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The Coal Blockade

Of all the crises Nils Claus Ihlen had had to deal with in the last four years as foreign minister, this one was undeniably the worst. Ever since the outbreak of war in 1914, Ihlen had worked tirelessly day and night. He had ignored Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen's warnings against "Sunday work and work after supper". He had also gained considerable weight, and the doctor had warned that he was showing signs of overwork.¹ Now, on Christmas Eve 1916 itself, he had been told that Britain would block all further coal imports. For a country that had no domestic coal mines, this was disastrous. Coal was the driving force in the age of industry. Now Norway only had enough coal for three months of normal consumption, with little hope of getting more if they did not comply with Britain's demands. Norway's policy of neutrality was at a crossroads, and none of the paths ahead seemed alluring.



Kristianialiv.
Vinteren 1917.

Herren i forgrunden: «Hvad de slaass om? — Jo det skal jeg si Dem. Den ene fandt en kulbit i gaten, og saa paastaar den anden at han saa den først.»

Drawing in the witty magazine The Wasp, 24 February 1917

«We want no foreign policy»

There were long lines behind the foreign policy Nils Claus Ihlen wanted to pursue when he took the helm at the beginning of 1913. The desire for Norwegian democratic control over foreign policy had been the trigger for the dissolution of the union in 1905, and this desire stemmed not least from a desire to keep Norway neutral and out of great power politics and dubious military adventures abroad. True, the Swedish-Norwegian union had remained peaceful, but several times the union kings had come close to plunging the country into war, as during the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Second Schleswig War (1864).



Nils Claus Ihlen was Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1913 to 1920 for the Liberal Party. Photo: Wikimedia

During the union dispute, Bjornstjerne Bjornson had summarized the prevailing Norwegian position as a desire for a "Foreign Ministry without foreign policy." It was this thread that Norway's first foreign minister, Jørgen Løvland, took up when he had to create a Norwegian foreign policy. The Norwegian Foreign Minister's foremost task was "to keep us out of participation in the combinations and alliances that can draw us into war adventures with some of the European warrior states."²

After the dissolution of the union, there was no longer any imminent danger of being drawn into any war adventure against the will of the Norwegian Storting. On the other hand, it didn't necessarily make the security situation easier. There was still some concern that Sweden might want revenge at some point in the future. At the same time, independence from Sweden also meant that Norway also had to do without Swedish protection in any confrontations with other powers. And although Norway had rearmed, militarily in the years before the dissolution of the union, it was clear to

everyone that the country's own military power alone was far from enough to ensure the country's neutrality or territorial integrity should it be challenged.

It was therefore a decisive goal for the independent Norway to secure some form of guarantee of Norwegian independence from the European powers of the time, Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia. With the Treaty of November in 1855, France and Great Britain had guaranteed the territorial integrity of Sweden-Norway in exchange for a promise not to cede territory to Russia. However, at the dissolution of the union it was highly uncertain whether this treaty could any longer be regarded as valid. At the same time, Norway also wanted a guarantee from all the great powers, not only from one side of Europe's gradually tightened alliances.³

It turned out that it was difficult to get such a guarantee. Norway had originally put forward a proposal in which the UK, France, Germany and Russia would promise to respect Norwegian neutrality and if Norway's independence or territorial integrity was threatened, the great powers were obliged to come to the rescue. In return, Norway was to remain strictly neutral, but reserved the right to defend the neutrality of neighbouring Denmark and Sweden if

necessary. This was not to the liking of the great powers, as this was ill-suited to their interests. In particular, Britain had little interest in a treaty that bound them to protect Norway's neutrality. The Royal Navy did not want Britain to enter into an agreement that prohibited them from occupying a Norwegian port in a future war. On the other hand, Britain was willing, under doubt, to agree to a treaty that guaranteed Norwegian *territorial integrity*. In the eyes of the British, a temporary occupation of a Norwegian port city would not be a violation of territorial integrity as long as they had no plans to make it permanent. This was also what Norway got to settle for when the so-called *Integrity Treaty* was signed in November 1907.⁴ Whether this actually provided any special protection if one of the four great powers were to break it, many doubted. On the other hand, it probably provided some protection against Sweden. The Swedes also interpreted the treaty as primarily directed against them.⁵

Admittedly, the idea of Norwegian neutrality was not a desire for Norway to isolate themselves from the outside world, quite the opposite. Norwegian neutrality had always been strongly linked to the country's economic interests. In addition to keeping Norway non-aligned and neutral, an active trade policy was also to be pursued to ensure freedom of trade for Norwegian goods and services. The Norwegian economy was heavily dependent on international trade. Norway had long depended on buying grain from abroad. This had become painfully evident during the Napoleonic Wars, when Britain's blockade of the country had led to famine. In the years before World War II, about 2/3 of all grain consumed in Norway came from abroad, primarily the United States and the Russian Empire.⁶ At the same time, much of the Norwegian business sector focused on exports, such as fish, minerals, lumber and pulp. But the Norwegian economy was not only dependent on imports and exports of goods. The largest Norwegian "export business" of all was shipping. Norwegian ships not only transported goods to and from Norway, but also transported goods to and from various foreign ports around the world. At the outbreak of World War I, Norway had the world's fourth-largest merchant fleet, which accounted for about a third of the country's export revenues.⁷ In total, exports accounted for over a third of the country's gross domestic product, which was significantly higher than in Denmark and Sweden, despite the fact that their economies were relatively export-oriented compared to other European countries.⁸

