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978-0-521-15362-1 - European Neutrals and Non-Belligerents during the Second World War

Edited by Neville Wylie

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*Introduction: Victims or actors? European neutrals
and non-belligerents, 1939–1945*

Neville Wylie

Neutrality has been one of the most enduring features in the history of international relations. The desire of individuals, groups or states to stand aside from the conflicts that convulse their neighbours is a natural one. Self-preservation and the wish to avoid the deprivation and hardship that so often accompany wars generally prevail over the temptation to enter the fray. Although various attempts have been made to outlaw war from international relations, war has remained an accepted, common, and perhaps even natural way for states to pursue their interests on the international stage. In these circumstances, the recourse to neutrality has generally been considered an entirely legitimate and appropriate form of behaviour. Neutrality's impact on modern history has thus been a profound one. It has helped shape the conduct of international affairs from the 1790s to the Cold War: from Jefferson's declaration of US neutrality, to the 'spectre of neutralism' in Europe in the early 1950s, and the emergence of Third World non-alignment in the 1960s and 1970s.

The pervasiveness of neutrality in international relations has not, however, encouraged people to look upon it with affection. Machiavelli, the fifteenth-century Italian philosopher, strenuously counselled against it, warning that 'the conqueror does not want doubtful friends [while]... the loser repudiates you because you were unwilling to go, arms in hand, and throw in your lot with him'.¹ Six hundred years later, John Foster Dulles, United States secretary of state, substantiated Machiavelli's claims: neutrality was, he warned on 9 June 1956, 'except under very exceptional circumstances... an immoral and shortsighted conception'.² Historical writing on the Second World War has tended to

¹ N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, cited in Efraim Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States* (London, 1988), 1.

² Cited in Jürg Martin Gabriel, *The American Conception of Neutrality since 1941* (Basingstoke, 1988), 185–6.

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reflect this mood. The neutrals have been painted as immoral free-riders, ready to benefit from the successes of one side or another but unwilling to contribute actively themselves. At their worst they amply confirmed Chateaubriand's caustic description of the Swiss: 'neutral in the grand revolutions of the states that surround them, they enrich themselves by the misfortunes of others and found a bank on human calamities'. At the other end of the spectrum, neutrals have been depicted as naïve simpletons, who mistakenly assumed that by reiterating the mantra of neutrality they might lull the warring factions into respecting their wishes. Only rarely are they seen in a positive light, like 'gallant little Belgium' in 1914, standing Canute-like before the consuming evils of barbarism and symbolising the last vestiges of international decency.

The caricaturing and general neglect of neutrality in histories of the Second World War stem in part from the influence exerted by the writings of the principal protagonists. To these men, writing shortly after the war, the great issues had all been decided on the battlefield or in the allied conference halls. Victory had not turned on their success in playing to the neutral gallery in Europe. Historians have tended to remain wedded to the issues that impressed contemporary observers. Neutrality's abysmal record in the war – only five states avoided being sucked into the conflict – appeared to confirm neutrality as an anachronism to the modern world, or at least to modern warfare. As a consequence, few historians saw the neutrals as subjects worthy of serious attention.

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that many of the assumptions that governed attitudes towards the neutrals were misplaced. Victory in 1945 may indeed have been one the Allies had to fight hard for, but the need to resort to total war in the first place in part arose from their failure to win the diplomatic contest while the war remained a purely European affair. It was during this period that the British, their French allies, and their supporters across the Atlantic may have squandered the chance to tackle the German menace by capitalising on their moral superiority and the sympathies of the neutral gallery. Even after the fighting intensified and expanded over the second half of 1941, diplomatic manoeuvring in Europe did not cease. International relations continued, and the neutrals, courted and cajoled by the belligerents, were clearly central to this process. However much events between 1939 and 1945 might then, at one level, revolve around belligerent concerns, we would be wrong to confine our study of the period to an examination of only those powers actively engaged in the fighting. Moreover in scripting the neutrals into the story, we would be mistaken to view them as simply appendages to

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the military struggle. Clearly account must be taken of their substantial economic, political, and military contribution to the fighting, but this was by no means the sum total of their activity during the five and a half years of war. The war was one of many factors which demanded the attention of neutral statesmen after 1939, and its importance was by no means foreordained. With this in mind, it is worth recalling that the neutrals were not always mere victims, powerless to resist belligerent demands. The neutrals not only *chose* to stay out of the war, they also *chose* how to define and conduct their neutrality thereafter.

