the opinion that although some sectors of the economy might profit from such a union, it would not necessarily be beneficial to the Dutch economy as a whole. A customs union with Germany would force the Netherlands to abandon its policy of free trade and embrace German protectionism, since it was inconceivable that Germany would decide to change its policy, and most experts believed that protectionism was very harmful to ‘a small country with such an important export trade.’⁹¹ Many newspapers, including the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, agreed that German protectionism was ‘the greatest hindrance’ to the realisation of a customs union between the Netherlands and Germany.⁹²

There thus existed no majority in the Netherlands in favour of inclusion in the German *Zollverein*, which explains why the official Dutch foreign policy did not change as a result of the discussion.⁹³ The Dutch Foreign Minister Willem de Beaufort instructed the Dutch envoy in Berlin that, were he asked for the opinion of the Dutch government regarding a possible customs union, he was to reply that the idea had sprung exclusively from ‘the brains of some newspapermen’ and that the government ‘had not devoted her attention’ to these plans.⁹⁴

After the early months of 1900, the discussion in the Dutch press appeared to slowly fade away, but it intensified again in 1902 after the publication of articles by two influential Germans arguing for a Dutch-German customs union. Circumstances again appeared favourable, due to the Anglo-Japanese alliance of January 1902, which appeared to strengthen the threat to the Dutch East Indies.⁹⁵ The marriage between Queen Wilhelmina and the German Duke Heinrich von Mecklenburg-Schwerin in 1901 was also a confirmation that Dutch-German relations were very friendly.⁹⁶ Furthermore, as previously mentioned,

⁹⁰ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 227.

⁹¹ ‘Tolverbond tusschen Nederland en Duitschland’, *De Economist* 48 (1899) 2, 762-766, 763.

⁹² ‘Onze handelsstatistiek’, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 17 September 1899. For examples of other Dutch newspapers that agreed with this assessment, see ‘Een tolverbond met Duitschland’, *Middelburgsche Courant*, 10 October 1899; ‘Tol-unie met Duitschland’, *Leeuwarder Courant*, 12 October 1899.

⁹³ Lademacher, *Zwei ungleiche Nachbarn*, 90.

⁹⁴ ‘De Minister van Buitenlandse Zaken De Beaufort aan de gezant te Berlijn Van Tets van Goudriaan, 1 november 1899’, in: RGP 128, 682-683, 683.

⁹⁵ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 231.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 233.

Abraham Kuyper had become the Dutch Prime Minister in the same year and he was generally known for his pro-German attitude.⁹⁷ Once again, however, no consequences followed. The Dutch were generally not keen to reside ‘under German wings’⁹⁸, but the discussion lingered on.

Kaiser Wilhelm reacted with much enthusiasm when he heard that a Dutch-German customs union was openly debated and he ordered his Foreign Minister and later Chancellor, Bernhard von Bülow, to stimulate the discussion.⁹⁹ However, German officials soon recognised that ‘the Dutch national pride’ prevented the country from a political alignment with Germany.¹⁰⁰ They also noted that, even though tradesmen in Amsterdam and Rotterdam wanted closer economic ties, there was no majority among the Dutch population in favour of a customs union.¹⁰¹ Moreover, the German Foreign Ministry tried to halt the discussion in the (pan-)German press, witnessing how these articles stimulated anti-German sentiment. The many publications of members of the *ADV*, which unabashedly stated that Germany should take economic measures to force the Netherlands into the *Zollverein*, hardly contributed to making the Dutch eager for closer ties with Germany.¹⁰²

Therefore, the German government decided that caution was the best policy. The Kaiser wrote that they would ‘wait and study’ how the mood amongst the Dutch population developed.¹⁰³ Yet the German ambition was undeniably to establish a close connection with the Netherlands, in which the latter would not completely lose its independence, but would occupy a subordinate position. The Kaiser noted in the margins of a diplomatic report on the Netherlands that ‘the small planet must finally be inside the orbit of the greater one and belong to it, without losing its independent activity.’¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Von der Dunk, *Die Niederlande im Kräftespiel*, 23.