What neutrality meant in practical terms was not nailed in stone. But in the last century before the outbreak of war, and not least in the last two decades, several steps had been taken to formalise the rights and obligations of neutral states in international law. The Declaration of Paris in 1856 had been the first step. It had made privateer activity illegal, and had stipulated that neutral countries had the right to trade with warring countries, except with goods that were *Contraband*. The first Hague Conventions in 1899 and 1907 built on these principles and established clearer rules governing the rights and obligations of neutrals. Neutral states were obliged to protect their territorial integrity and guard their neutrality, and act militarily impartially. This meant that neutral states were obliged to detain ships from warring states that stayed in the territorial waters of a neutral state for more than 24 hours. At the same time, neutrals had to recognize the right of warring states to declare contrabands, set blockades, and control neutral shipping to and from an enemy.⁹

What was *contraband* in a war had also not been defined. The prevailing understanding in international law had been that the warring parties themselves could declare what constituted contrabands, but in practice this had primarily concerned weapons and other goods directly related to warfare. Admittedly, there had been some exceptions. During the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5), Russia had declared that virtually all goods for Japan were considered contraband.¹⁰

The Hague Conventions had done nothing to rectify this, but at the Naval Conference in London in 1909 the delegates had arrived at a declaration attempting to specify what could be considered contraband. Here, a distinction was made between goods that were *absolutely contraband* and goods that were *conditionally contrabanded*. Absolute contraband were goods directly related to warfare, such as weapons, ammunition and other military equipment. Conditional contraband were goods that had both military and civilian uses, such as food, animal feed, clothing, ships, railway equipment and fuel. These could be declared contraband without warning, but could only be seized if it could be shown that they were to be used by a warring state or army. On the other hand, there were a large number of goods that could not be declared contraband. These were primarily raw materials, including ore, fertiliser and paper, which were important Norwegian export goods.¹¹ However, this declaration was not ratified, as it was voted down in the British House of Lords in 1911.¹² Nevertheless, many Norwegian politicians had hoped that the London Declaration of 1909 would provide guidelines for warring parties in a possible war between the great powers.¹³

Before the war broke out, Norway had charted a course where the country could remain foreign policy neutral, while Norwegian trade and shipping could continue in the event of war. Many hoped that international law and arbitral tribunals could give small states a safer future. But there were also many who believed that there was a limit to how closely one should associate oneself with such institutions, and where one chose to draw the line for what was reserved for national interests. Even if Norway had been a major advocate of international free trade, Norway would have been far more reluctant to give foreign investors unequivocally free access to buy Norwegian natural resources. The Nationality Act of 1888 and the licensing laws of 1906-1909 had provided for opportunities to control and stop foreign acquisitions if they were considered to threaten Norwegian interests.¹⁴

It was indeed one thing to invoke *treaties* and *international law*, but even before the war broke out, everyone had been aware that this alone was not necessarily enough. And there was one great power in particular that stood as more important than everyone else to Norway: Britain. Britain's support had been crucial in the dissolution of the union. Kaiser Wilhelm would have preferred to see the union preserved. Britain was also by far the dominant maritime power, and ultimately many Norwegian politicians believed that Norway's neutrality and security ultimately rested on an implicit British guarantee and British self-interest in keeping Norway united and independent.¹⁵ And Britain was not decisive in purely security policy matters. The British were also Norway's largest trading partner. Britain was also the largest exporter of coal to Norway. Coal was the most important fuel, and absolutely critical for both ships and railways, as well as for heat in cities. Norway had recently begun to use large-scale hydropower, but it had not yet replaced coal and was mostly used for industry and lighting. Norway had no coal mines of their own, but as ships carrying raw materials to Britain could bring coal back as ballast, the prices of coal in Norway were very good. The Norwegian merchant fleet was also completely dependent on British goodwill on the seas, as much of Norwegian shipping went to British colonies.

