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N. 3
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Fascicolo 11. Giugno 2022
Storia Militare Moderna

a cura di
VIRGILIO ILARI



Società Italiana di Storia Militare

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Direzione, Via Bosco degli Arvali 24, 00148 Roma
Contatti: direzione@nam-sigm.org ; virgilio.ilari@gmail.com

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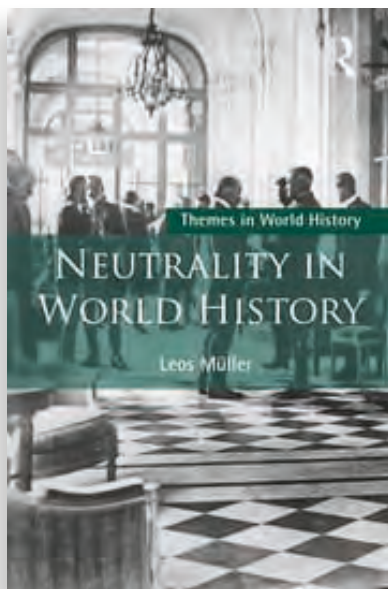


Testiera (Shaffron) per cavallo, Brescia (?) 1560-70
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LEOS MÜLLER

Neutrality in World History

London, Routledge, 2019, pp. vii + 188



In *Neutrality in World History*, author Leos Müller offers a conceptual overview of the historical development of neutrality during the last five centuries. He does so concisely and pedagogically. The volume belongs to Routledge's series *Themes in World History*, which aims at providing a general readership with serious, if brief, discussions of selected topics. Müller immediately explains that in its stricter sense, neutrality presupposes an armed conflict "between two legally equal sovereign parts, where a third (neutral) part stays impartial"¹. More broadly, the term can also be used in peacetime to indicate a pledge that one state makes to not ally itself with any part in a future war (long-term non-alignment) or a declaration of neutrality by a state directed to the international community (permanent neutrality). Although the legal and political status of non-alignment

1 Leos MÜLLER, *Neutrality in World History*, London, Routledge, 2019, p. 4.

or declarations of permanent neutrality varies, in principle, they all imply that the state concerned will stay neutral in an upcoming military conflict.

Within this broad understanding of neutrality, the author identifies three interrelated dimensions of neutrality relevant to his analysis: legal, economic, and foreign policy oriented². Therefore, the book adopts a broad approach, combining global history, maritime history, international relations, and international law. The same applies from a temporal and geographical perspective. However, the focus lies unequivocally on the European continent and its neutrals, which the author considers through the lens of the “Westphalian state system”, based on the sovereignty and equality between states³. Only in the final chapter extra European/American forms of “neutrality” are given some space, especially regarding the creation of the non-aligned movement in the context of the Cold War (pp. 153-159).

A brief introduction explains the author’s aims and angles of analysis (pp. 1-17). Chapter 2 conventionally situates the ‘birth of maritime neutrality’ in the Early Modern Age, following the demise of the medieval just war doctrine and the exploration of the world oceans with their new trading routes (*Birth of Maritime Neutrality: 1500–1650*, pp. 18-42). Chapter 3 considers the coming to maturity of neutrality in doctrine and state practice during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were marked by recurrent naval conflicts. The author focuses on maritime neutrality, arguing that territorial neutrality was far less and successful in practice until the end of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Chapter 4 addresses the widespread practice and legal codification of neutrality in nineteenth-century European international relations (Chapter 4: *The Golden Age of Neutrality: 1814–1914*, pp. 84-123). Chapter 5 addresses the existential challenges faced by neutral policies in the total war context imposed by the two world conflicts, focusing on the Swedish and Swiss experiences. Then, it outlines

2 Ibid., p. 165.

3 Ibid., p. 7. The “Westphalian Myth” has been thoroughly questioned in recent decades, notably among historians of international law and international relations. See, for instance, Andreas OSIANDER, «Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth», *International Organization*, 55, 2, 2001, pp. 251–287; Stephane BEAULAC, «The Westphalian Model in Defining International Law: Challenging the Myth», *Australian Journal of Legal History*, 8, 2004, pp. 181-213. For a list of references on the issue, see Randall LESAFFER, *International Law and its History: Story of an Unrequited Love, Histories*, in Matthew CRAVEN, Malgosia FITZMAURICE & Maria VOGIATZI (Eds.), *Time, History and International Law*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, p. 39.

the developments from the creation of the UN to our times (*Neutrality in Trouble: 1914–2016*, pp. 124-164). Lastly, the author provides some brief concluding remarks (pp. 164-165). The author, Leos Müller, is Professor of History and Head of the Centre for Maritime Studies at Stockholm University in Sweden. He has published widely on early modern maritime history, focusing primarily on Scandinavian history in a global perspective. His background profitably influences the volume's focus on the "maritime dimension" of neutrality in the Early Modern Age, which he conceives as the formative period of the modern understanding of neutrality. Throughout the book Müller highlights neutrality's intimate connection with the sea, arguing that "most of the tangible history of neutrality between 1500 and 1800 actually concerns maritime neutrality"⁴.

