

# Geography and history of the netherlands - essay



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The Netherlands, which is a country in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, is located in Northwestern Europe. The country is often referred to as Holland, which is technically incorrect, due to Holland being economically and politically dominant in the 17th century (Janin, 2008). The Netherlands is also often called the Low Countries because the name Netherlands comes from the word neder meaning “ low”, and lands meaning “ countries” (Seward, 1995). The country is bordered by the North Sea to the North and West, Germany to the East, and Belgium to the South.

The Netherlands has a total of 12 provinces including Drenthe, Flevoland, Friesland (Fryslan), Gelderland, Groningen, Limburg, Noord-Brabant (North Brabant), Noord-Holland (North Holland), Overijssel, Utrecht, Zeeland, and Zuid-Holland (South Holland) (“ Government”, 2008). The four major cities in the Netherlands are Amsterdam (the capital city), The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht. These four cities make up what is known as Randstad which has a population of 10 million (Janin, 2008). Amsterdam is named after a dam on

the Amstel river. The tourist industry has really added to Amsterdam's importance over the past few decades. Amsterdam's progressive attitude is apparent in its legal red light district and leniency towards the use of drugs (Seward, 1995).

The Netherlands is very densely populated with a total population of about 16,400,000, with about 760,000 people living in Amsterdam-the capital of the Netherlands. Approximately 1,202 people live per square mile, which is 20 times the United States' per mile population (Janin, 2008). This is not due to the excessive amount of people so much as it is to the small size of the country, which is a little smaller than West Virginia in the United States (Seward, 1995). The population is growing at a rate of 0.412 percent annually. Females have a life expectancy of 82.14 years, which is 5.34 years greater than male's life expectancy, 76.8 years. The nationality and ethnicity is predominantly Dutch ("Background Note", 2009).

The Netherlands is not very geographically diverse. Most of the country is very flat. The highest point of elevation is 1,056 feet and is located in the southern tip of the country. The lowest point of elevation is more than 22 feet below sea level located near Rotterdam (Janin, 2008). The Netherlands maintains a Northern maritime climate with cool summers and mild winters. The temperature barely dips below freezing or rises above 80 degrees Fahrenheit, which makes for a very tolerable climate year-round. However, precipitation levels are rising yearly. Rain is very common throughout the whole year especially in the winter, so water levels are higher than before. Coastal regions can experience more Mediterranean climates, whereas the midlands are more foggy and rainy ("Climate", 2009).

The geographical location of the Netherlands has been the decisive factor in shaping its development, the character of its people, and their culture (Seward, 1995). Almost 20 percent of the Netherlands consists of water-rivers, lakes, canals, locks, ponds, slootjes (narrow drainage ditches), and of course the North Sea (Janin, 2008). Since almost half of the Netherlands lies below sea level, flooding is the main natural hazard concern. Dikes are the single most important factor shaping the Dutch landscape. Dike making in the Dutch culture dates back to 500 BC when rudimentary mounds of dirt were used (Janin, 2008). The dikes shield approximately 1, 491 miles of the low flat land. Without this protection, it is estimated that 65 percent of the country would be flooded daily (National Geographic Society, n. d.).

Natural resources of the Netherlands include natural gas, petroleum, peat, limestone, salt, sand, and gravel (" Land Mass Total", 2008).

## **History**

The Netherlands has been invaded and occupied by foreign powers for much of its history. From the 14th to the 16th centuries, The Netherlands came under a succession of three foreign rulers-the French Burgundians, the Austrian Hapsburgs, and the Spanish. The 80 Years' War of Independence lasted from 1568 through 1648. The events leading up to the war began in 1515, when Charles I of Spain inherited the Low Countries and acquired the remaining Dutch provinces. Amsterdam was tolerant of Protestants, which made Charles increasingly concerned by the Protestant revolt. As a result, Catholicism was imposed on Amsterdam (" Netherlands", 2009).

Phillip II, who was Charles' son, took the thrown in 1555. Phillip sent the Duke of Alva to restore Catholic control of Amsterdam in 1567. Just one year later, Prince William of Orange raised an army to fight the Spanish. The war was predominantly about religion; however, Phillip also wanted to put a stop to the rapidly growing economy of the Dutch because it was a threat to the Spanish (Seward, 1995). By 1572, William had captured Zeeland and Holland. Both the Dutch Catholics and Protestants put their differing religious beliefs to the side to fight the Spanish. However, the northern Dutch provinces were predominantly Protestant, and the southern Dutch provinces were mainly Catholic.

The Union of Utrecht Treaty, under which the seven northern provinces declared themselves the independent United Provinces of the Netherlands, was signed in 1581. Meanwhile, the southern provinces remained under Spanish Catholic domination (Seward, 1995). The 80 Years' War of Independence was put to rest in 1648 when Spain finally recognized the Netherlands' independence. This historical event has been named the Dutch Revolt.