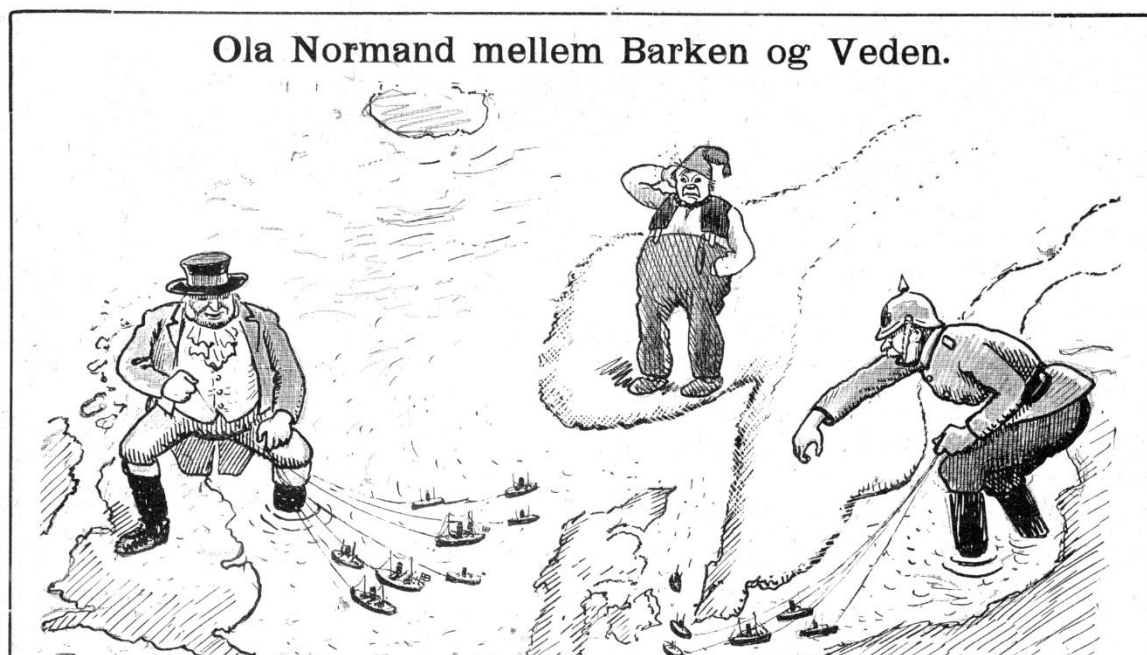
Neutral in war

"Are the neutrals allowed to remain neutral? Is it not much more in the direction that the belligerents say, Either against or with us... I think that sticking together will get harder and harder in the year to come. I think there are great difficulties we are facing." Minister of Foreign Affairs Nils Claus Ihlen (24 June 1916)

When the war broke out, Ihlen and the rest of the government had been ready to follow the lines that had been laid out in the nine short years Norway had been independent: the state should be foreign policy neutral, and businesses should be free to act in a way that served them best.¹⁶

In terms of security policy, the most important thing was to prevent Norway and Sweden from ending up on opposite sides of the world war and prevent war between the two neighbouring countries. Already in the escalation of the outbreak of war, Ihlen had contacted Swedish Foreign Minister Knut Wallenberg, and on August 8 the two governments assured the outside world that they would "rule out the possibility" of "hostile interventions" between neighboring countries. Although this assurance was well received in both countries, Ihlen was painfully aware that the agreement only ran so deep, and that the mood between the two countries was still quite poor. During the August 1914 talks, Wallenberg had wanted Norway and Sweden to enter into some kind of neutral alliance, with particular sting against the Russian Empire. This was out of the question for Ihlen and the Norwegian government. The Norwegians had never been particularly worried about the Russians, and certainly not in the way the Swedes were. At the same time, a possible confrontation with Russia would also mean a confrontation with Russia's allies, namely France and not least Britain.

The risk that the Scandinavian countries would end up on different sides could therefore still not be written off. If Sweden were pressured, they might side with Germany.¹⁷ The Swedish



Norway quickly found himself in a squeeze between the Entente and the Central Powers. Drawing from the magazine

king was also married German, and everyone was aware that his sympathy lay with the German Empire. Now Gustav V did not have direct control over Sweden's foreign policy, but the distinction between royal power and government was not as clear as it was in Norway. Just before the war broke out, the liberal government in Sweden had chosen to resign after the king had publicly expressed his disagreement with the government's defense policy in a speech to a large procession of conservative Swedish farmers. Instead, a "civil servant government" headed by Hjalmar Hammarskjöld was appointed, but with a distinctly conservative orientation. Several members of the government, including the prime minister himself, were seen as very pro-German by the Norwegian government.¹⁸

Besides the problems with Sweden, it had been crucial to ensure that trade went as normally as possible. When war broke out, it quickly became clear that the British wanted to use naval power to impose a blockade on Germany. At first, the British had taken a line not too far from the London Declaration. By August 1914, Britain and France had declared that all conditional contraband, i.e. goods that could be used for both civilian and military purposes, would be stopped unless it could be guaranteed that the goods would not end up with the Central Powers. But with this regime, there had been two major holes in the blockade attempt. The first was that it was difficult to control, nor did it prevent merchant ships from passing through neutral waters, such as along the Norwegian coast. Second, this did not prevent the re-export of goods from neutral countries to the Central Powers.

