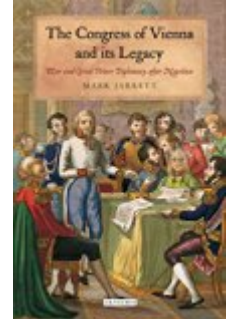


**Maartje Abbenhuis.** *An Age of Neutrals: Great Power Politics, 1815–1914.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. X, 289 S. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-03760-1.



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“Neutrality in war has never been regarded as an act of much honour.”[1] Indeed there is little in the past one hundred years of international politics that inspires complacency, even when scant national resources preclude a vigorous response by members of the international community. When confronting such threats as Soviet and Chinese communism in the Cold War, and Nazi Germany, imperial Japan, and Wilhelmine Germany before that, few states legitimately (much less effectively) responded with a policy of neutrality. Those that did choose neutrality, moreover, tend to be assessed with varying doses of derision and pity. Lacking much in the way of international political agency, Switzerland is *sui generis* owing to its geography and identity as Europe’s banker; the Netherlands prior to the Second World War was terribly naïve and foolish in its foreign policy; Belgium was that poor but brave small country that in 1914 was unfortunate enough to have Germany as its next door neighbor. “Neutrality Now!” inspires few and is given

little consideration as a viable foreign policy choice.

In this impressive piece of scholarship, Maartje Abbenhuis (University of Auckland) demonstrates clearly that neutrality in the “long nineteenth century,” from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, was viewed much differently than it is today and was practiced with frequency and deftness. Far from being considered a mere alternative in the foreign policy toolbox, however, according to Abbenhuis, neutrality was a near-permanent feature in international relations during this period. Throughout *An Age of Neutrals*, Abbenhuis details the evolution of neutralism, analyzing the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. In some cases, neutrality was an instrument of statecraft for both great and small powers. In other ways, neutrality was a central feature in the development of international law entailing rights and responsibilities for both belligerents and nonbelligerents. Finally, neutralism is shown to have been endowed with powerful normative and ethical content, affecting

the national identities of the states that adopted nonbelligerent status and influencing the vocal and influential peace advocates in the decades before the Great War. While this resuscitation of the historical dignity of neutrality is worth considering in its own right, the true value of *An Age of Neutrals* lies in Abbenhuis's arguments on the implications of neutrality in nineteenth-century diplomacy. While always judicious in her causal claims, Abbenhuis contends that neutrality played important roles in embedding flexibility in the Concert of Europe, ensuring that warfare from 1815 to 1914 remained limited, facilitating the growth of European empires, strengthening pre-war globalization, elevating the diplomatic profile and influence of key neutral countries, and fostering a body of international law that remains important today. This book is thus not an in-depth examination of any particular state's experience with neutrality (though Great Britain does receive sustained treatment). Rather it is an exploration into a concept, the influence of which was widespread at the time even though it is largely forgotten now.

The significance of neutrality in European diplomacy emerged quickly in the post-Napoleonic era by facilitating the goals embedded in the Concert of Europe. The great powers meeting in Vienna recognized that their international system needed a new form of management, not only to prevent the rise of a second revolutionary with Continental designs, but also to add a dose of predictability in great power relations. Ultimately, the conferees recognized that limits on their own national aspirations were required. Toward this end, neutrality played two distinct roles. First, neutralism constituted a useful tool available to the great powers, one that allowed them to pursue realpolitik while accepting practical limitations on the means through which their national objectives were sought. The neutralization of key states, buttressed by various great power guarantees, created a firebreak to the spread of war. In the process, the diplomatic profiles of long-term

neutrals rose, making them vital centers in which the affairs of European states were conducted. Second, the recognition that the system needed concerted management meant that the disputes among states had to be settled in a manner that was agreeable to all. The frequent adoption of neutrality proved vital in this regard. As Abbenhuis demonstrates, neutrality allowed international conflict resolution to be elevated to a high art form, making it among the defining features of the Concert system which set it apart from previous and future forms of global order. By foregrounding neutrality in her analysis of the Concert, Abbenhuis reveals how the general preferences for system stability, abetted by close ideological orientations of the great powers and efficacious institutional features,[2] were ultimately insufficient in avoiding the spread of war. Rather, neutrality served as a practical mechanism of dispute resolution which frequently proved its merit by narrowing the bargaining space among belligerents and potential belligerents.

