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# Kapitel 1: Internationales Spannungsfeld

Maartje Abbenhuis

On the Edge of the Storm?  
Situating Switzerland's Neutrality  
in the Context of the First World War



Historians often conceptualise the First World War as a «total war», a conflict in which the totalising effects of warfare eroded the distinctions between civilians and soldiers and in which whole societies were seconded to the needs of the military-industrial complex. The conceptualisation is an appropriate one, but it begs the question: Where does it leave the war experiences of neutrals? Should we consider neutral countries like Switzerland marginal to the war, sitting, as the theme of this collection suggests, on the edge of the storm? This chapter asks questions of neutrality in the period before and during the First World War and argues that only by fully integrating the history of neutrality and neutrals into the history of warfare can we begin to comprehend the totality of the between 1914 and 1918 conflagration.

The historian Hugh Bichenko defines the term «total war» as pertaining to a conflict in which «the whole population and all the resources of the combatants are committed to complete victory and thus become legitimate military targets».<sup>1</sup> In total war, the distinction between armed force and civilian population is either eradicated or becomes less clear. In total war, the principle that armed forces should only attack designated military-strategic sites erodes. Civilians become justifiable targets for the enemy, enabling their destruction and justifying increasingly violent behaviour towards them. Few wars in history meet the conditions of totality as Bichenko describes the concept. Thus, a «total war» for Bichenko is «a term to be used sparingly».<sup>2</sup> The general consensus among military historians, however, is that the First World War is one such war.<sup>3</sup>

If we accept Bichenko's definition, the «totality» of the First World War was defined by the commitments of the belligerents to victory at any cost. By implication, only those societies actually at war could participate in the war's totalisation. The belligerents were simultaneously the war's perpetrators and its primary victims (the targets of their enemy's total warfare campaigns). Bichenko's definition leaves historians of neutrality in a quandary: How can we write the history of the First World War and acknowledge its totality for many (although not all) of the belligerent societies involved, and leave room for alternate war experiences?

Between 1914 and 1918, could we say that neutrals like Switzerland were also involved in «total war»? Were neutrals impacted by the «total war» waged by others? And, if so, how should we describe those neutral war experiences? The First World War was a globalised industrial conflagration from which almost no society escaped unscathed, be it neutral or belligerent. But how people were affected by the conflict differed substantially depending on their geographic location and their level of military involvement. The longer the war endured, the likelihood of a person being drawn directly into the war's maelstrom of violence, revolution and upheaval increased exponentially.

I do not wish to revise the idea that the First World War was a «total war». The descriptor is a perfect adjective for the 1914–1918 conflict. But I do want to argue that by looking only at the belligerents to make sense of the parameters and impacts of the conflict as it totalised, historians miss a vital piece of the story. For the First World War did not start out as a «total war». It developed into that reality over time: as an increasing number of states ended their neutrality and joined the war and as the great power belligerents expanded their military violence, heightened their economic warfare, militarised the world's seas and oceans and devastated the global economy. My argument is that we can only fully understand the totality of the First World War if we integrate the history of neutrals and neutrality in it and acknowledge that as non-belligerents, neutrals were key actors in the globalisation of the war and its violence.<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch professor of military history, Wim Klinkert, grapples with similar questions. He argues that the vital distinction between a neutral state and a belligerent one has to be maintained: that the difference between a belligerent being «at war» militarily and a neutral «waiting» for (or «expecting») to become involved in a military conflict is essential. He argues that successful neutrals had a war experience but that their war experience was distinctly different from that of the belligerents because the neutrals did not enter into combat, suffered very few military casualties and endured limited military damage. At best, neutrals were indirect military agents in the war and should not be classified as the war's primary victims. They experienced the military impact of the conflict either tangentially or as vicarious witnesses. The war existed for them but only at a distance. As such, Klinkert argues that for the neutral Dutch, the First World War was not a «total war».<sup>5</sup>