It hadn't taken long for the British to tighten their grip further. In October 1914, the British demanded that Norway ensure that supplies from the Entente countries did not end up in the hands of the Central Powers, whether contraband or not. The Norwegian government had not agreed to this, as this would probably be interpreted by Germany as a serious violation of neutrality. Instead, the Norwegian government promised to keep the British "informed" if they were going to make any changes to the already existing export bans in Norway. At the outbreak of war, the Norwegian government had quickly introduced export bans on a number of goods Norway were completely dependent on, such as grain, coal and mineral oil. This had been introduced to secure Norwegian supply, but now that they were continued, it also meant a way of preventing the re-export of these goods that could also be useful to the central powers.

After German submarines had sunk several British cruisers in the North Sea, the entire area was declared a war zone, and all ships entering there from the north now did so at their own risk. The British had also mined parts of the North Sea. The British now wanted all ships going through the North Sea from west to east to pass through the Strait of Dover and follow the English coast until they could make their way through a safe passage to Lindesnes. This, of course, made it much easier for the British to control the ships for contraband. The British had also put pressure on Norwegian shipowners to get them on the blockade. First came the requirement to agree to voluntary inspections. Those who would not cooperate were blacklisted from taking on board coal at coal stations in the British Empire. The vast majority of shipping companies agreed. But a small minority chose to stay out. With this, shipping in the Norway effectively became divided into two parts between the larger global fleet that continued on the oceans at Britain's mercy, and a smaller part that operated freight to and from Germany.

When it became clear that the war was going to be protracted, things quickly got worse. The Germans had responded to the British blockade by introducing unrestricted submarine warfare. They had declared the entire area around Britain and Ireland a war zone, and all ships, even neutral ones, risked being sunk by German submarines without warning. Britain responded

by throwing the contraband rules into the sea and declaring a complete blockade of Germany. The unrestricted submarine war lasted only a few months, before Germany chose to abandon it under pressure from the United States. Britain's blockade, however, was maintained.

With this, Britain reserved the right to detain and port all kinds of ships, regardless of origin, cargo and destination. As the legal situation around this was unclear, the British hoped that fear of long stays would cause shipping companies to submit to further control by the British authorities.

The Norwegian government had protested, but was promised that the problems would cease if Norway established a government agency that could prevent re-export to Germany. The Norwegian government considered something like this to be going too far in violation of neutrality, as the Norwegian state would in many ways be directly involved in enforcing the blockade of Germany. The British, for their part, claimed that they were dependent on controls to ensure that products exported to Norway would be used in Norway, and not exported on to the central powers.

In August 1915, Ihlen had agreed to send representatives of the semi-private *State Trade, Industry and Maritime Committee* to London to explore the possibility of reaching a joint agreement with Great Britain. An agreement was drawn up that gave the British the right not only to control ships, but also domestic consumption in Norway and Norwegian companies. Ihlen himself had been inclined to agree to this proposal, but had not received the go-ahead from the rest of the government. He had also faced much opposition from both his own ministry and from private traders who were concerned that this information could give important advantages to competing British companies. At the same time, the British government also lost interest in the agreement, as a similar agreement that the British had made with Denmark had been heavily criticized in Britain for giving too much freedom to the Danes. The result was instead that the Norwegian business sector itself entered into "industry agreements" with the British government in which they were guaranteed imports in exchange for giving the British the opportunity to control consumption. After all, for Ihlen and the Norwegian government, this was preferable. This solution gave the Norwegian state an arm's length against the expansion of British economic warfare. At least formally speaking.

The battle for Norwegian goods

The inflated price of Norwegian copper is, in fact, the price of blood, -- the blood of the friendly people to whom Norway would necessarily look for assistance in time of need, and on whom she depends, not only for the continuance of her present prosperity and independence, but for her existence as one of the foremost sea-faring nations of the world.

Mandsfeldt de Cardonell Findlay, britisk minister i Kristiania. (7. april 1916)

In the Storting election at the end of 1915, a year and a half into the war, Ihlen and Knudsen were rewarded with renewed confidence from the voters, even with a slight increase in support. Ihlen and Knudsen had succeeded in keeping the country out of the war, and in spite of the war, much was going well financially in Norway. Much of the Norwegian merchant fleet had voluntarily allowed itself to be subjected to a British control regime, and more and more industry

groups in Norwegian business and industry did the same. But the need for international shipping had also skyrocketed, and Norwegian shipowners were earning money like never before. And although there had been stricter controls on opportunities for re-export to the Central Powers, there was still trade to Germany in goods produced in Norway. Demand for some of these goods had also skyrocketed, resulting in very good revenues for Norwegian producers. Compared with 1913, exports to Britain had increased by 50% in 1915. At the same time, exports to Germany had increased by 150%, overtaking the UK as Norway's largest export market.¹⁹



Jobbegrossereren: «Her eksporterer vi mat og kontra-bande iflæng, den ene dag til Berlin og den anden til London og endda paastaar de vi ikke er neutrale.»