No state benefited more from neutralism in the nineteenth century than Great Britain. Yet London was slow to recognize precisely how defending neutrals' rights (especially at sea) served both its liberal and imperial interests. When that recognition eventually came, Britain's reversal was quick and thoroughgoing. Before the Crimean War, Great Britain adhered to its historical mercantilist roots by championing belligerents' rights. While useful for a time, this stance came under pressure as the empire grew and Britain emerged as the world's leading commercial power. Neutrality played a significant role in this ascendancy to the extent that London was able to avoid committing substantial military resources to the Continent. Still, the global implications of neutrality were only fully understood during the period 1853-56 when it became clear to Britain that it had the opportunity to lock in its position of leadership in the international political economy. At the end of the war, the Declaration of Paris was signed, overturning "the long-defended idea that

Britain should jealously guard its rights to control the seas by aggressive naval means” (p. 87). The reasons for this change in position are multiple, but in the end, Abbenhuis argues, London’s reversal “heralded a wider public acceptance of the idea that in a globalizing world, sustaining trade, communications and exchange was [sic] essential to the success of nations. It also signaled that limiting the spread and impact of wars when they occurred was useful for the continued effectiveness of the world economy, and certainly for Britain’s role in it” (p. 91). *Pax Britannica* mattered more to London than upholding its particular obligations under the Concert system, a point that Abbenhuis makes with dexterity against historian Paul W. Schroeder’s assertion that Britain’s behavior in the Crimean War constituted a “great missed opportunity.”[3]

Clearly neutrality served as an important mechanism in great power relations, one that over time became a cornerstone of international law. While Abbenhuis addresses these features of neutralism thoroughly, her inclusion of a chapter-length discussion on neutrality as an international and patriotic ideal gives *An Age of Neutrals* impressive breadth. Notwithstanding the pragmatism of leaders in grappling with promise and challenges of neutralism, Abbenhuis posits, “neutrality was also very much a product of nineteenth-century idealism, connected to the promotion of peace and internationalism, as well as to national pride.... Neutrality was as much a culturally constructed idea, promoted and debated by a variety of interested parties and the educated reading public at large, as it was a principle of international relations and international law” (p. 148). International peace conferences, networks of activists, public intellectuals, and prominent figures advocated for new modalities of international political life—all the while militant nationalism was taking root in key states on the Continent. Among the driving factors in this international peace movement prior to World War I was the promise of arbitration as a means of limiting

or avoiding war. For arbitration to work, a pool of neutral states was needed that could serve the cause of peace. Many smaller states understood neutrality, in terms of its patriotic appeal, as a lived experience. The prospect of permanent neutrality was considered a matter of national pride, an idealized rational pursuit that would elevate the country above grubby and destructive war-mongering.

Abbenhuis’s discussion of the interplay between the international and national ideals is illuminating and important. Nevertheless more could have been done with competition in ideas that was brewing in Europe before the Great War. To be sure, Abbenhuis’s treatment of neutrality’s normative content is subtle. Despite the temptation to adopt highfalutin rhetoric, “even the most committed peace advocates of the time tended to ground their activism in pragmatism. As a result, war prevention and the alleviation of misery of war, rather than the unrealistic ambition to bring an end to all war, were the *modi operandi* of the majority of peace activists” (pp. 145-146). Yet peaceful internationalism was not a cause taken up by a radical fringe, nor were the benefits of peace lost on European states. This nexus needed a more thorough examination to determine how state leaders interacted with and were influenced by national and transnational networks of peace advocates, how they were affected by military organizational and nationalist-conservative elements, and how leaders themselves drove the contest in ideas between peace and war.[4] As it stands, Abbenhuis does a truly fine job in detailing the broad contours of this important set of ideational factors prior to World War I.

