A brief history of the Netherlands

For 18,000 years, human beings inhabited the land that is now called the Netherlands. Archeologists have discovered crude stone weapons and tools as proof. These early people did not settle in one place however, but continually moved around in search of food and shelter. Evidence of the first settled tribes can still be seen along the eastern border with Germany, where these people heaped up huge piles of large rocks as memorials to the dead. These memorials, known as “Hunnebedden”, date back 4,000 years. The English term for these memorials is Dolmen.

(Example of a Dolmen)

Other remnants of the past, that date back 2,500 years, can be seen in the province of Friesland. There, tremendous mounds of earth and clay, called “terpen” stand out in the Frisian landscape.

(Example of a terp)
The Frisians built these islands in an attempt to deal with the North Sea. Other tribes, including Celtic people from central Europe and Germanic tribes from northern Europe, settled in the Netherlands. The Frisian, Celtic, and Germanic tribes each had their own appearance, customs, dialects, and way of life.

In the 1st century BC, the Romans, whose empire was expanding throughout Europe and the Mediterranean region, overpowered the Netherlands. The people of the Low Countries were no match for the massive, well-organized army of Julius Caesar. Around 50 BC the Romans conquered the areas that consist today of the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The conquest was a mixed blessing for the Dutch. Although the people no longer had their independence, the Roman invaders taught them how to build highways, towns, and more effective dikes. For the majority of the Roman occupation, the boundary of the Roman Empire lay along the Rhine. Romans built the first cities in the Netherlands, most importantly Utrecht, Nijmegen, and Maastricht.

All was not peaceful under Roman rule, however, and the Dutch revolted from time to time. These uprisings were unsuccessful until the Roman Empire began to crumble. A Germanic people called the Franks drove out the Romans in the early 5th century AD and overcame their neighbours, the Saxons, and laid claim to a kingdom that included the present-day countries of the Netherlands, Belgium, France and part of Germany, during the reign of Charlemagne (Charles the Great). The Frankish empire divided and reunited several times, in the end giving rise to two major powers, France and the Holy Roman Empire in Germany. The Netherlands formed part of the latter.

The Dutch faced tremendous difficulties at that point - not only had they lost their independence, but they continued to struggle against the sea. To make matters worse, they faced a new threat: the Vikings. Vikings were Scandinavian seafarers who plundered and terrorized the coasts of northern and western Europe. For 200 years, the Dutch were subject to vicious, unpredictable raids by these fierce Norwegians and Danes.
During the 10th century, a number of feudal semi-autonomous vassal states, owing allegiance to the Holy Roman Empire, emerged as the rulers of the Low Countries. Local vassals made their countships and duchies into private kingdoms and felt not much obliged to the emperor, who over large parts of the nation governed only in name. Large parts of what now comprise the Netherlands were governed by the count of Holland, the duke of Gelre, the duke of Brabant and the bishop of Utrecht, but Friesland and Groningen in the north kept their independence, being governed by the lower nobility. Most of what is now the Netherlands and Belgium was united by the duke of Burgundy. This period was known as the Burgundian Dynasty.

**Struggle for Independence and the Golden Age**

At the end of the 15th century, following the marriage of Charles the Bold's daughter and heir, Mary of Burgundy, to Maximilian I, Holy Roman Emperor, the Burgundian possessions became part of the Austrian Habsburg reign.

(Portrait of Charles the Bold from the workshop of Rogier van der Weyden)

Eventually it became under Spanish control, ruled by Charles V.
In the first decades of the 1500s, a German priest and theologian named Martin Luther began to criticize the Roman Catholic Church. His teachings led to a split in Christianity and the growth of Protestantism. Lutheranism and Calvinism became the two main branches of Protestantism. Calvinism attracted many believers in the northern part of the Low Countries, where the Netherlands is located.

At first, when Charles V ruled over the Netherlands as well as a vast empire of European countries, although the Dutch came under Spanish rule, his wisdom and moderation eased religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants.

In 1555, Charles V however abdicated and his son Philips II became ruler of the kingdom. Philips II, a devout catholic, tried to stop the foothold the Protestant Reformation had made in the Low Countries. Philips resorted to intimidation and violence to limit religious freedom. He installed a military force, led by
the Duke of Alba in the Low Countries, ordered Protestants to be put to death, and stripped away the rights of those who would not agree with him.

Philips’s attempts to enforce religious persecution of the Protestants and his endeavours to centralise government, justice and taxes led to a revolt in 1586, starting when the seven Dutch provinces united in the Union of Utrecht in 1579 and formed the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (also known as the “United Provinces”). The predominantly catholic southern provinces formed the Union of Arras and declared their loyalty to Philips II.

William of Orange (also known as Willem the Silent), a nobleman, took the lead in what is called the Eighty Years’ War (1568 - 1648). Willem of Orange was assassinated in Delft in 1584 by Balthasar Gerards. Willem is remembered in the Netherlands as “the father of the fatherland”. His name was given to a promotional song that was later to become the Dutch national anthem, the Wilhelms.