⁹⁸ ‘Nederland onder Duitsche vleugels’, *Leeuwarder Courant*, 17 May 1902.

⁹⁹ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 225.

¹⁰⁰ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Pourtalès aan de Rijkskanselier Von Bülow, 13 augustus 1902’, in: RGP 128, 78-82, 80.

¹⁰¹ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Brincken aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 27 augustus 1899’, in: RGP 128, 11-13.

¹⁰² Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 218.

¹⁰³ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Brincken aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 27 augustus 1899’, in: RGP 128, 11-13, 13.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

Chapter 3

Reactions from Great Britain

In 1912, the German writer Max Heinrichka envisaged in his book *100 Jahre Deutsche Zukunft* (Germany's Future in 100 Years) a final war between the German Empire and Great Britain, culminating in a German victory. What is most striking is that he imagined the two countries going to war over the Netherlands. Realising their economic dependence on Germany, the Dutch would have entered into an alliance with their eastern neighbour. According to Heinrichka, this was greatly upsetting to the British, who declared war on both countries, maintaining the alliance had destroyed the European balance of power.¹⁰⁵

Heinrichka's account was not prophetic in the sense that the coming Anglo-German war would break out over the Netherlands, but his judgement regarding British responses to a political alignment between Germany and the Netherlands was not very farfetched. After the turn of the twentieth century, Britain became increasingly concerned with the balance of power in Europe and a German incorporation of Holland was widely viewed as a catastrophic violation of that balance.

As noted above, the Netherlands, and the Low Countries in general, were of great strategic importance. A fundamental aspect of British security policy was that the Rhine-Meuse-Scheldt delta must not be occupied by a major European power, because the short distance to Britain made an invasion a serious possibility.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, ever since the days of Philip II of Spain, the Low Countries could rely on the support of England whenever they were threatened by the expansionism of a continental power.¹⁰⁷ As the British General Staff put it in a memorandum of April 1907:

The maintenance of the independence of the Low Countries – and with it the preservation of the balance of power in Europe – has ever formed a traditional feature of British foreign policy, and it is perhaps safe to say that no military problem has more frequently absorbed the attention and energies of the nation.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ I.F. Clarke (ed.), *The Great War with Germany, 1890-1914* (Liverpool 1997) 399-408.

¹⁰⁶ Pruntel, *Bereiken wat mogelijk is*, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ 'Our Position as Regards the Low Countries, Memorandum by the General Staff, 8 April 1907', in: RGP 128, 239-243, 239.

Furthermore, the Dutch colonies in Southeast Asia were also of immense strategic importance, because of their geographic proximity to the routes connecting Australia with India and the Far East. As a result, a study by the British government determined in 1905 that from the British point of view, it was ‘a distinct advantage that the Dutch islands should remain in the possession of a weak power.’¹⁰⁹ As previously argued, a customs union between the Netherlands and Germany was likely to be the first step in a process of further political integration, which is why it was perceived by the British as a threat to their security.

There was thus ample reason for the British to try to discourage the Dutch from entering the German *Zollverein*. British newspapers frequently took it upon themselves to warn the Dutch of German annexationism. For example, *The Times* of 16 February 1900 scornfully treated an article from the German newspaper the *Gegenwart*, in which the author, dr. Eduard von Hartmann, made a case for a Dutch-German customs union. *The Times* pleaded to ‘one of the oldest, proudest, and toughest nationalities in Europe’ not to so easily ‘surrender her birthright’, since she has historically been ‘the champion of civil and religious liberty, the home of art and civilisation.’¹¹⁰ Germany, on the other hand, was during those glorious days nothing more than ‘a welter of semi-barbarous feudal despotisms.’¹¹¹ According to *The Times*, the Dutch paid ‘far less in the shape of taxation’ and enjoyed ‘a degree of civil and personal liberty quite unknown under the regime of German bureaucrats and policemen’, which is why the Dutch should not freely enter into an alliance of any sort with Germany.¹¹² However, most Dutch papers, including the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant*, reacted with indifference to this praise of the Netherlands and the warnings of German expansionism, because the European power the Dutch feared most at this point was not Germany, but Britain itself.¹¹³