*An Age of Neutrals* would have benefited from an explicit evaluation of two additional issues. The first pertains to neutrality’s ultimate demise in the run-up to war in 1914. According to Abbenhuis, the value of neutrality as a firebreak to war declined precipitously after 1908 when the accumulated strains in great power relations be-

came too great and the vulnerability of key neutrals increased. Under these conditions, challenges to effective deterrence rose dramatically by short-circuiting the deliberative diplomatic processes that had characterized much of the nineteenth century. In the wake of mounting crises, European states lost sight of the diplomatic value of neutrality. In the end, Abbenhuis contends that World War I was a failure of diplomacy, “the rise and fall of neutrality was always more a symptom of international affairs than one of its driving forces” (p. 237). This conclusion is surely an accurate depiction of neutrality’s status in the run-up to war. Yet the vast majority of the preceding analysis suggests that neutrality was more than epiphenomenal to broader structural factors. By the end of the 1800s, neutrality had proven its merits as an effective tool of statecraft, had assumed a vaunted position in international law, and was deeply colored with national and transnational normative hues. Something (or many things) undermined the widespread understanding of neutrality’s worth among the most powerful states in Europe. While Abbenhuis does argue persuasively that neutrality was particularly ill-suited to the international system immediately prior to the war, that conclusion has an ad hoc feel to it. The final substantive chapter is simply too short to adequately deal with the multiple processes that caused neutrality to atrophy.

Finally, Abbenhuis’s argument that neutrality served as a critical feature in limiting warfare for one hundred years demands serious attention. She convincingly argues that neutrality constituted an important mechanism driving the system away from total war. At the same time, this case is made without deep investigations into the strategic assumptions and plans of many of the states that waged limited war during the nineteenth century. This is unfortunate. Had she been able to show that the prevailing practice of neutrality conditioned (say) Otto von Bismarck’s and Helmut von Moltke’s war planning, then not only would her argument have approached the status

of “airtight,” but she would also have been able to make a significant contribution to the scholarship on limited war. Specifically, limited war scholars frequently take the position that limited wars are inherently difficult to prosecute, where success and failure is a function of the quality of strategy. This approach places the strategic agency of the belligerents at the forefront.[5] Abbenhuis’s approach is to argue that the international system had a set of features that independently served to ameliorate the spread of war. These two views are not incompatible; a synthesis between the two would be ideal. As it stands, however, *An Age of Neutrals* is open to criticism from an established body of scholarship that explains limited warfare in terms of strategic choice and interaction. At the same time, scholars of limited warfare would be unwise to henceforth ignore the role that neutrality played in affecting the contours of European warfare in the nineteenth century. On this score, Abbenhuis points to a fruitful avenue for future research.

*An Age of Neutrals* is a rich, beautifully written, and expansive investigation into a long-lost diplomatic tradition. Abbenhuis has made a significant contribution to our understanding of how the long nineteenth century unfolded. Her book should be carefully considered by diplomatic historians and international relations theorists alike.

#### Notes

- [1]. Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1983), ix.
- [2]. Mark L. Haas, *The Ideological Origins of Great Power Politics, 1789-1989* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 73-104; and G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 98-107.
- [3]. Paul W. Schroeder, “International Politics, Peace, and War, 1815-1914,” in *The Nineteenth*

*Century: Europe 1789-1914*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171.

[4]. Cf. John M. Owen IV, *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change, 1510-2010* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[5]. Richard Smoke, *War: Controlling Escalation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); and Spencer D. Bakich, *Success and Failure in Limited War: Information and Strategy in the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

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