The current book places fourteen neutral and non-belligerent states under the spotlight.³ Its aim is not so much to uncover the neutrals' place in the actual fighting, but to explain what the war looked like for those states standing on the 'touchlines of war'. Why, did these states believe that a policy of neutrality provided the best means of securing their national interests? How did their domestic circumstances affect their estimation of events on the international stage? Why, ultimately, did some neutrals end up being put to the sword, while others appeared consciously to fall on it, and others still passed through the tumult with their territorial and political integrity preserved?⁴

By 1939 the neutrals could point to a rich and sophisticated corpus of international public law to define their position. They had the right to defend their borders by force, the right to trade with both camps in goods of a non-military character, and the right to maintain communications with all sides. Above all, however, they were obliged to treat the belligerents with strict impartiality, not only in their commercial dealings but also in preventing their territory from being used for military purposes or acting in such a way as to favour one side over the other. These principles had been enshrined in the 5th Hague Rules of War in

³ For a brief discussion of the principal countries not covered in the book, see Appendix.

⁴ The number of books dealing with a broad range of neutrals is small. Arnold and Veronica Toynbee (eds.), *The War and the Neutrals* (Oxford, 1956), is a good 'first cut'. The conference papers collected by L.-E. Roulet, *Les Etats Neutres Européens et la Seconde Guerre Mondiale* (Neuchâtel, 1985) are excellent, as are some of the short essays published by the University of Caen: *L'année 40 en Europe* (Caen, 1990), and the conference papers collected under the editorship of Jukka Nevakivi, *The History of Neutrality / L'Histoire de la neutralité* (Helsinki, 1993). Jerold M. Packard's synthesis, *Neither Friend Nor Foe. The European Neutrals in World War II* (New York, 1992) is rather impressionistic. Christian Leitz's, *Nazi Germany and Neutral Europe during the Second World War* (Manchester, 2001) appeared as this book went to press, but his ideas are summarised in 'Les aspects économiques des relations entre l'Allemagne nazie et les pays neutres européens pendant la seconde guerre mondiale', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 194 (1999), 7–28. For general studies on neutrality, see Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States*; A. B. Fox, *The Power of Small States* (Chicago, 1959); Alan T. Leonhard, *Neutrality: Changing Concepts and Practices* (Lanham, 1988), and Roderick Ogley, *The Theory and Practice of Neutrality in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1970).

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1907 and represented the cumulative experience of nearly a century of learned discussion and state practice.⁵

If the basic rules governing the application of ‘neutrality’ were relatively straightforward the same could hardly be said for non-belligerency, a concept that Mussolini mischievously conjured up to explain Italy’s ambiguous position in September 1939. In its essentials, the concept harked back to the form of neutrality common in the eighteenth century in which neutrals were effectively allowed to do as they pleased and discriminate against those belligerents they thought were in the wrong. It drew its rationale not from abstract legal principles, but from the state’s capacity to convince the principally aggrieved party that its interests were best served with the *status quo*. In the last resort, a non-belligerent’s strength rested on the functioning of the balance of power. Non-belligerency was, then, what states made of it, and its implications had to be worked out as the war progressed. For Mussolini, it allowed Italy to retain her ideological and political alignment with the Axis, while stopping short of either full belligerency, a situation for which Italy was ill prepared, or strict neutrality, a position which Mussolini found repugnant. Vichy France, Spain, Turkey, Egypt, and the Argentine can all be considered ‘non-belligerent’ at various times in the war. The term could equally be applied to the United States, after the passing of the Lend Lease legislation in March 1941, and the Soviet Union, before Germany’s invasion in June 1941. In all these cases, the states’ individual strategic, political, and economic resources allowed them to establish their own position, unimpeded by the constraints of strict neutrality. Yet, despite the clear differences between the two concepts, non-belligerency and small-state neutrality nevertheless occupy the same position in international relations. In both cases, the defining issue is the relationship between the state and the belligerents. There was therefore considerable overlap between the two concepts, and in practice ‘aggrieved’ belligerents frequently chose to afford non-belligerent states the same legal entitlements as they gave to neutrals. Indeed, in some cases non-belligerents were treated significantly better than their neutral counterparts.⁶