The immense Anglophobia in Netherlands that was caused by the Boer War made it very hard for the British to come across as sincere when warning the Dutch of German imperial ambitions. The British Prime Minister, the Marquess of Salisbury, had deprecated a war with the Transvaal (one of the Boer Republics) for precisely this reason. In a letter from 1897, he wrote that war would make the British ‘intensely unpopular in Holland’ and this might lead to increasing German influence over the Netherlands.¹¹⁴ The previously mentioned

¹⁰⁹ ‘Germany and the Dutch East Indies, 20 April 1905’, in: RGP 128, 213-216, 215.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Times van 16 februari 1900’, in: RGP 128, 31-33, 32.

¹¹¹ Ibidem.

¹¹² Ibidem.

¹¹³ ‘Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant van 17 februari 1900’, in: RGP 128, 34-36.

¹¹⁴ ‘Lord Salisbury to Lord Lansdowne, April 21, 1897’, in: Lord Newton, *Lord Lansdowne. A Biography* (London 1929) 145.

Henry Howard, the British envoy in The Hague, wrote that ‘no argument nor facts’ could divert the sympathy the Dutch felt for the Transvaal.¹¹⁵ He later reported to the Marquess of Lansdowne, the British Foreign Secretary, of a particularly embarrassing incident that occurred during the visit of the British King Edward VII to the Netherlands in February 1901. When Edward came ashore at Vlissingen, a large crowd sang the national anthem of the Transvaal.¹¹⁶

In this anti-English climate, warning the Dutch of German annexationist aims had little effect. However, the German envoy Pourtalès was not entirely correct when he stated that the only achievement of British warnings, like that of *The Times*, was that closer relations between the Netherlands and Germany were once again on the agenda.¹¹⁷ Those warnings made the Germans recognize that, as the German ambassador in London put it, the maintenance of the independence of the Netherlands will remain in the future ‘one of the prime principles of English policy.’¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the ambassador reported to the German Chancellor that France and Russia would also not stand idly by while a Dutch-German customs union was being created.¹¹⁹ Therefore, German officials tried to halt publications in the pan-German press, because no matter the intentions of the authors, such articles gave writers in Britain a welcome opportunity to warn the Dutch of German annexationism.¹²⁰ This happened, for instance, again in early 1902, when *The Times* gave enormous attention to a publication of the pan-German professor Ernst von Halle, who openly stated that it was Germany’s intention to absorb Holland, first economically, and then politically.¹²¹ The publications in the British press thus definitely had an effect, though not in the Netherlands itself.

However, it was not necessary for the British articles to affect the Dutch attitude towards a customs union with Germany, because, as argued above, the Dutch people as whole were not very eager to join the German *Zollverein* to begin with, regardless of the Boer War and the anti-English sentiments it incited. If the reports of the British envoy Howard accounted for anything, the British government was well aware of this. In none of his

¹¹⁵ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Howard aan de Foreign Secretary Salisbury, 18 juli 1899’, in: RGP 128, 167.

¹¹⁶ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Howard aan de Foreign Secretary Lansdowne, 25 februari 1901’, in: RGP 128, 168-169.

¹¹⁷ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Pourtalès aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 1 maart 1900’, in: RGP 128, 37-38.

¹¹⁸ ‘De Ambassadeur te Londen Metternich aan de Rijkskanselier Zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, 16 februari 1900’, in: RGP 128, 30.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Von Pourtalès aan de Rijkskanselier Von Bülow, 18 maart 1902’, in: RGP 128, 71.

