CHAPTER VI

August 1914

Shortly before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, at least three newspapers in the Netherlands Indies, the Java-Bode, De Locomotief, and the Preanger-bode, reported that a Japanese fleet had entered Wijnkoopwaaik on the south coast of West Java. The source of the news was a telegram from Cibadak addressed to the Governor General, in which it was stated that fifteen Japanese warships had been sighted in the bay. The Assistent-Resident of Sukabumi was instructed to investigate. He sent a telegram to a government official stationed on the coast. The reply was that nothing was known about any Japanese fleet. After headquarters in Batavia had contacted him, the local agent of the Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij (KPM, Royal Packet Company) shipping company in Pelabuhan Ratu submitted a similar report. Army and naval command had also been alerted. General De Greve, by now chief-of-staff of the colonial army, personally travelled to Pelabuhan Ratu by car to check. There were no Japanese warships in sight. All had fallen victim to a practical joke. Someone had wanted to deceive the telegraph clerk in Cibadak and had succeeded with a vengeance. Without giving the matter a second thought he had transmitted the telegram with its alarming news.¹

The reaction elicited by the telegram is a minor example of the anxiety that had gripped people all over the world. The dying days of July 1914 were pregnant with rumours and speculations about what was going to happen. The gloom that was building up only grew even more sombre after Vienna’s ultimatum had expired and war was declared on Serbia on 28 July 1914. The Netherlands succeeded in remaining neutral, but inevitably could not escape the economic and financial consequences of the war. A severe crisis was in the making. It was to affect almost all sectors of the Dutch economy. Shipping, trade, fisheries, agriculture, and industry, none escaped repercussions at the outbreak of war. Anxiety was stirred up to greater heights because a shortage of wheat, and hence of bread threatened. Holland was dependent on imports for the bulk of its wheat. Available stock would suffice for two or three weeks.

¹ De Locomotief, 28-7-1914, 31-7-1914.
The new harvest at the end of September would provide only enough wheat for domestic consumption for about two months. Good pre-war bread became but a memory. The Dutch had to eat ‘war bread’, made of one-quarter of wheat flour to three-quarters bran. To guard against a food-shortage export bans, including one on wheat, were instituted. Fuel also threatened to become scarce. To prevent a forcing-up of prices, burgomasters were given the authority to confiscate stocks of food and fuel.

One reason for the threat of scarcities was the fact that Great Britain and France aimed to create a complete economic blockade of Germany and Austria. British warships operated off Dover and off the north coast of Scotland, blocking the entrances to the North Sea. South of Dover, the French Navy patrolled the seas. Neutral merchantmen were arrested and directed to French and British ports. The stopping of neutral merchantmen in a search for contraband had been a point of concern and deliberations for years. During the Russo-Japanese War searches on the high sea of neutral merchantmen by Russian warships had caused great dismay in British commercial circles. At that time London had refused to call for a change in the international rules on contraband. The British government had felt uneasy about the searching of British ships, but had not protested. The prime minister, A.J. Balfour, had explained why. He said that

[W]e can not be sure that the time will not come when our role will be changed; and that we shall be the belligerents, and when that time comes it will indeed be unfortunate if we had by our own action at the present moment forfeited any of the privileges which belong to a belligerent and which we might at such a time ourselves desire to exercise.¹

Impressed by the damage to the trade and shipping, the liberal government of his successor, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, had adopted a different position in 1907 at the time of the Second Peace Conference in The Hague. Cautious, preferring other states which would arouse less opposition from Germany and other powers, to take the initiative, the Foreign Secretary, Sir Edward Grey, had prepared proposals for the abolition of the concept of contraband – and when this proved impossible, for the restriction of goods belligerents could forbid their enemies to be supplied with by neutrals. Initially he had even pleaded for the immunity of enemy private property carried as cargo in ships captured or searched at sea. The Peace Conference ended in a great disappointment for the British delegation and for Grey personally. Apart from a well-intentioned resolution about the urgent necessity to cut defence spending, plans for a naval conference, to be held in London, were the only

¹ The Times, 29-10-1904.