One of the points borne out in the chapters which follow is the sheer variety of neutral ‘cloaks’ donned by European states between 1939 and

⁵ For a survey of the law of neutrality see Stephen C. Neff, *The Rights and Duties of Neutrals. A General History* (Manchester, 2000).

⁶ After the summer of 1940, for example, Britain allowed Spain to accumulate stocks of blockaded goods equal to two and a half months’ domestic requirements; the neutral Swiss and Swedes on the other hand had to make do with rations based on two months’ supplies.

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1945. Whatever its different cut and colour, it is clear that the institution of 'neutrality' was largely inadequate in providing for the basic needs of these states in an era of ideological and total war. The reason for this apparent failure can be traced to three developments. The first concerns the changing nature of modern warfare. It is one of the bitter ironies of history that progress towards the codification of neutral rights by the turn of the twentieth century coincided with technological and military developments which would ultimately overwhelm the fragile legal edifices within less than a decade. The First World War began with the violation of two 'permanent neutrals,' Belgian and Luxembourg, and by the time it ended fighting had spilled over to affect nearly every aspect of neutrality. Neutral ships were requisitioned, torpedoed, and forced to follow routes prescribed by the belligerents, their cargoes were seized as contraband, and their firms subjected to enforced rationing and trade discrimination. It was not just the expansion of warfare that precipitated the sudden collapse of neutrality but, as Geoffrey Best has shown, the general withering of self-restraint on behalf of the belligerents over all aspects of their military conduct. Once one belligerent crossed the Rubicon, others soon followed, and even those who mourned the passing of a golden age quickly found that the advent of total war left precious little opportunity to put the clock back. All too often the pursuit of military advantage was used to justify the abuse of neutral rights. War fighting after 1914 showed little regard for the rights of those wishing to stand aside, irrespective of the clarity with which these rights had been enunciated less than a decade before.⁷

Disquieting though the First World War had been for the neutrals, it proved merely a foretaste of the misery that was to befall them after 1939. Further military and technological developments between the wars ensured that when war returned to the continent the neutrals found it almost impossible to insulate themselves from the corrosive effects of the fighting. Maintaining control of their economic destiny was perhaps the highest hurdle. The problem partly lay in their heightened importance to the warring factions. Germany's close economic ties with south-east Europe, coupled with the enormous pressures exerted by total war after 1941, meant that the neutrals' manufactures, raw materials, financial resources and facilities were substantially more valuable to Germany than they had been quarter of a century before. Their ability to resist German

⁷ Geoffrey Best, *Humanity in Warfare. The Modern History of the International Law of Armed Conflicts* (Oxford, 1980).