The Dutch East India Company was founded in Amsterdam in 1602. This was established to control and oversee trade between the United Provinces and territories in the Indian Ocean. Commerce started to expand in 1621 when the Dutch West India Company was established. This handled trading with the Americas and Africa. This expansion of commerce led to great wealth for the United Provinces (Seward, 1995). Spiritual and cultural life began to flourish. This time period is known as the Golden Age of the Dutch. Many

Dutch painters, particularly Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals, and Ruysdael, flourished during the Golden Age (Seward, 1995).

This new found prosperity led to wars with other European countries. The Dutch and British went to war twice over control of the sea. The Dutch continued to fight with the Spanish on into the early 18th century (Seward, 1995). The War of the Spanish Succession lasted for 12 years total. This war depleted the Dutch's finances which led to the end of the Golden Age. The Dutch maintained their independence for 150 years until the rise of the French Empire in Napoleonic times brought their independence to an end.

In 1806, Napoleon Bonaparte made his brother Louis king of Holland. By 1810, the country had been annexed to France. The Kingdom of the Netherlands came into being in 1814, and ended the French occupation. The Netherlands discarded their republican system of government, and became a constitutional monarchy under King William I (Seward, 1995). The constitution of 1814 made ministers accountable to an elected parliament. This constitution is still in force today.

During World War I, the Netherlands remained neutral. However, they were still attacked by the Germans when the Netherlands' merchant navy was taken over by allied forces. The Netherlands was invaded by the Germans again in May of 1940 during World War II. German occupation of the Netherlands lasted five years and inflicted misery, humiliation, and degradation of the population (Seward, 1995). Food shortages, forced labor, lack of freedom, curfews, and censorship were common. The Dutch Jews were deported to concentration camps. The Dutch quickly rallied and started

a Dutch resistance movement. However, the Germans retaliated with random killings after each act of defiance.

## **Government and Politics**

Although it is not the capital of the Netherlands, the government and administration of the country is located in The Hague. The Netherlands is structured as a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system of government. It is governed under an 1815 constitution which has been revised and most recently amended in 2002. The monarchy is hereditary (“Government”, 2008). The government consists of three branches-executive, legislative, and judicial.

The executive branch of government consists of the chief of state, head of government, and cabinet. Queen Beatrix has been the chief of state since April 30, 1980. The head of government is Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, and has been since July 22, 2002. The council of ministers (cabinet) is appointed by the monarch. Following Second Chamber elections, the leader of the majority party or leader of a majority coalition is usually appointed Prime Minister by the monarch. Deputy Prime Ministers are also appointed by the monarch (“Government”, 2008).

The legislative branch of government (known as the Bicameral States General) consists of the First Chamber (Eerste Kamer) and the Second Chamber (Tweede Kamer) (“Government”, 2008). The First Chamber has a total of 75 seats. Members are indirectly elected by the country’s 12 regional councils. They are elected to serve four-year terms. The Second Chamber has a total of 150 seats. Contrary to the First Chamber member, Second

Chamber members are directly elected by popular vote by the country's 12 regional councils. Similarly to the First Chamber members, they are elected to serve four-year terms. The judicial branch is solely Supreme Court (Hoge Raad) justices ("Government", 2008). They are nominated by the monarch to serve for life.

## **Economy**

The Netherlands has played a special role in the European economy since the 16th century. The country has a prosperous and open economy, which depends heavily on foreign trade, making it the 16th largest economy in the world (The New World Encyclopedia, 2008). The economy is noted for stable industrial relations, moderate unemployment and inflation, and a sizable current account surplus ("Economy and Trade", 2009). The country is one of the four largest investors in the United States.

The euro has been the legal tender of the Netherlands since 2002, replacing its former currency, the Dutch guilder. Even in these tough economic times, the euro is holding a very strong value in the market. The euro surpassed the value of a pound for the second time ever on September 21, 2009. The currency experts at BNP Paribas in London predict that the euro will rise to \$1.54 by the end of 2009 (Ram, 2009).

The Netherlands felt the global financial crisis the worst in the fall of 2008. The Dutch economy entered recession in the fourth quarter of 2008. As a result of the global economic downturn, the unemployment rate is expected to increase to 5.5 percent in 2009 and 9.5 percent in 2010. Similarly to the United States, the Dutch government has launched three economic stimulus



packages since November of 2008. All three stimulus packages combined total \$17.3 billion, or approximately 2 percent of the current gross domestic product ("Background Note", 2009). The Dutch government will not cut its stimulus spending until 2011, unless the economy significantly recovers.

The highest-valued import products are machinery and transport equipment, chemicals, fuels, foodstuffs, and clothing. The Netherlands imports the most goods from Germany (17 percent of total imports), followed by China 10.3 percent, Belgium 9 percent, the United States 7.6 percent, the United Kingdom 5.8 percent, Russia 5.2 percent, and France 4.5 percent ("World Fact Book", 2009). The top exports include machinery and equipment, chemicals, fuels, and foodstuffs. The top export partners include Germany (24.4 percent of total exports), followed by Belgium 13.6 percent, the United Kingdom 9.1 percent, France 8.5 percent, Italy 5.1 percent, and the United States 4.3 percent ("Economy and Trade", 2009).