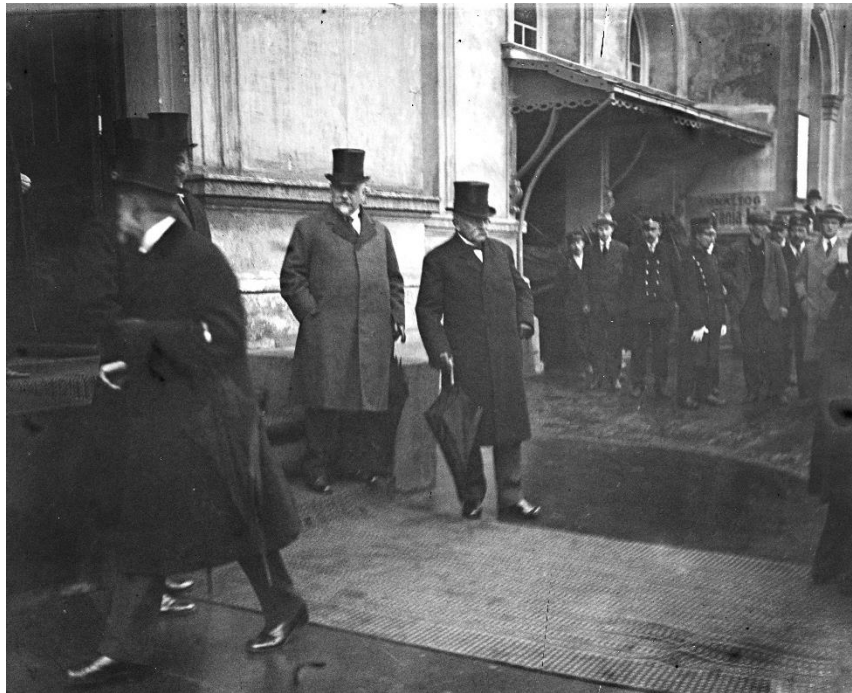
Norwegian exports experienced favourable times during the first years of the war. Drawing from The Wasp, 11.11.1916

The increased revenues were due not least to the fact that the warring parties actively tried to outbid each other in order to buy Norwegian goods. Either to secure these goods themselves, or to ensure that they did not get to the enemy. For example, times were very favourable at Norsk Hydro's plants at Notodden and in Rjukan, when their nitrate products played a key role in the production of high explosives. In the massive and intensive artillery war on the Western Front, the need here was virtually endless. Before

the war, most of the production had gone to Germany, but now it was bought by France, where Hydro alone accounted for about 30% of the French's nitrate needs. However, this was also made easier for the French, since the main owners of Norsk Hydro were French.

Another example was the Norwegian fish. Since the central powers had largely been cut off from world markets, they saw Norway and Norwegian fish as an opportunity to improve the food supply. To prevent this, the British had also jumped on to buy Norwegian fish. The result was that the British were able to buy up 70-80% of the spring fishery in 1916. But this had cost the British a lot of money, and they quickly concluded that they were not interested in continuing a price war against the Germans over Norwegian fish. Instead, they wanted the Norwegian government to support a continuation of the scheme, but with a price cap, which would be made publicly known to all fishermen. If Norway were not willing to accept this, the British floated the possibility of cutting off exports of supply goods to the Norwegian fishing fleet, such as oil and coal. Once again, the British tried to get the Norwegian government to conclude an agreement that officially incorporated the country into the British economic warfare. After much back and forth, Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen finally cut through in the summer of 1916. Fisheries exports were to be divided up and reserved to the countries supplying the fishing fleet, so that Britain could have the right to import the part it supplied, and Germany could have the right to import the part it supplied. Germany's share was set at 15%, and Britain was then allowed to buy the rest at the maximum price.

Prior to this, the government had avoided directly participating in British rationing policy, but rather leaving it to Norwegian businesses. The split by 15% to Germany locked in fisheries exports in favour of Britain. Ihlen himself was unsure whether they had rushed into the agreement with Britain, and did not investigate whether Germany was willing to allocate larger



Minister of Foreign Affairs Ihlen (left) and Prime Minister Gunnar Knudsen (right) at the Scandinavian ministerial meeting in Kristiania, 1916. Photo:

supplies to the fishing fleet to cover for the British.²⁰ Formally, the agreement was secret, but the Central Powers soon became aware of its contents and protested. But the Central Powers did not have similar means of pressure readily available, and the government stood its ground, despite all doubts.

Admittedly, the controversy surrounding the fisheries agreement would pale in comparison to the copper agreement signed at the same time. Norway was a major producer of copper ore and pyrite, much of which went to Germany. Where many other industries had

entered into industry agreements with the UK, the mining industry had largely stayed out and continued exports to Germany. Germany's copper shortage was acute. The Germans had gone so far as to melt down many of the country's church bells to obtain copper for ammunition.²¹ But the copper pyrite also had another important use. Norwegian copper pyrite consists primarily of pyrite, which consists of iron and sulphur. The difference between pyrite and pyrite therefore depended only on how high the copper content was in the pyrite. Sulphur was also a key input for the production of gunpowder, among other things, which made it just as important as copper for ammunition production, and here Norway was one of the Central Powers' most important sources of sulphur.