Instead, Klinkert ascribes the term «total mobilisation» to the war experiences of the Dutch, retooling Ernst Jünger's idea of *totale Mobilmachtung* to make his case.<sup>6</sup> Klinkert is very careful to stress that the Dutch endured many of the same wartime developments and privations as civilians in belligerent societies, including the militarisation of everyday life (and the mobilisation of large numbers of citizen-soldiers), the imposition of restrictive rationing and distribution measures, heightened state control over the lives of citizens, an influx of refugees and foreigners and high levels of economic insecurity. But the Dutch did not go to war. They did not have to deal with the grief of innumerable military casualties. They did not see their cities bombed into oblivion, their homes torched or their lives and livelihoods end. Only rarely did they experience the inherent violence of total war (for example, when a belligerent aeroplane accidentally dropped a bomb on a Dutch village, when a loosened sea mine exploded on a Dutch beach, or when a Dutch fishing vessel was lost at sea due to military operations conducted there). For Klinkert, then, the Netherlands' neutrality differentiat-



ed the country from the rest of wartime Europe, indicating that the Dutch had a different kind of war experience. Klinkert agrees with Bichenko: total war cannot apply to a neutral.

Klinkert's argument is an important one and can be extended to other neutrals as well (Switzerland included). While defending the principle that the neutrals in the First World War deserve and need to be studied, Klinkert also insists that the distinctions between neutrals and belligerents should be preserved. I agree: neutrals were not belligerents and their war experiences were (by and large) quite different from most belligerent societies. The danger of accepting Klinkert's premise, however, is that it risks marginalising the neutrals to the edges of the war and potentially denies them a degree of agency in the conflict. It tends to assume that because the «military war» happened outside neutral borders the neutrals' role in the conflict was peripheral. Leaving the neutrals out of the mainstream history of the war or removing them to the edges of the storm, makes their war histories exceptional. It also suggests that neutrality was an exceptional response to warfare in general.

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that there was no such thing as exceptional neutrality in 1914 (not even for Switzerland), that neutrality was an expected and desired response for states going into the war and that the totalisation of the First World War should be considered within the framework of the collapse of the viability of nineteenth-century conceptions of neutrality. For neutrality did not have the same meaning attached to it in 1918 as it did in 1914. The war transformed the ways in which belligerents conducted their warfare and the ways in which non-belligerents could survive a military conflict. In the process, the war altered the global balance of power and mitigated the application of neutrality in international affairs.

With very good reason, the Swiss consider their history as a neutral country exceptional. Charting it from its inceptions in the early modern era to the present, neutrality has had extraordinary impact on Swiss national and cantonal history. This chapter is not going to revisit or engage directly with that vast historiography. I am not a historian of Switzerland. However, my research on the uses, applications and conceptualisations of neutrality in the period 1815–1918 suggests that Swiss neutrality in the «long» nineteenth century and during the First World War was neither extraordinary nor exceptional.<sup>7</sup> Or to put it slightly differently: although Switzerland was an exceptional state with a unique past (and a particular and unique national history), its neutrality was neither exceptional nor unique during these about hundred years. Its neutrality would become unique in part because of the changes to the international system brought about during the First World War. The point is particularly important for when the First World War broke out, the Swiss state behaved in very similar ways to other



Exceptional Swiss neutrality? Europe and the neutral states 1914 at the outbreak of war  
(Source: Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, ZMSBw).

neutral states and did so within a framing of neutrality that was founded on international legal precepts, rights, obligations and precedents.

We commit the historical sin of anachronism if we apply our twentieth-century bias towards neutrals and neutrality in analysing the nineteenth-century world and the Great War that brought that century to a dramatic and disastrous close.<sup>8</sup> For in the European world that evolved in the aftermath of the Congress of Vienna (1815), neutrality underwent a transformation. It no longer operated as an exceptional status in time of war as it had during the early modern era. Neutrality would undergo another transformation during the First World War itself. Charting the longer-term history of neutrality highlights just how flexible neutrality is (and was) as a concept that moulds itself to and is moulded by the international system in which it operates.