As of 2008, 7.75 million people participated in the labor force of the Netherlands, with 80 percent of them working in the services industry. The agricultural sector employs no more than 3 percent of the labor force, but provides large surpluses for the food-processing industry and for exports ("Country Facts", 2008).

Women make up 70 percent of all part-time employees. Over the last two decades many changes have been made to the Dutch employment laws. These changes have helped increase the role of women in the Dutch economy. However, despite these legal provisions, women still fall behind men in terms of income. According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and

Employment, the wage difference between men and women is 24 percent (“Women in Business”, 2008). Dutch women rarely hold high managerial positions, particularly in the trade and industry sector. In fact, only 4 percent of all executive positions are women.

## **Culture**

The Netherlands prides itself on being a true egalitarian society. The gap between rich and poor people in the Netherlands is not as visible as it is in the United States, Britain, or other developed countries. In fact, since the end of World War II, the Dutch have basically eliminated life-threatening poverty in their country. Currently, it is estimated that only two percent of the population falls below the poverty line, which is set relatively high (Janin, 2008). The Dutch welfare system sets the poverty level so high because they offer a vast array of unemployment, housing, and other social benefits.

The Dutch are known as very blunt people. They are not known to be very intelligent, tolerant, or considerate people. They are usually not known to be very prosperous or friendly either.

Labor shortages in the 1970s prompted the Dutch to recruit large numbers of workers from foreign countries. Many came with their families from Turkey and Morocco to settle in the Netherlands permanently. These settlers, combined with the immigrants that came from Suriname and the Antilles in the 1980s, turned the Netherlands into a multiracial society (Janin, 2008).

Religion is somewhat predominate throughout the Netherlands. Roman Catholic, the most widely accepted religion in the country, is practiced by 30

percent of the total population. However, 42 percent of the total population does not practice any religion ("The People, 2008).

The Netherlands used to be known for its windmills, tulips, and clogs. However, more recently the Netherlands has been in the spotlight for its liberal policies towards drugs and prostitution, making it infamously known as the most socially tolerant society in the world. However, as of 2008, it was ranked as the eighth happiest country in the world (Mabe, 2008).

## **Education**

Education is of utmost importance to a certain sector of the population in the Netherlands, predominantly being the middle to upper class (Janin, 2008). About one-third of the elementary and secondary schools in the Netherlands are public, and about two-thirds are nonpublic, mainly Roman Catholic or Protestant. Major institutions of higher education include the University of Amsterdam, and the state universities of Groningen, Leiden, and Utrecht.

## **Environment**

Major environmental issues in the Netherlands include water pollution, air pollution, and acid rain. Water pollution occurs in the form of heavy metals, organic compounds, and nutrients such as nitrates and phosphates. Air pollution is primarily from vehicles and refining activities ("Land Mass Total", 2008). Industrial activity in the Netherlands resides mainly in food processing, chemicals, petroleum refining, and electrical machinery. This had led to major environmental issues in this densely populated country. The government is currently working closely with industry and nongovernmental organizations to reach environmental targets. The Dutch accepted the

European Union's 2008 order to cut greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent from 1990 levels. The European Union also expects the Dutch to increase power obtained from renewable sources to 20 percent by 2020. The Environment Ministry recently released its plan requiring the entire Dutch Government to procure only sustainable, green goods and services as of 2010 (" Background Note", 2009).

Consequentially, protecting the environment is becoming increasingly important to the Netherlands which is similarly becoming more evident to the rest of the world. Waste management is very difficult due to the limited amount of land available to landfill. Waste is either incinerated to produce energy or exported elsewhere for disposal. Recently, they have been very proactive in creating an energy efficient plant which converts waste into energy-named the W2E plant. Amsterdam has created the Afval Energie Bedrijf (AEB) plant which is capable of producing 1 million MWh of electricity annually. In addition, the plant is also being used to create district heating for several communities around Amsterdam. It produces about 300, 000 gigajoules of heat annually. Located beside the W2E plant is the Waternet Water Treatment Plant . The waste incineration plant supplies energy and heat for water the treatment processes allowing the two plants to work together. The water treatment plant injects its sludge and biogas into the incineration plant as an additional fuel source (Tobias, 2009).

The Dutch Postcode Lottery was founded in 1989 to create a greener world. The Dutch Postcode Lottery is the Netherlands' biggest, most popular charitable lottery. It currently supports 64 charity organizations, including UNICEF, WWF and Amnesty International. It also donates €700, 000 in "

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Green Challenge” money. People can enter their green inventions in the Green Challenge contest to compete to win money. This contest started in early 2007 to promote the need for “ green” inventions (Green Challenge, n. d.).