Furthermore, the author argues that states that upheld neutrality for significant periods of their history, such as Switzerland, Denmark-Norway, Sweden, and Belgium, have played a significant historical role in many ways. First, their policies provided "an alternative to the early modern warlike and unpredictable aspects of international relations", and an important factor of stability in Europe. Second, they advocated a free trade paradigm, becoming key global centres of trade and finance. Neutral trade usually reduced the damaging economic impact of warfare. Third, neutrality played a role in the rise of internationalism, humanitarianism, and the peace movement. Thus, it contributed to the foundations of the twentieth-century international organisations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations⁵.

Undoubtedly, in countries like Sweden, Switzerland and Austria, neutrality is still perceived as "a predominantly favourable national characteristic, still enjoying strong public support. And it is perceived, too, as a unique characteristic, setting them apart from other nations"⁶. In other words, although throughout history, neutrality has often been criticised as unrealistic, based on realist arguments of the Melian type, or immoral, for instance regarding Swedish and Swiss posture during World War Two⁷, neutral policies have often, albeit far from always, guaranteed peace and economic prosperity to the countries that chose them. Focusing on the role of smaller neutral countries, *Neutrality in World History* offers an al-

4 Ibid., p. 8.

5 Ibid., pp. 2-3.

6 Ibid., p. 165.

7 Ibid., pp. 10-11, 135-144.

ternative to dominant world history narratives centred primarily on the aspects of international relations dominated by empires and great powers.

The author highlights the close relationship between attitudes concerning the morality of neutrality and the ever-changing political and economic circumstances characterising European international politics during the last five hundred years. The starting point is the medieval negation of neutrality as fundamentally immoral, followed by the gradual affirmation of the concept in the Modern Age, ending with a renewed theoretical and factual questioning of neutrality during the twentieth century.

The author took on a difficult challenge: condensing five centuries of the development of a topic as complex as neutrality in less than two hundred pages. Considering his broad approach, it is inevitable to find some imprecision and vagueness in specific passages. For instance, when the author implies a stark difference between Hugo Grotius' and Alberico Gentili's thoughts on the acceptability of neutrality⁸. Footnotes are limited to a minimum; however, the author provides a helpful 'further reading' section at the end of each chapter. Unfortunately, recent scholarship by legal historians and historians of international law whose perspectives would have enriched the author's perspective are not included⁹.

In conclusion, *Neutrality in World History* provides its readers with a valid, albeit non-exhaustive, introduction to neutrality's place in the historical development of international relations. It has the merit of highlighting the central role played by seas and oceans in the development of the concept during the 17th and 18th centuries. Moreover, it centres the analysis on the significant role played by neutral small-medium powers in international relations during great powers' conflicts as well as in peacetime.

STEFANO CATTELAN¹⁰

8 MÜLLER, *Neutrality in World History*, cit., p. 8. See Valentina VADI, *War and Peace. Alberico Gentili and the Early Modern Law of Nations*, Leiden, Brill- Nijhoff, 2021.

9 For instance, Eric SCHNAKENBOURG, *Entre la guerre et la paix. Neutralité et relations internationales, XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2013; Idem., *Neutres et neutralité dans l'espace atlantique durant le long XVIIIe siècle (1700-1820). Une approche globale / Neutrals and Neutrality in the Atlantic World during the long eighteenth century (1700-1820). A global approach*, Becherel, Perseides, 2015; Lauren BENTON, *A Search for Sovereignty. Law and Geography in European Empire, 1400-1900*, Cambridge: University Press, 2010.

10 Postdoctoral Researcher - Research Group Contextual Research in law (CORE), Faculty of Law and Criminology, Vrije Universiteit Brussel.



Armatura equestre realizzata nel 1548 a Norimberga dall'armaiolo Kunz Lochner (1510-1567)
per Giovanni Ernesto Duca di Sassonia-Coburgo (1521-1553).
Rogers Fund (1932), Metropolitan Museum, CC0. Public domain

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