The Norwegian government had long been aware that this was something the entente wanted to stop. Here, too, the British had an additional means of pressure. Despite the fact that Norway extracted a lot of copper ore, there was no processing in Norway. Norway was therefore dependent on importing finished copper products, including copper wire for the rapidly growing electricity development. The UK had an industry agreement with the copper industry in the US, which was then the world's largest copper producer, and through it had the possibility of cutting off Norway from all copper products from there. The Norwegian government had responded by referring to international law and the right of a neutral party to continue trading, while preparing for some form of restriction to be unavoidable. By March 1916, Ihlen had begun to prepare the German minister for just that. When a group of Norwegian pyrite exporters tried to get an

industry agreement with the British around the same time, they received the answer that this would not be relevant unless the Norwegian government introduced an export ban.

Around the same time as the government chose to break the taboo against formally being included in the British rationing policy in the fisheries agreement, the Norwegian government submitted a proposal to the British for a copper agreement. The draft, written in Norwegian, contained a proposal to ban exports of "copper, copper ore, copper-containing pyrite" in return for a commitment by the British that the British would ensure that Norway could import 10,000 tonnes of refined copper. By and large, the British agreed and signed the treaty with minor modifications at the end of August. As with the fisheries agreement, this had been an unpleasant break with the previous policy of keeping the state at a formal neutral distance from the implementation of the British blockade system. At the same time, the agreement had some appeasement points towards the Germans, as it allowed the German-owned mines in Stordø and Bossmo to continue exporting pyrite, as the pyrite in these mines had a lower copper content than that used in copper production. This was also Ihlen's message to the German minister and the mining companies.²²

Admittedly, the British had had other plans. Within a month, a sharp message came from the British minister in Kristiania that they perceived that Norway had violated the copper agreement as Norway continued to export pyrite containing copper. Such a break, the minister threatened, would lead to a "swift and drastic" restructuring of British coal policy. Whether it was due to an actual misunderstanding or a deliberate misunderstanding, the British had chosen to interpret "copper-containing pyrite" as all pyrite containing the slightest trace of copper, rather than which ores could realistically extract copper from. This entailed a complete ban on all pyrite, since all Norwegian pyrite contained *some* copper. At the same time, the completion of the associated industry agreement was complicated by the fact that the British were only willing to give a very low price for the purchase of Norwegian ore. The acquisition agreement with the Kisexport Association in Norway meant that the British would buy all available pyrite after the needs of neutral Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands had been met. The acquisitions and price negotiations were conducted by British pyrite mining giant Rio Tinto on behalf of the British government. This company was Europe's largest pyrite company, and was in direct competition with the mining companies in Norway.

As negotiations dragged on, the British threatened that the 3,000 tons of refined copper Norway promised immediately in the original agreement to address critical shortages would not be sent until the contract between the export association and Rio Tinto was signed. As a result, Ihlen had chosen to put pressure on the pyrite exporters to get them to sign the contract towards the end of October 1916. At the same time, Ihlen and the government agreed to impose a general export ban on all pyrite with any trace of copper, unless it was compensated for by a refined copper equivalent to the copper content of the exported pyrite.²³ Britain would also be given pre-emptive rights to all pyrite until it had purchased pyrite equivalent to the 3,000 tonnes Norway was promised.

But Ihlen had also already made promises to the Germans. Despite the export ban, the Norwegian view was that the German-owned mines could still export pyrite to Germany if Norway were compensated for the copper content in return. In any case, Germany would not be supplied with additional copper. Despite constant protests from the British minister in Kristiania, Ihlen denied that the agreement with the British applied to anything other than copper-containing ore that could actually be used to extract copper.²⁴ The German-owned mines

also did not join the pyrite export association, and were therefore not part of the purchase agreement with the British. In this way, the German-owned mines were allowed to continue exporting even after the general export ban on pyrite was introduced.

