SUMMARY

This thesis treats the naval armament policy of the Dutch cabinet led by Ruys de Beerenbrouck, and the successful opposition to that policy in 1923. Chapter I provides a general overview of the international threats confronting a small nation like the Netherlands after 1813, and describes the means by which the government sought to safeguard the nation's sovereignty. Germany and Japan formed a direct military threat to the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies respectively; the danger posed by England lay more in political dominance, while the emancipatory colonial policies which accompanied the United States' expansion in the Pacific undermined the historical legitimacy of Dutch rule in the East Indies. The Netherlands tried to ensure her independence in three ways. Firstly, by creating a so-called 'moral bastion'. The propagation and dissemination of ethical values, pacifism and international law was to turn the Netherlands into unassailable 'holy ground'. Secondly, by following a policy of neutrality: friend to all, ally to none in either war or peace. But behind the scenes of that neutrality was an undercurrent in foreign policy which was now pro-Germany, then pro-England. Partly as a result of this discord, it was impossible to depart from a policy of neutrality. Lastly, the Netherlands posessed a military apparatus. Until about 1900, the Netherlands' defence policy had relied on a typically 'Dutch' strategy, based on fortresses and inundation tactics. After the turn of the century, the same opposing views were put forward in the Dutch defence debate as in, for example, that of Germany or France - a democratic popular army with a defensive strategy as opposed to mass armies under autoritarian leadership. The result here was also a triumph for the 'rage de nombre' and the 'decisive stroke' strategy. After the war, the Dutch government, grown wiser from the Belgian experience, was inclined to revert to the static defence strategy, now based on inundation tactics, barbed wire and trenches.

The difficulties in defending the Dutch East Indies (Chapter II) were greater and more numerous than the defence of the motherland. The expansion of Dutch authority over an empire of islands, rich in waterways, led the government in 1892 to assign the navy a role equal to that of the army in the defence of that empire. From that time until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1941, the army and the navy carried on a constant struggle for preeminence in the defence of the East Indies. A vigorous and uncontroversial naval policy was further hindered by the handicaps which beset small nations in particular: lack of money and technological means, and inconclusive debates on the right strategy for a small fleet. Nevertheless, after 1910, the Netherlands was also caught up in 'navalism'. However, little came of the realisation of the ambitious fleet plans. The First World War ruled out the purchase of large ships, while building battleships at home became less possible than

ever. Thus, the longer the war lasted, the stronger the feeling within the navy became, that after the armistice a great deal of leeway would have to be made up.

The Ruys de Beerenbrouck cabinet was formed in September 1918. Chapter III describes the cautiousness of the cabinet's reactions to the foundation of the League of Nations as a new system of collective security. The Netherlands had always been a great verbal advocate of international law organisations, but the government expected more problems than protection from this defective League. For this reason, the government tried to avoid entering into obligations so that if a new conflict should arise they could once again remain aloof. The government was reluctant to place its complete trust in international law until the League of Nations was totally 'secure'. They were not, therefore, prepared to dispense with the fleet plans which had been drawn up in 1920. Thus, in November 1921, while the five major sea powers gathered in Washington to open negotiations on restricting naval armaments, the cabinet put forward a Six Year Fleet Plan.

The success of the Washington Conference, however, caused the bill to be shelved in April 1922. The motion gained a majority due to the support of the largest coalition party, the RKSP (Roman Catholic Party). Elections were coming up. After a period of relative harmony during the war years, internal politics became increasingly characterised by political discord. This was the result of political emancipation, the economic crisis which overtook the Netherlands in 1920, and a growing aversion to war. Military policy became a bitter issue in a worsening political and social climate, in which fear and frustration played a major role. More so than the other parties, the RKSP showed signs of internal discord. The domestic situation is discussed in Chapter IV.

Chapter V describes the navy's concern for its future after the 'outbreak of peace'. A modern fleet plan was designed under the direction of naval chief of staff Gooszen in 1920. The navy top made every effort to have the plan passed by parliament. In order to ensure the construction of new material for the near future, they pushed through the idea of anchoring the Six Year Fleet Plan in a law. Although the coalition parties had won a comfortable majority in the 1922 elections, it still became necessary to look closely at the financial side of the expensive Fleet Plan once again as the minister of finance, De Geer, raised objections. De Geer felt that due to the crisis the Netherlands' financial position was already alarming, and if the Fleet Bill were adopted, naval spending could not be cut back. A government committee, led by Patijn, was set up to investigate the Fleet Plan. The members were, however, divided on the urgency of the bill. The majority advised the government to produce a financial recovery plan before introducing the Fleet Bill in parliament. Initially the Dutch East Indies had been in favour of the bill, but as the economic crisis gradually worsened, more and more objections were raised. The governor-general and the East Indies' government rejected the bill in the middle of 1923. Their

main reason for doing so was the construction of a naval port, which was to be financed by the East Indies alone. Nevertheless, in July 1923, the government decided that the Fleet Plan should be carried out unrevised, even though this meant they were forced to accept the resignation of the competent De Geer. The cabinet members were convinced decisive action was called for in all departments.

With his resignation De Geer unintentionally gave the signal for public opposition to the expensive armament plan. And so much the more as he was succeeded by Colijn, a politician hated by the socialists and communists and feared by the Catholic workers.