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demands was likewise reduced by the scale of Germany's victories in the first years of the war. Economic relations with the Allies were little better. The blockade was a cherished weapon in Britain's depleted armoury, but in fact all sides quickly developed a level of sophistication in their economic warfare which far outstripped anything the neutrals had been forced to endure before. By the middle of 1943 Portugal, Spain, and Switzerland each had well over one thousand companies 'black-listed' by the Allies for collaborating with the Axis. The Swedes, though more fortunate, still had over five hundred names listed by the second half of 1944. To make matters worse, the neutrals' willingness to meet Allied demands, forgo economic advantages, and introduce restrictions on their trade with the Axis was diminished by the enduring effects of the Depression. The social and political unrest of the 1930s, added to memories of the dislocation that occasioned the return to peace in 1918, persuaded most neutral officials, businessmen, and financiers to err on the side of caution.⁸ Some neutrals may well have lived up to Chateaubriand's caustic judgement, but for many exploitation of the war's business opportunities was neither a question of ethics nor of commerce, but simply a way of maintaining political order at home and the socio-economic structures upon which that order relied.

The emergence of air power in the inter-war period further undermined the utility of neutrality after 1939. Air power made neutrals part of the strategic landscape. Britain's ability to strike the Ploesti oilfields in Romania from bases in Greece worked against Athens' attempt to keep Germany at arm's length in the spring of 1941. Likewise, the Turkish government never really overcame Moscow's suspicions that it had connived in the Anglo-French plans to bomb Russian oil installations at Baku during the Phoney War. At the other end of Europe, the mere existence of the airfield at Ålborg in northern Jutland was used to justify Germany's pre-emptive occupation of Denmark on 9 April 1940. Even when neutrals avoided being drawn into the belligerents' strategic plans, air warfare aggravated their political relations and exacerbated the already huge disparities between their military forces and those of any potential aggressor. Three days after the war began, Berlin ominously announced that neutrality would only be respected if governments provided for the adequate defence of their airspace.⁹ None of the neutrals

⁸ See Nils Ørvik, *The Decline of Neutrality, 1914–1941* (London, 1971, 2nd edition) and Hans A. Schmitt (ed.), *Neutral Europe between War and Revolution, 1917–1923* (Charlottesville, 1988).

⁹ Some neutrals blatantly departed from their obligations in relation to aerial overflights. Madrid turned a blind eye to Italian use of its airspace in bombing Gibraltar and happily repatriated Axis

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possessed the necessary equipment to mount a credible air-defence system and over subsequent years most suffered the indignity of having their neutrality repeatedly violated by belligerent aircraft traversing their territory. Germany's threat could not be ignored, nor the possibility of Hitler using the Luftwaffe to punish any neutral that stepped out of line. For all neutral governments, the fate of Rotterdam and Belgrade was a sobering reminder of the cost of failure.¹⁰

The last military development to erode neutral sovereignty after 1939 was the emergence of 'irregular warfare'. Neutral states had traditionally provided fruitful environments for intelligence gathering. While this could occasionally lead to embarrassment, on the whole so long as the belligerents' activities were not directed against the host state, neutral governments were usually prepared to turn a blind eye.¹¹ 'Irregular warfare', including subversion, 'psychological warfare', and sabotage, was, however, a different proposition, not just because it represented another stage in the escalation of total war but because it further eroded that vital, but increasingly fragile, distinction between belligerent and neutral. The 'fifth column' was used to devastating effect by Germany in the Low Countries in May 1940; both sides subjected the neutrals to a barrage of propaganda, through newspapers, newsreels, and radio broadcasts, with the aim of influencing public opinion and bending neutral governments to their will.¹² As the war progressed, the neutrals were used as sanctuaries for mounting covert military operations into enemy territory and on occasion became operational theatres in their own right. Britain's hand in the *coup* that ousted Prince Paul in March 1941 is the most outstanding example, but Salazar's discovery in early 1942 of secret British networks in Portugal showed how even those neutrals enjoying good relations with the belligerents were not immune from the threat of subversion.¹³

It was not, however, merely the expansion, radicalisation, and intensification of warfare that undermined neutrality before the Second World

crews who were forced down on Spanish soil. The Irish afforded the same facilities to the British, while denying them – like the Spanish – to the opposing side.