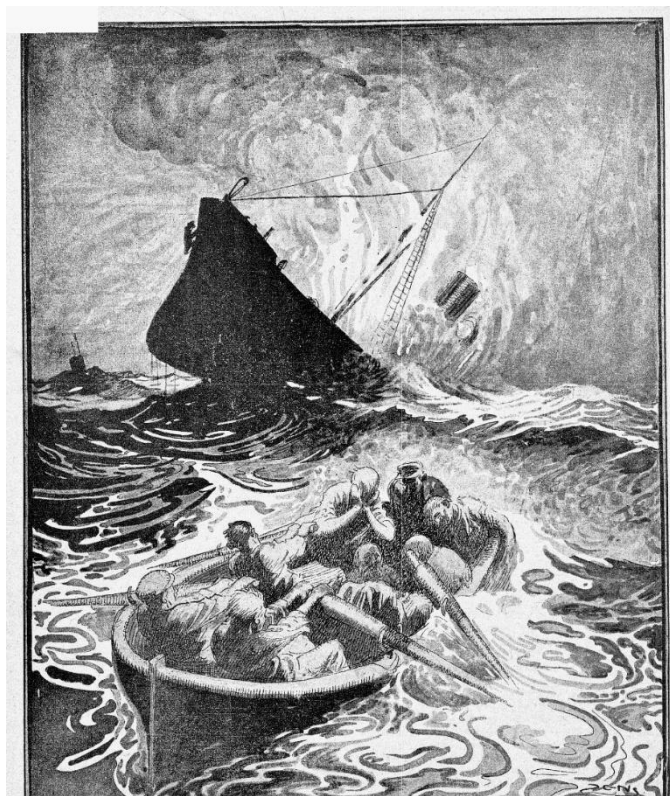
The British stood their ground, and with that, the situation seemed deadlocked. The situation did not get any easier after Britain got a new government in December 1916. The new British Prime Minister David Lloyd George had previously served as Minister of Supply and Secretary of War, and stood for a harder and more uncompromising conduct of the war. Shortly after the inauguration of Lloyd George, there was a sharp message from the British that they regarded the copper agreement as a breach on the Norwegian side, and that it had to be fulfilled by the Norwegians immediately. After the Christmas lights were lit in the Foreign Minister's residence on Christmas Eve, Ihlen had received an unexpected visit from Findlay, the British minister in Kristiania. The brief brutal message was unmistakable. All export licences for coal to Norway had been revoked. They would remain so until Norway complied with British interpretation of the copper agreement. Merry Christmas.

Ihlen's dilemma

The consequences were not long in coming. It was quickly estimated that existing coal stocks in Norway would be sufficient for about three months of normal consumption. Rationing and switching to wood-burning would stretch these stockpiles further, but this was undoubtedly a very serious threat. Outside in the cold January winter, coal prices skyrocketed rapidly, as many of Kristiania's residents had to prepare to freeze. Now what?

Sweden had always taken a firmer line towards the British. Whether it was due either to principledness or to hidden German sympathies, Swedish Prime Minister Hammarskjöld had shown little flexibility in his interpretation of neutrals' rights in international law. But the Swedes had also experienced their own import dependence. In October 1916, Sweden was forced to ration sugar, and by New Year 1917 bread also became a ration commodity. Not everyone in Sweden seemed to be happy with Hammarskjöld's approach, and more and more often one could hear the nickname "Hungerskjöld" in the streets of Stockholm.²⁵

Ihlen had suggested to the Germans that they would continue to receive deliveries of pyrite, which for Ihlen had been the prerequisite in the draft agreement with the British. Was



The sinking of Norwegian ships carrying goods to the Russian Empire made a great impression on Norwegian public opinion. Here from The Wasp 17.02.1917

there a point where Norwegian neutrality was stretched too much, and the Germans might push back?²⁶ If so, what would that entail? Germany had already stepped up the submarine war that autumn, especially in the Arctic Ocean, where the Entente transported supplies to the Russian Empire. From September to the end of the year, Norwegian ships equivalent to 303,000 tonnes of deadweight had been sunk.²⁷ German submarines usually gave their crews the opportunity to abandon the ship before they were sunk, but despite this, more than 57 Norwegian sailors had died as a result of the sinkings.²⁸ The sinkings had created much resentment against the Germans, but also a feeling that this was a response from Germany to Norway enlistment in the British blockade.²⁹ The demand for insurance against air attacks increased rapidly in Kristiania, and the Norwegian General Staff ordered the military units along the coast to prepare for blacking out Kristiansand, Bergen and Trondhjem.³⁰

As a protest against the sinkings and in response to the anger in Norwegian public opinion, the government had introduced a ban on submarines in Norwegian waters, unless it was necessary to save lives on submarines in distress. This was in contrast to other warships, which under international law had access to neutral waters (see page 3).³¹ But while the submarine laws were more of a response to pressure from home, the entente had also been eager to encourage this. At the same time, the British pushed for a solution where Norwegian ships could be reflagged so that they could go into convoy with the Entente protection.

Did the British actively try to push Norway into the war against Germany? Both Britain and France had assured Norway of support should Germany take action against Norway. There were also those who wanted this to happen, such as Ihlen and Knudsen's resigned Minister of Social Affairs, Johan Castberg. How would this affect relations with Sweden? It was a well-known fact that the Swedish king had German sympathies, and the Germans had already tried to air the possibilities of dragging Sweden into the war on the side of the central powers. Could Sweden and Norway end up on opposite sides and go to war with each other anyway, after the war had been avoided in 1905?

There were many questions, and few alluring ways forward when Ihlen set about preparing the government's plan for the road ahead. But one thing was clear to him: the choice the government made would have major consequences for Norway's foreign policy future.