The role of the two Protestant coalition parties, which supported the Fleet Bill more from habit than conviction, is set forth in Chapter VI. They had always been keen advocates of a strong defence policy, but now they had an ulterior motive. They did not want to capitulate to the Catholics again, let alone the opposition parties. Moreover, at that point they particularly needed a new source of inspiration to crank up the flagging party elan, and the 'Protestant' East Indies seemed a most appropriate choice for that purpose. Just as De Geer before him, ARP (Anti-Revolutionary Party) leader Colijn adopted a dissenting attitude to the Fleet Bill. He suspected that the Bill, wether carried or defeated, could retrieve and strengthen both his party's and his own position.

Chapter VII is devoted to the Catholics' attitude to the Fleet Bill question. Military defence, and certainly that of the East Indies, had never been popular among Catholics. Although the 'revolution of 1918' had earned the fleet a bad name among the whole bourgeoisie, in Catholic circles the 'heathen' fleet was downright unpopular, and not least because the second class social treatment which had been the Catholics' lot for centuries was still in effect in the fleet. As a result, some Catholic politicians were reluctant to expose the party to great internal and party political upheaval for an issue of this nature. The great fear, certainly in Catholic trade union circles, was that their members, already greatly disappointed by the austerity policies resulting from the economic crisis, would see the highly disputed and extremely expensive plan as the last straw and would leave to join the ranks of the more attractive red camp. At he same time, the memberships of the various parties began putting more pressure on their representatives in the Commons to speak out against the Fleet Bill.

The liberals, subject of Chapter VIII, increasingly opposed the Fleet Bill in 1922 and 1923. The motives of the five left-liberal M.P.s were pacifistic, military-theoretical and financial in varying degrees. The civil servants, among whom many left-liberals, turned against the Fleet Bill because they believed cancelling the expensive plan would make the proposed 20% cut in salaries unnecessary. To the ten conservative-liberals the financial aspect was the deciding factor. They felt the government should cut back spending much more and that the Fleet Bill, which was excessively expensive and not urgent, was an obstacle to this drastic operation.

The driving force behind opposition to the Fleet Bill was not so

much the vociferous, but hardly numerous, anarchists and communists (Chapter IX), but the social democrats, as is shown in Chapter X. Around 1918 the social democrats had held high hopes for the future, their future. After 1920 it became increasingly obvious that little would come of those expectations. The economic crisis and political impotency caused confusion and inactivity among the leaders, and disillusionment and bitterness among the members. As the realisation of the long standing plans for social reform again became vague hopes for the future, the social democrats felt a growing need to take up a new theme which could be used to explain the problems which had arisen. This theme would serve as a new ideal for the movement and could be used as a spearhead in their opposition to the cabinet. Anti-militarism, traditionally a socialist platform, now became the only political issue that could engender enthusiasm among socialist ranks and which could be used to agitate. Although many a party leader recognized the opportunism and political risks involved in the acceptance, at the 1921 party conference, of unilateral national disarmament as a platform, they acquiesced. This popular catchword could replace the unsuccesful Socialization slogan and might take the wind out of the communists' sails at the same time. In the hope of better days after the elections and in view of the theoretical uncertainties which attached to the intensification of their standpoint on military policy, the SDAP (Social Democratic Workers Party) and the NVV (Trades Union Congress) reacted passively to the 1922 debate on the Fleet Bill. It was to take 16 months, a period in which the party became more politically isolated than ever and the union movement suffered defeat after defeat at the hands of the employers and the government, before De Geer's resignation led to the liberating outburst of frustration, pent up too long. For the first time in years there was a chance of successful opposition to the cabinet's policy. The protest demonstration and petitions against the Fleet Bill, which had been decided on after some hesitation, were an unparalleled success. During this hectic period of extra-parliamentary activity a festive mood prevailed in social democratic circles.

The debate in the House of Commons lasted nine days. Chapter XI is devoted to it. After the voting on October 26, 1923, which had taken place in an extremely tense atmosphere, it appeared that the Commons had thrown out the Fleet Bill by the smallest possible majority: one vote (50-49). Ten Catholics had voted with the opposition. The cabinet tendered its resignation. But as the political crisis, after a power struggle between the ARP, CHU (Christian Historical Union) and RKSP and their leaders which had gone on for months, seemed insoluble, the Queen refused to accept the cabinet's resignation. The Ruys de Beerenbrouck cabinet returned to power, minus the Fleet Bill. Chapter XII shows that the crisis round the Fleet Bill was a victory for the opposition, but no less for the Catholic leaders. Catholic unity was preserved as the left wing's fear they would lose many members to the red camp diminished and with it the internal rebelliousness, and at the same time they had succeeded in taking

the Protestant 'bruiser' Colijn down a peg or two. The navy had ventured 'all or nothing' and had lost, but there was no question of the dreaded 'liquidation' of the fleet.

The social democrats' victory was short-lived. Just as the VDB (Left-Liberal Union), which in 1924 would also climb onto the disarmament platform, the SDAP gained a few seats in the 1925 elections - without doubt partly as a result of their success in 1923. But in reviewing the whole interbellum, their standpoint on military policy formed an extra hindrance to their acceptance by the bourgeois parties.

Chapter XIII is a conclusion in which the main points are discussed once again. The opposition to the Fleet Bill in 1923 was inspired by the nature of the Bill itself, by political disillusionment among the various political parties, by the exasperation caused by the economic crisis, and by the wide-spread 'no-more-war' feeling. But the success of that opposition is especially due to the complexity of the Dutch political system. Because, besides the usual and relatively clear struggle between opposition and government, there was a less apparent disunity within the largest coalition party, and a covert power struggle between the denominational coaliton parties and between their leaders. The last two factors were decisive for the defeat of the Fleet Bill.