¹²¹ ‘The Times van 6 maart 1902’, in: RGP 128, 200-204.

despatches did Howard give the slightest suggestion that the Dutch might willingly enter into a customs union with Germany. The Dutch Foreign Minister had personally told him in March of 1900 that ‘no such understanding is or ever was thought of in this country.’¹²² In a later despatch to Lord Lansdowne, it was Howard’s firm belief that:

the true Dutchmen would [...] prefer to remain just as he is, without any alliance or customs or commercial union of any sort, and to trust to the jealousies and opposing interests of other nations to preserve him from being swallowed up by his mighty Teutonic neighbour.¹²³

Howard acknowledged that there existed people in the Netherlands who thought that the country should abandon its course of neutrality, but he considered them to be of no political importance. Furthermore, of Dutchmen who expressed the opinion that their country should voluntarily be incorporated into the German Empire he wrote that they ‘are probably almost as rare as white blackbirds are said to be.’¹²⁴

The chief concern of the British, therefore, was whether the Dutch were able to uphold their neutrality vis-à-vis Germany, which made the Dutch military capacity a topic of particular interest. Luckily, the British military attaché in The Hague, Charles à Court Repington, judged the Dutch in 1901 to be ‘a stout, obstinate and uncompromising race, the most masculine people in Europe, though not the most attractive’, which made him conclude that the Netherlands would put up a fight when attacked by Germany.¹²⁵ However, the British did not expect outright war from Germany at a time when the rest of Europe was at peace. They were far more worried by ‘the slow, steady and silent infiltration of German ideas’, which formed a great danger for the national existence of the Netherlands.¹²⁶ The increasing economic entanglement might very well force the Dutch into a closer political relationship with Germany. As À Court put it, ‘the external danger is [...] not from any open blow, but from slow poison.’¹²⁷ As to the consequences for Britain of eventual incorporation of the

¹²² ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Howard aan de Foreign Secretary Salisbury, 6 maart 1900’, in: RGP 128, 167-168, 168.

¹²³ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Howard aan de Foreign Secretary Lansdowne, 4 september 1902’, in: RGP 128, 205-206, 206.

¹²⁴ ‘De gezant te ‘s-Gravenhage Howard aan de Foreign Secretary Lansdowne, 18 februari 1904’, in: RGP 128, 210-211, 211.

¹²⁵ ‘Report by Lieutenant-Colonel C. à Court on the Defence of the Netherlands, 28 August 1901’, in: RGP 128, 186-194, 194.

¹²⁶ ‘De militaire attaché à Court aan de gezant Howard, 19 september 1901’, in: RGP 128, 194-196, 195.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*, 196.

Netherlands by Germany, Howard's view was crystal clear: 'it would [...] constitute a national disaster for us.'¹²⁸

James Ellis Barker, author of an article from 1906 titled 'The Absorption of Holland by Germany', could not agree more. Barker complained that many British statesmen and political writers considered the Netherlands to be 'politically as uninteresting a country as is Luxemburg or the Republic of San Marino', while in reality it evidently occupied 'a more important strategical position than Constantinople.'¹²⁹ At this point, however, this charge could not be made against the British government. Alarmed by Howard's dispatches, the British Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) concluded in 1905 that 'an absorption of Holland by the German Empire [was] one of the possibilities of the future' and it investigated possible courses of action.¹³⁰ The changed attitude of British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour was astounding. In 1903, he had written to the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Earl of Selborne, that he did not think a German occupation of Holland 'fatal to this country.'¹³¹ During a meeting of the CID in July 1905, however, he thought that British interests determined that 'we could not view with indifference the establishment of a strong naval power in the Dutch ports.'¹³²

Anxiety about a German incorporation of the Netherlands converged with, and intensified, the more general fear of a growing German navy. The latter might also explain Balfour's change of heart, since what frightened nearly everyone in Britain who warned against a German takeover of Holland was the way in which that would contribute to Germany's naval build-up. Barker stated that Germany had 'practically no harbours which are suitable for her mighty navy', because Wilhelmshaven was too small and Kiel had an unfavourable geographic position.¹³³ However, the Dutch harbours would provide Germany with the necessary capacity to strike westward against Britain.¹³⁴ By taking over Holland, the Germans would obviously also acquire the Dutch navy, which at that point was of little

¹²⁸ 'Sir Henry Howard to Lord Sanderson, 24 August, 1905', cited in Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 28.