Between 1815 and 1914, in all the wars of the world, there were always more neutrals than belligerents. Some of these neutrals were neutralised by great power decree (like Switzerland and Belgium), others volunteered their neutrality as a long-term position (like the United States, the Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands), but most declared their neutrality at the outbreak of war. They were occasional neutrals.

After 1815, most European governments, in fact, took care to announce their declarations of neutrality when others went to war. This fact ensured that the «long» nineteenth century was an age of limited war, by which I



mean do not that the conduct of particular wars were militarily limited (although they sometimes were) but rather that their geo-strategic and economic reach was purposely restrained and restricted. Only the Crimean War (1853–1856) involved more than two great European powers but even this conflict did not extend much beyond the Crimean Peninsula, the Russo-Ottoman border regions and the Baltic Sea. Importantly, in all these wars, there was almost no distinction made between the expected behaviour of neutral states. That is to say, it did not matter if a country was permanently or voluntarily neutral or a great or small power: the same expectations existed in terms of their relationship with any belligerents, to the global economy, to the laws of war and neutrality, and to each other.

Nevertheless, neutrality remained a contested idea – it was not always welcomed or supported – but its internationalist values were on the rise. Nineteenth-century neutrals were often seen to do «good» in the world. Neutral states facilitated humanitarian aid in time of war. Their existence promoted peace and international stability. They offered viable options for advancing international order, transnational cooperation, and the regulation of international law. And they provided essential services to mitigate the impact and spread of war, including «good offices», mediation and arbitration. The Swiss delegate at the first Hague peace conference of 1899, Édouard Odier, for example, referred to neutrals as *pacigérants* («the managers of peace») and deemed neutrals to have a particularly important role in stabilising world affairs.<sup>9</sup> By 1900, there certainly were a lot of long-term and voluntary neutrals about. In the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), for example, all of Europe professed its neutrality, as did the United States, all of Latin America and most Asian governments, including China and Korea. The neutrality of both these countries was complicated by the military conduct of the war.

In a world where war was an acceptable choice for any government, the nineteenth century made not going to war an acceptable choice as well. By the early twentieth century, in fact, the only legitimate choice for war between supposedly «civilised» states was in defence of vital interests.<sup>10</sup> For those states that opted for neutrality (in contrast to those whose neutrality was a permanent reality), the choice of non-belligerency often came with benefits: protecting trade with other neutrals and in non-contraband goods and to profit from not having to make the choice to go to war. Neutrality aided industrialisers, imperialists, entrepreneurs and those seeking to advance the inter-connectedness of the world. Britain's on-going neutrality particularly guaranteed the freedom of the seas and protected the global movement of ships, people, resources and ideas. Nineteenth-century globalisation thrived on the reality of limited war and global neutrality.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, through the course of the nineteenth century, neutrality developed into an «international good». Anglo-European states proudly

adopted neutrality and imbued their assertions of nationhood with neutral values. For example, the Belgian politician and jurist, Édouard Descamps, noted in 1902 that neutrality was a «natural vocation» for Belgium, situated as it was between the might of France and Germany, helping to sustain the political equilibrium in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Dutch projections of their national virtue focussed on the internationalist, cosmopolitan, liberal and anti-militarist values promoted by their neutrality in Europe and the wider world.<sup>13</sup> Often, these projections were commercially self-serving.