¹⁰ These fears played a part in Portuguese anxieties over allowing the British onto the Azores islands in August 1943, and Turkish reluctance to enter the war in 1943 and early 1944.

¹¹ Dutch claims to neutrality were damaged by the Abwehr's seizure of two British agents who were lured to the Dutch–German border, together with Dutch security officials, in November 1939.

¹² See Robert Cole, *The War of Words in Neutral Europe* (London, 1989).

¹³ David Stafford, 'SOE and British Involvement in the Belgrade Coup d'Etat of March 1941', *Slavic Review*, 36/3 (1977), 399–419; Antonio Telo, *Propaganda e guerra secreta em Portugal 1939–1945* (Lisbon, 1990), 104–7, and Neville Wylie, 'An Amateur Learns his Job'? Special Operations Executive in Portugal, 1940–1942', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 36/3 (2001), 455–71.

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War. Two events in the inter-war period eroded the basic assumptions that sustained neutrality's status as an acknowledged and respected institution in international relations. The first was the emergence of 'internationalism', symbolised by the creation of the League of Nations in 1919, which saw a reversion to the medieval ideas of a 'just war' and at a stroke cast neutrality in a war against aggression as not merely inappropriate but positively immoral. Neutrality was clearly out of place in an age when peace was considered indivisible and security deemed the responsibility of the entire international community. The collapse of collective security in the mid-1930s triggered a general drift towards neutrality, but the fifteen-year experiment in liberal internationalism which preceded this did nothing to improve neutrality's standing after its debacle in the First World War, and eroded the confidence of those small western European states who had most to gain from the reinforcement of neutral rights in time of war.

The corrosive effects of the League's internationalism on neutrality paled into insignificance in comparison with the assault inflicted by the new authoritarian ideologies. It was the appearance of aggressive political extremism, with its attendant ideas of perpetual conflict, survival of the fittest and elevation of the *Volk* or class above all else, which ultimately made neutrality the threadbare garment that it was for most of the Second World War. Fascism, National Socialism, and Communism all explicitly challenged the 'accepted norms' of international relations and rejected the principles of restraint and 'balance' that were essential for the survival of small-state neutrality. All three, in their own fashions, embraced ideological warfare during the Second World War – a concept that not only entailed the jettisoning of humanitarian standards on the battlefield, but also involved harnessing the airwaves, newspapers, and movies to propagate their ideological beliefs abroad. While all the neutrals tried, with varying degrees of success, to accommodate Italian, German, and Soviet wishes, it was Hitler's National Socialism that posed the greatest threat and confronted them with a challenge that few could meet. Hitler's racial ambitions entailed merging the Nordic races and Swiss-Germans with the Aryans of the Reich, and subordinating all other peoples, especially those in the Balkans, to their will. Politically, National Socialism was more exclusive than Soviet Communism or Italian Fascism. The march to create a thousand-year Reich had little time for such arcane ideas as neutrality. 'It was not the neutrals or luke-warms,' Hitler insisted, 'who make history.' Those whom destiny had summoned had to answer the call: he who was not for Nazi Germany was against her.

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In such a world, it was not sufficient for the neutrals simply to adhere to The Hague's – increasingly incongruous – 'rules': they had instead to be unfailingly impartial in their statements, sentiments and press reporting. This was clearly an impossible task, even for those neutral governments prepared to go to the limits in controlling public expression. Endeavouring to live up to these intolerably high standards after June 1940 became a consuming concern for all neutrals.

