Recently I decided to follow the research method of many of my students. I typed the word “myth” into Google and got 113 million “hits.” I did not consult all these websites. Instead I fell back on a more academic formulation, namely that a myth is a story that has been told so often that it becomes the only accepted version of a particular event.

Historians delight in destroying myths, particularly popular ones. We recognize, however, that a myth is not the same thing as a lie (although it can be). More typically, it omits, and through omission, distorts. A myth may be like a photograph of a parade; the picture is inherently “accurate” but it leaves out the motion, the cadence, and the music. As you will see, this metaphor is fairly descriptive of the Dutch myth of World War I.

The Netherlands managed to remain neutral in that war, but that was by no means guaranteed. Its location astride three major rivers and its closeness to the action made it highly vulnerable. Yet neutral it remained. The Dutch gave themselves surprisingly little credit for this result. During a talk at the University of Amsterdam a student listener expressed her surprise at my suggestion that the wartime government had performed well. “We are never told that.” Instead, there developed a myth, that I will call, “Righteous but Passive.” It had two variants. One train of thought emphasized the importance of international law and explained neutrality in terms of Holland's adherence to international law. ‘We played by the rules.' This has also been called “strict” or “academic” neutrality. This had strong appeal in a country whose elites thought in highly legalistic terms about international

---

1 Discussion following “The Netherlands in World War I,” invited lecture, University of Amsterdam, March 2002.
affairs; a high proportion of diplomats had trained in international law, the country had hosted the famous Hague peace and disarmament conferences, and The Hague itself was home to the Carnegie Peace Palace.

Strict neutrality pretended that the armed forces did not matter, or at best had a symbolic importance. The other variant, which I will call “passive neutrality,” did accept the importance of mobilizing an army to indicate one’s intent to defend neutrality, but this interpretation is also passive. It is a static picture; we declared, we mobilized, we survived. Passive neutrality is mentioned occasionally, while “strict” or “academic” neutrality language appears more often. Occasionally the maintenance of neutrality is described as “luck” or God’s grace, the latter an interpretation which I am not qualified to disprove.

Evaluating the Myth

The tenacity and universality of the myth is somewhat surprising. The World War I government did not believe it, the foreign ministry did not believe it, the military believed it not at all, and foreign governments during the war believed it least of all. Perhaps it owes as much to the social psychology of the period as to any trends in traditional intellectual history. The result in either case is the same. The avoidance of war was neither celebrated nor studied. There was no methodical study of the military, diplomatic, or economic factors that had produced neutrality. With a few exceptions, idealistic neutralism was given almost universal credit. This leads us to two obvious questions; first, in the best Rankian sense, what really did happen, and second, why was there a divergence between what happened and what came to be believed?

One reason that the Dutch escaped the war was because they were well informed about the developing intentions of their great neighbor. The Netherlands was aware of its inclusion in the original Schlieff en plan. In his 1933 memoirs, wartime War Minister Nicolaas Bosboom revealed:

That the German army leadership was seriously considering a march through Limburg in its preparations, did not have to be doubted. A few years earlier I had received reports from an individual, fairly trustworthy, German source, whose contents pointed to a definite decision to do so.²