Because the choice to avoid war was deemed valuable by the great powers, its regulation in international law was prioritised at the second Hague peace conference of 1907. The experience of the Russo-Japanese War in particular impressed on the great powers that if they wished to take full advantage of neutrality, they needed greater recognition of neutral rights (as opposed to belligerent rights) in the international arena. This conference created a comprehensive, if controversial, set of rules that neutrals and belligerents were to apply in time of war. Most of them related to the regulation of economic warfare, the defence of territorial sovereignty and the requirement for neutrals not to give military assistance to belligerents. The concept of impartiality was less well defined in the conventions, although the idea of neutrals «not giving undue favour» was firmly entrenched. All the great power attendees, Germany included, looked to influence the shape of these Hague rules. They did so to benefit as much from the regulations when they declared themselves neutral as when they were at war. And, by and large, they applied those regulations fastidiously for profit and stability. For example, during the two Balkan Wars fought between 1911 and 1913, the neutrality of the world's industrial states ensured both a steady supply of arms to the warring factions and enabled the great powers to mediate and bring the conflicts to a speedier end.<sup>14</sup> Altogether then, neutrality was a most useful tool for diplomacy and statecraft in the nineteenth-century age of limited war. On the eve of the First World War, neutrality was a respectable, practical and much-used international norm.

The Great War ended neutrality's golden age as surely as it collapsed the nineteenth-century international order. In the process, the First World War transformed the meaning and applications of neutrality. This was as true for Switzerland as for any of the other states. The implications of this statement are numerous and profound. Although on the eve of war in 1914, neutrality was a stable and recognised international reality and (arguably) more stable than it had ever been in the history of war, peace and international relations, by war's end in 1918, neutrality was no longer a stable reality or much valued in the international system (although it had some value).<sup>15</sup> The countries that managed to maintain their neutrality during the war did so not as much by upholding the rules, regulations and expectations attached to neutrality in international law as they did by negotiating



their on-going relationships with the belligerents. The diplomacy of neutrality and the maintenance of a «neutral (and impartial) face» increasingly defined the politics of the relationships between most neutrals and belligerents. The legal parameters of neutrality continued to matter, but they were often negotiated. The cultural interpretation of neutrality gained ground.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that neutral states and their people were victims of the competing demands of the enemy camps was a common and important one within the neutral countries themselves. So were attempts at promoting the on-going humanitarian and internationalist functions neutrals performed in the international system and for the belligerents. To this end, the work of the International Red Cross came to take on greater relevance as did the «good offices» neutral states performed in representing enemy interests in belligerent countries. In other words, throughout the war, neutrals were active agents and promoters of their non-belligerency and advocated that their neutrality offered essential services to the warring states. From the neutral governments' perspective, the neutrals were essential agents of the war and helped to mitigate and limit some of its totalising impacts.

However, such professions of the virtues of neutrality came up against increasingly hostile responses. It did not take long for the belligerent press (on both sides) to depict neutrals as wanton war profiteers or as shirking from international responsibility. In a «just war», of course, there is no escape from doing the right thing. How could a neutral stay neutral when the very future of the world and its civilisation were at stake? How could a neutral not fight the «good fight»?

These oppositional perspectives on the value of neutrality were part of a much larger public and transnational investigation into the nature of the war and the post-war world order. The horrors of the First World War were exposed to the world's press (belligerent and neutral) and thus to the world's opinion makers. Public perceptions of who was fighting on the side of «right» and «justice» mattered within belligerent and neutral countries alike. The fact that all the major belligerents, and many of the smaller powers too, engaged in decisive press campaigns in neutral states suggests just how important the war for the «hearts and minds of neutrals» was and how integral a sense of global awareness was to contemporary ideas of war. Of course, a neutral could become a belligerent (and many did), so influencing their populations' perspectives on the war was an essential tool of war.<sup>17</sup> To that end, the media war was a signal of the totalising impact of the war. Above all, the media war suggests that neutral space was a conceptual and intellectual theatre of war.