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Endnotes

¹ Based on: Kåre Fasting, *Nils Claus Ihlen* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1955); Per Fuglum, *One ship - one skipper: Gunnar Knudsen as Prime Minister 1908-10 and 1913-20* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1989); Gunnar Knudsen, *Memoirs 1905-1925*, ed. Harald Bache Bystrøm (Grenmar forl., 1998).

² J.V. Heiberg, ed., *Dissolution of the Union 1905* (Stenersen, 1906), 715.

³ Roald Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*, History of Norwegian Foreign Policy, (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995), 68-71.

⁴ Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*; Olav Riste, *Norway's foreign relations -- A history* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2005).

⁵ Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*, 83-86.

⁶ Knut Ola Naastad Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea: Trade negotiations between the Western Allies and the Scandinavian neutrals 1914-1919" (Ph.D. University of Gothenburg, 2019), 52.

⁷ Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," 54.

⁸ Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," 75.

⁹ For a more detailed review, see Chapter 6 of the Abbenhuis Maartje, *An Age of Neutrals : Great Power Politics, 1815–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 178-218. See also Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," 66-67.

¹⁰ Maartje, *An Age of Neutrals : Great Power Politics, 1815–1914*, 205.

¹¹ For the full text of the London Declaration, see Schindler Dietrich and Toman Jiri, *The Laws of Armed Conflicts : A Collection of Conventions, Resolutions and Other Documents; Fourth Revised and Completed Edition*, 4 ed. (Leiden: Brill & Nijhoff, 2004), Book, 1113-22.. For contraband see in particular Articles 22, 24 and 28.

¹² Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 145.

¹³ Riste, *Norway's foreign relations -- A history*, 88.

¹⁴ Andreas R. D. Sanders, "Europe's Northern Resource Frontier: The political economy of resource nationalism in Sweden and Norway 1888-1936" (Ph.D. European University Institute, 2018).

¹⁵ Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*, 36-37, 80-82, 94-97; Riste, *Norway's foreign relations -- A history*, 72-73, 81.

¹⁶ The representation of Norway during the First World War is based on: Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea."; Olav Riste, *The neutral ally : Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War* (University Press, 1965); Wilhelm Keilhau, *Norway and the World War* (Aschehoug, 1927); Mountain *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*; Riste, *Norway's foreign relations -- A history*; Patrick Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers: 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Where no further endnotes are listed, this is the literature.

¹⁷ In particular, there were rumors of the possibility that Sweden could join the German side in the spring of 1915. See: Rolf Hobson and Tom Kristiansen, *Total war, neutrality and political division*, vol. 3, Norsk forsvarshistorie, (Bergen: Eide forlag, 2001), 116. Gustav V had tried to dissuade the Italians from joining the war. Later, the king was offered an alliance with the Central Powers, with Åland and Swedish "leadership in the Nordic countries" as possible Swedish spoils. But many in the Swedish government were sceptical, and Gustav V finally had to announce that it was out of the question for Sweden to join the war without a cause of war that united the entire country. Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers: 1890-1940*, 146-49. The details of this do not seem to have been known at the time.

¹⁸ Knudsen, *Memoirs 1905-1925*, 111.

¹⁹ Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," 106.

²⁰ Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*, 201.

²¹ Jonas Scherner, "Learning and Learning Failure: The Metal Mobilization in the German Reich 1939 to 1945," *Quarterly Journals of Contemporary History* 66, no. 2 (2018).

²² Riste, *The neutral ally : Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War*, 113.

²³ Riste, *The neutral ally : Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War*, 117.

²⁴ Riste, *The neutral ally : Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War*, 117.

²⁵ Strøm, "Between the devil and the deep blue sea," 156-65.

²⁶ Foreign Minister Ihlen was concerned about the possibility of either Britain or Germany capturing a Norwegian coastal city for use as a support point in the naval war – primarily Kristiansand, as well as the threat of bombing from the Zeppelins. Subsequent investigations have shown that Germany had no plans to invade Norway. Germany would only take military countermeasures if Norway became active on the side of the Entente, but the plans outlined only limited measures and also contained reservations that much of this could hardly be implemented. The British, for their part, were less worried about the consequences of whether or not Norway joined the war, but ultimately concluded that their interests were best served by Norway remaining neutral – at least as long as Britain generally gained acceptance for its demands. See: Karl Erik Haug, "Between the belligerents: British and German (war) plans and views on Norwegian neutrality during World War I," in *World War I: War, Neutrality and Consequences*, ed. Knut Arstad and Bue Wigernes (Oslo: Forsvarsmuseet, 2020), 153-54; Hobson and Kristiansen, *Total war, neutrality and political division*, 3, 141; Salmon, *Scandinavia and the Great Powers: 1890-1940*.

²⁷ Johan Schreiner, *Norwegian shipping during war and boom 1914-1920* (Cappelen, 1963), 134.

²⁸ Keilhau, *Norway and the World War*, 63.

²⁹ Riste, *The neutral ally : Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War*, 130.

³⁰ Keilhau, *Norway and the World War*, 147; Berg, *Norway on your own : 1905-1920*, 221.

³¹ Riste, *Norway's foreign relations -- A history*, 99.