One of the striking features of European neutrality after 1939 was the neutrals' failure to capitalise on their numerical strength. In the eighteenth century, when the modern laws of neutrality were first crystallised, neutrals had habitually formed 'leagues of armed neutrality', often under the patronage of a benevolent Great Power. Though by no means an unqualified success, there is little doubt that the practice served these states well. From the 1950s, neutral and non-aligned states likewise benefited from joint action, with both groups successfully developing common sets of ideas and practices that helped insulate them from the pervasive influence of the two Superpowers. Collective neutrality was, however, largely absent during the Second World War. The benefits of forging regional neutral blocs had long been recognised. The Oslo pact (1930), Balkan entente (1934), and Luso-Spanish treaty (1939) all in their way looked towards the emergence of neutral zones and sought to gain international endorsement for their efforts.¹⁴ Part of their difficulty lay in the absence of Great Power sponsorship. The one practice of his Tsarist predecessors Stalin chose not to emulate was their promotion of 'neutral leagues' or advancement of international law, and while most neutrals, at one time or another, appealed to Washington for assistance, the Roosevelt administration ultimately showed little interest in anyone's neutrality other than its own. The various Balkan projects ultimately fell victim to Bulgaria's refusal to renounce its revisionist ambitions and the anxiety most felt towards encouraging a resurgence of Turkish influence in the region.¹⁵ Though more internally cohesive, the Oslo pact suffered from a lack of agreement over which of their overbearing neighbours posed the greatest danger. Russia's attack on Finland momentarily cemented public opinion behind the concept of 'Nordic solidarity' but none of the governments was willing to promote the idea, least of all Stockholm,

¹⁴ The Oslo group emerged in late 1930 and eventually consisted of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Finland. Although primarily concerned with economic matters, the group became a forum for political action by the mid-1930s, actively promoting neutral rights and making some efforts towards coordinating defence planning. See Ger van Roon, *Small States in Years of Depression: The Oslo Alliance 1930–1940* (Assen, 1989).

¹⁵ The Balkan entente, formed in 1934, comprised Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, and Greece.

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whose geographical position and resources ultimately gave it the decisive voice. The neutrals remaining after June 1941 sought to expand their trade with each other but no concerted efforts were made to coordinate their activities, except on a humanitarian level, although even here the initiatives were often marked by a sense of competition as much as cooperation. The opening of the Allied propaganda offensive against them in April 1944 encouraged all the neutrals to pay more attention to each other's activities, but apart from wolfram exports from Iberia, despite Allied suspicions to the contrary there was little overt coordination of policies between the different neutrals.¹⁶

The institution of neutrality, in which so many European states had sought sanctuary by 1939, was thus a much less robust institution than that which had entered the First World War a quarter of a century before. The practicalities of modern warfare, with its increasing confusion of combatant and non-combatant status; belligerent and non-belligerent distinctions; the experiment in liberal internationalism, with its implicit assault on the validity of neutrality; and finally the emergence of aggressive authoritarian ideologies in Russia, Italy, and above all Germany resulted in the erosion of those diplomatic norms, values, and beliefs which had underpinned the classical neutrality of the nineteenth century. Few states could claim that their neutrality was guided by anything other than political pragmatism. In the majority of cases, the neutral proclamations in September 1939 sounded hollow when voiced by statesmen who had either made Geneva their second home for nearly two decades or whose societies found Bolshevism and Hitler's pact with Stalin so demonstrably repulsive.¹⁷ Moreover, the role that neutrals had traditionally made their own, of interceding between the belligerents and facilitating their mutual humanitarian concerns, became increasingly difficult to sustain in a war which, after 1941, descended into such barbarity and excess, and whose belligerents rejected the moral assumptions upon which neutral interventions had been based. Yet, for all its patent shortcomings, neutrality was the obvious, preferred, and indeed only option for some twenty-two European states when faced with the prospect of war in the late summer of 1939. Despite the enormous changes that took place in Europe in the months and years that followed, neutrality remained the

¹⁶ For Allied suspicions see Selim Deringil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1989), 168, and the relationship between Spanish and Portuguese policy over wolfram: W. N. Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade*, 2 vols. (London, 1959), vol. II, 598–607.

¹⁷ See Neville Wylie, 'The Neutrals', in Robert Boyce and Joe Maiolo (eds.), *The Origins of the Second World War: The Debate Continues* (London, forthcoming).