Increasingly, the opinion that neutrality was no longer a feasible or viable position for a state to adopt also grew in the belligerent states. In 1915, the Irish playwright Sir Bernard Shaw commented that neutrality was «utter humbug».<sup>18</sup> He was not alone. That same year, another Irishman, judge

James Creed Meredith, responded to Spain's declared neutrality in the most scathing tones:

*«A nation [...] that has refrained from expressing the slightest concern in the ultimate issue of the struggle [of war] and avoided indicating the least sympathy with any belligerent however outraged [cannot be] entitled to be heard with particular respect on the conclusion of peace.»<sup>19</sup>*

In 1918, the German international lawyer Alex Lifschütz argued a similar point that the «end of neutrality» was nigh and any neutrals that continued to exist should do so as passive and uninvolved in world affairs. They certainly should not have any right to decide the shape of a post-war international system.<sup>20</sup> The Italian Luigi Carnovale went even further, arguing that neutrality amounted to passiveness and selfishness.<sup>21</sup> At war's end, the League of Nations' charter attempted to outlaw neutrality as contrary to the interests of global peace. Collective security would, so the argument went, guarantee international stability better than nineteenth-century style diplomacy supported by unreliable neutrality declarations. The nineteenth-century conception of neutrality fell victim to the demands of industrialised total war.

Through the course of the war, the expectation that neutrals could continue as neutrals in the way that they had grown accustomed to before 1914 ended. The exigencies of a global war involving all the world's major industrial powers (especially after the United States ended their neutrality and entered the war in 1917) altered the international and domestic realities for all states and most peoples, neutrals included. Nineteenth-century conceptions of neutrality, embedded in principles of balancing power, limiting wars and maximising the economic and imperial gains made by keeping the seas open for business, had to adapt to the realities of total war, the closing of borders, the militarisation of the world's waterways and the conduct of global economic warfare. In other words, this total war was total in part because it muddled the distinctions between belligerents and non-belligerents: they were all affected in fundamental ways by the war.

To that end, scholars of neutral nations, ideas and experiences during the First World War need to keep in mind the shifts in values and expectations attached to neutrality during the war both domestically and internationally. Neutrality was never a domestic reality alone: it was always embedded in international relationships, be they political, social, economic or cultural. They also need to keep in mind that neutrality was not a unique position. A large part of Europe and the world declared its neutrality in August 1914, although a much smaller number of governments remained neutral in 1918. Above all, it is imperative that scholars of the war acknowledge the global environment of the conflict. Perhaps the easiest way to consider



how relevant neutrality was to the global theatre of war is to consider that there were only two types of states in the war: ones that were either belligerent or neutral.

I agree with Wim Klinkert that there were obvious differences between neutrals and belligerents during the First World War, but, I would argue, what neutrals and belligerents had in common was far more important. They were all involved in some vital way in the industrial total war that engulfed the world. In other words, neutrals did not exist outside the war but were very much agents in the war. Their relationships with the belligerents and with other neutrals made a significant impact on the conduct of the war, including its strategic, economic, military and political, humanitarian, diplomatic and cultural elements. From this perspective, it seems unnatural and incomplete to write a history of the war without the neutrals or without discussing the roles played by neutrality and belligerency. The totality of the war is inexplicable without the neutrals. As much as the limited wars of the nineteenth century were defined by the place and conduct of neutrals in them, as much can the parameters of total war during the First World War be delineated by the role played by neutrals.

Of course, it is important that no two neutrals were quite the same: Switzerland was not the Netherlands and nothing like Argentina. Samuël Huizinga and Johan de Hertog, for example, make a persuasive case for considering the «many neutralities of the First World War». But that is not an argument for studying each outside the context of the others. For where there were many neutralities, there were also «many belligerencies».<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the societies that remained neutral through the war tended to approach the post-war world differently from those that had become belligerents.<sup>23</sup> The post-war order was in large part shaped by the belligerents' expectations of collective security. The neutrals, including Switzerland, had a difficult time in safeguarding their neutralised position in that new order. In fact, if you are to believe the British Foreign Office, neutrality could not exist in the League of Nations era at all. It declared in 1929 «there can be no neutral rights for there can be no neutrals».<sup>24</sup> This world of collective security presented Switzerland, as the only remaining permanent neutral, with unique challenges. At this stage, it is worth quoting the international lawyer, Lassa Oppenheim's prediction about permanent neutrals in 1906: «Neutralised States in existence – namely, Switzerland, Belgium, and Luxembourg – are a product of the nineteenth century only, and it remains to be seen whether neutralisation can stand the test of history».<sup>25</sup> The First World War suggests that it could, but it left Switzerland in a precarious and unique position.