¹²⁹ James Ellis Barker, 'The Absorption of Holland by Germany', *The Nineteenth Century and After* 60 (1906) 25-38, 25, 36.

¹³⁰ 'Germany and the Dutch East Indies, 20 April 1905', in: RGP 128, 213-216.

¹³¹ Cited in Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism*, 426.

¹³² 'Extract from the Minutes of the 74th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 6 July 1905', in: RGP 128, 218-219, 219.

¹³³ Ellis Barker, 'The Absorption of Holland by Germany', 34.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

significance, but its power could increase tenfold through ample supply of German steel and coal.¹³⁵

Moreover, as *The Times* pointed out, the acquisition of the Netherlands meant ‘the incorporation with Germany of the population of skilled and hardy seamen, to whom Holland owes her glories in the past and no small part of her prosperity in the present.’¹³⁶ This was an element of enormous significance for the British, for while Germany had no significant maritime history, the Dutch had been a prominent rival of the British for a long time and their expertise would be an immense addition to Germany’s industrial might. Already in 1900, the Dutch envoy in London reported of a frantic English Member of Parliament who was under the staunch impression that the Netherlands were actively helping Germany with expanding her navy.¹³⁷ The Germans themselves were also keenly aware of the potential of Dutch seamen to the German navy. Kaiser Wilhelm was an immense admirer of the maritime history of the Netherlands, which is why he made the *Holländische Ehrenmarsch* (Dutch March of Honour) the official hymn of the German fleet.¹³⁸ About the Dutch fleet he wrote that it was ‘nothing, but we could make good use of the human material.’¹³⁹

For the British, German control over the Netherlands was thus a frightful prospect. As a possible inducement to prevent the Netherlands from entering the German *Zollverein*, the CID considered offering the Dutch a formal guarantee of integrity, much like how the great powers of the Concert of Europe guaranteed Belgian neutrality after the Treaty of London of 1839. To use the words of Balfour:

Although, jointly with four other powers, we guarantee the territorial integrity of Belgium, we are under no such obligation as regards Holland, whose independence is of even greater importance to this country.¹⁴⁰

A formal guarantee of integrity was never offered, but the British made it abundantly clear that a threat to the independence of the Netherlands would be a *casus belli*, because,

¹³⁵ Smit, *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 23.

¹³⁶ ‘The Times van 16 februari 1900’, in: RGP 128, 31-33.

¹³⁷ NL-NA-GB, inventory number 511, letter 14 February 1900, envoy Baron Gericke van Herwijnen, London, to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Willem de Beaufort, The Hague.

¹³⁸ Beening, *Onder de vleugels*, 179.

¹³⁹ Cited in Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 24.

¹⁴⁰ ‘Extract from the Minutes of the 74th Meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence, 6 July 1905’, in: RGP 128, 218-219, 219.

according to the General Staff, that independence was ‘of paramount importance to the future welfare of the British Empire.’¹⁴¹

The discussion about a possible customs union between the Netherlands and Germany thus made a political amalgamation of the two countries, ‘the beau ideal of German diplomacy’, a very serious prospect for the future.¹⁴² For the British government, the development of Dutch-German relations had become a leading indicator for Germany’s overall intentions.¹⁴³ This frightening prospect merged with British fears of Germany’s *Flottenpolitik*, which made Germany appear to form the greatest challenge to British interests. After asserting in a memorandum that Britain could not allow the harbours of the Netherlands to fall into the hands of a naval power who would pose a threat to Britain, the British General Staff concluded as follows: ‘That there is such a power, and that that power is Germany, requires no demonstration.’¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ ‘Our Position as Regards the Low Countries, Memorandum by the General Staff, 8 April 1907’, in: RGP 128, 239-243, 243.

¹⁴² Ellis Barker, ‘The Absorption of Holland by Germany’, 34.

¹⁴³ Frey, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande*, 29.

¹⁴⁴ ‘Our Position as Regards the Low Countries, Memorandum by the General Staff, 8 April 1907’, in: RGP 128, 239-243, 241.

Conclusion

The maintenance of the independence of the Low Countries is a traditional principle of British foreign policy and, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, this principle was very much present in the minds of British diplomats, journalists, and politicians when they discussed the Netherlands during the years between 1899 and 1906. Germany's *Weltpolitik* further strengthened this principle, since the excellent harbours of the Netherlands and the country's maritime population could greatly contribute to Germany's expanding navy. Therefore, Britain was determined to uphold Dutch neutrality, while Germany was keen to establish close relations with the Netherlands.

However, judging from how the discussion about a possible customs union between the Netherlands and Germany developed, the British had little to worry about. Even though some Dutch newspapers, like the *Haagsche Courant* and the *Utrechtsch Dagblad*, actively campaigned for inclusion of the Netherlands in the German *Zollverein*, the country's majority rejected the idea. Despite widespread anti-British sentiments as a result of the Boer War, most people in the Netherlands, including government officials, clung to the country's position of strict neutrality, which the Dutch national interest demanded. Furthermore, Germany was not going to directly force the Netherlands into an economic or political union, even though pan-German writers frequently expressed such desires. As my analysis of British sources has shown, the British were well aware of this, or at the very least, they did not expect Germany to attempt a forceful annexation of the Netherlands during a time when the rest of Europe was at peace.

What made the British anxious, however, was the economic entanglement between the Netherlands and Germany. To repeat À Court's statement, 'the external danger is [...] not from any open blow, but from slow poison.'¹⁴⁵ The economic interdependence motivated Germany to form some kind of union with Netherlands, while this 'slow poison' gave the Dutch increasingly less room to uphold their independence vis-à-vis Germany. Therefore, the mere existence of a discussion about a possible customs union between Germany and the Netherlands, since it was justified by the economic interdependence between the two countries, represented what Britain was most fearful about: a gradual, slow, yet seemingly inevitable takeover of the Netherlands by Germany.

¹⁴⁵ 'De militaire attaché à Court aan de gezant Howard, 19 september 1901', in: RGP 128, 194-196, 195.

Consequently, the discussion concerning possible Dutch entry into the *Zollverein* was a case where the interests of Britain and Germany fundamentally clashed and, therefore, it contributed greatly to rising Anglo-German tensions in the years between 1899 and 1906. Combined with Britain's more general fear of Germany's growing naval might, the discussion created an image in the minds of many British people of Germany as the country that formed the greatest threat to Britain.

With this paper, I have tried to explore the potential of studying the Anglo-German relationship through both countries' relations with the Netherlands. Further research could delve deeper into this subject by using more sources, British ones especially, for instance, the records of the British legation in The Hague at the British National Archives. The possible customs union between Germany and the Netherlands was, of course, just one of the many incidents in which the Anglo-German rivalry manifested itself with regard to the Netherlands. Therefore, future research could focus on other events, for example, the international reactions surrounding Wilhelmina's choice of husband or the diplomatic correspondence concerning the North Sea Convention of 1908, which was a German initiative with the ostensible purpose of maintaining the territorial *status quo* in North-Western Europe. Moreover, further research could broaden its scope and focus on the Low Countries in general, thus including Belgium in the analysis.

In the introduction, I briefly touched upon the debate concerning the relevance of Anglo-German antagonism for the outbreak of the First World War or even for the British decision to sign agreements with France and Russia. Though my research has not attempted to answer the question whether tensions with Germany determined the course of British policy, it is important to note that most historians who deny the importance of Anglo-German antagonism emphasise how frequently British and German interests did not clash and that France and Russia were far greater imperial rivals for Britain than Germany. My research has shown, however, that the Netherlands form an arena in which British and German interests did clash and where Germany emerged as a potential enemy of Britain. Therefore, when researching Anglo-German antagonism and debating the relevance of this for British foreign policy, the relations of both countries with the Netherlands should be acknowledged as forming an important component in the general relationship between Britain and Germany.

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