Oppenheim's statement offers further weight to the argument that the history of neutrals in the First World War is essential at every level of analysis, be it social, cultural, political, military or economic. Such history has

transnational application. The military history of Switzerland in the First World War should, therefore, have an impact on the military history of the war more widely. Above all, any study of the neutral Swiss in the war underpins an understanding of what this conflict meant as a «total war» and offers an opportunity to fully integrate the war history of neutrals into the history of the war.

When we integrate neutrality into the mainstream history of the war, it brings out numerous developments. Firstly, it brings out the role neutrals played as cogs in the economic war: which might result in studies looking at differing interpretations of the morality of neutrality, for the First World War also returned neutrality to a «just war» compass and invoked the notion of immoral neutrality and profiteering. Secondly, a study of neutrals in the war highlights how important neutrals were as humanitarian agents, not only in terms of the Red Cross, the internment of belligerent soldiers, aid to prisoners of war and prisoner-of-war exchanges, but also in terms of «good offices» and reporting on excessive state violence and genocide (for example, the Armenian genocide might have gone undocumented were it not for neutral commentators in the Ottoman Empire).<sup>26</sup> Thirdly, integrating neutrals would highlight that neutral territory had eminent geo-strategic significance and is an essential part of the military history of the conflict. The entry into the war of neutral Greece, Persia and the United States, for example, changed the global scope of the military conflict, but so did the use of neutral territory (be it in Switzerland or elsewhere) for espionage.<sup>27</sup>

Such approaches to integrating neutrals into the narrative of the First World War help to signal the heightened stakes for victory of the belligerents. It proffers a context in which to understand how the war totalised. That is to say, by focussing on the belligerents' relationship with neutrals, we can chart how the checks and balances of the nineteenth-century international system broke down between 1914 and 1918 and reiterate just how hard it was in the post-war era to create a stable international system. It would also illustrate that the history of the neutrality of states that became belligerents was as important as the history of the neutrality of the states that remained neutral. The neutral histories of Italy, China, Romania and Greece, let alone the United States, are as important to understanding the war as the history of their belligerency.

Neutrality was an essential element of the history of the First World War. Switzerland was a key part of that history and its experiences should be integrated into the war history more generally. Above all, the war was a total war as much as it was a war of neutrals. Or, as William Mulligan argues: «Peace was at the centre of the First World War, providing meaning to the conflict.»<sup>28</sup> As Mulligan also argues: during the war, every government had to frame their policy making within the public sphere. Any measures taken (be it by a belligerent or neutral government) had to be



«justified against the political and moral principles at stake in the war», which as Jean-Jacques Becker suggests were increasingly nationalised and aggressive.<sup>29</sup> In that environment, neutrality's value teetered and recovered with immense difficulty after 1918. Neutrals were no longer the world's *pacigérants*. They did not manage the peace. Or, as the British commentators T. H. Lawrence and Malcolm Carter suggested in 1915:

*«Neutrals, and all who care for neutrality, are faced by the question whether hostilities may be carried on without regard to neutral rights, or only according to the rules that create and protect such rights. The importance of the matter can hardly be exaggerated. Those who deal with it must first make up their minds whether they desire the international society of the future to be organised and governed in the interests of war or of peace.»*<sup>30</sup>

Such connections leave us with the exciting possibility to do transnational research and comparative analysis beyond comparing belligerents with neutrals. Integrating neutrals into the 1914–1918 story offers the potential to truly globalise the history of the First World War.

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- 26 With thanks to David Monger for this essential point.
- 27 C. f. Wylie, Neville: «The Research of Neutrality: Coming in from the Cold and out of the Shadows» (unpublished) Keynote Address, 2017 Neutrality Conference – Lessons from the Past and Visions for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Complutense University Madrid, 2017.
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