(William of Orange or the Silent)

On May 15, 1648, the Peace of Westphalia confirmed the independence of the United Provinces from Spain. During the Eighty Years’ War the Dutch also started large-scale overseas trade - they hunted whales near Svalbard, traded spices with India and Indonesia, started colonies. The wealth accumulated from all this trade led to the 17th century being called the Golden Age (de Gouden Eeuw) of the Netherlands. As the Netherlands were a republic they were governed by regents, an aristocracy of city-merchants, rather than by a king or by nobility. In principle every city and province had its own government and laws. There was much independence of the various cities and districts, although some of the lands belonging to the republic had provincial official status. In 1602, the Dutch government chartered the East India Trade Company (VOC), a powerful trading enterprise and one of the world’s first joint-stock companies. Henry Hudson, an Englishman, was hired by the VOC in 1609. His mission was to find a northern route to the Orient. As a result of bad weather, he turned southward and explored the American coast landing in Albany, New York. The Dutch claimed what are today the states of New York, New Jersey, Delaware and Connecticut and named it New Netherland. They built a town named New Amsterdam on what today is the island of Manhattan. It was later renamed New York.

The Golden Age produced a profusion of great painters, including Rembrandt, Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen and many others. It was also a time of great scientific and philosophical achievements in the Netherlands.

In 1650, the stadtholder William II, Prince of Orange died, leaving the nation without a powerful ruler. The following year, England imposed the 1651 Navigation Act, which severely hurt Dutch trade interests. A fight over the Act resulted in the First Anglo-Dutch War, which lasted from 1652 to 1654, ending in the Peace of Westminster, by which the Navigation Act remained in effect.
The Second Anglo-Dutch War began in 1665 when the English declared war - they had already attacked Dutch settlements in the New Netherlands. While the Dutch were also troubled by French invasions in the Spanish Netherlands - present-day Belgium - the English and Dutch signed a peace treaty: the 1667 Peace of Breda, after Dutch admiral Michiel de Ruyter destroyed a large part of the English fleet on the Thames. It was agreed that the English would keep the Dutch possessions in North America (the area around current New York City), while they give control of Suriname to the Dutch. Also, the Navigation Act was loosened.

(The Dutch stamp NVPH 694, emission of 1957, 350th birth date of de Ruyter)

1672 is known in the Netherlands as the Rampjaar (disaster year). England declared war on the Republic, (the Third Anglo-Dutch War), followed by France, Münster and Cologne, which had all signed alliances against the Republic. France, Cologne and Münster invaded the Republic, while an English attempt to land could only just be prevented. In the meantime, a new stadtholder, William III, was appointed. Later, two important politicians during the stadholderless era, Johan and Cornelis de Witt were brutally murdered in The Hague. With the aid of other German nations, the Dutch succeed in fighting back, leading to a peace with Cologne and Münster in 1674, after England also agreed to peace, in the Second Peace of Westminster.

In 1678, peace was made with France, though the Spanish and German allies felt betrayed by the treaty signed in Nijmegen. When the English king James II of England was dethroned, William III was asked to become king of England in 1688.

**French rule**

At the end of the 18th century, unrest was growing in the Netherlands. Fights were starting between the Orangists, wanting stadtholder William V of Orange to obtain more power, and the patriots, who under influence of the American and French Revolutions wanted a more democratic government. Holland was the first country to salute the American flag, and Britain declared war before the country could join a group of neutral countries sworn to mutual assistance. This Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780 - 1784) proved a disaster for the Netherlands, particularly economically. In 1785 there was a democratic (‘patriotic’) revolt, but the House of Orange called upon their Prussian relatives to put it down. Many patriots fled the country to France.

After the French Revolution, French republican armies invaded the Netherlands and settled the internal strife in favour of the Patriots, who created the short-lived Batavian Republic. French influence was strong, and
Napoleon turned the Netherlands (including a small part of Germany) into the Kingdom of Holland, with his brother Louis Napoleon as king. This also did not last very long, because when Napoleon noticed that his brother put the Dutch interests before the French, he made the Netherlands part of the French empire.

(Napoleon)

The House of Orange in the meantime signed a treaty with Britain in which they gave to that country the Dutch colonies in 'safekeeping' and ordered the colonial governors to surrender to the English. This put an end to most of the Dutch colonial empire. Guyana and Ceylon never returned to Dutch rule. The Cape colony was briefly returned to the Batavian Republic but became definitively British after 1806. Other colonies, including Indonesia, were returned following the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1814 (there was also an Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824).

**Dutch Monarchy**

After the Napoleonic era the Netherlands were put back on the map of Europe. The country had always been part of the precarious balance of power that had kept France in check. Particularly the Russian tsar wanted the Netherlands to resume this role and wanted the colonies to be returned. A compromise was struck with Britain at the Congress of Vienna, whereby only Indonesia was returned, but the North and South of the Netherlands reunited. The country became a monarchy, with the son of the last stadtholder William V, the prince of Orange as king William I. His United Kingdom of the Netherlands originally consisted of what is now the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg, but the Belgians soon began feeling like second-class citizens. The primary factors that contributed to this feeling were religious (the predominantly Catholic South versus the mostly Protestant North), economic (the South was industrialising, the North had always been a merchants' nation) and linguistic (the French-speaking South was not just Wallony, but also extended to the French-speaking bourgeoisie in the Flemish cities). In 1830 the situation exploded, the Belgians revolted and declared independence from the North. After a war of only a few days, King William had to give in, though he refused to recognise Belgium until 1839. In 1848, unrest broke out all over Europe. In the Netherlands, little unrest happened, but the effects were large. The liberal Johan Rudolf Thorbecke was asked by the king to create a new constitution, which basically turned the Netherlands into a democracy. A constitution was written that called for the legislative duties of government to be placed in the hands of an elected body, the States General. The monarch would act as the head of the
The winter 1944 - 1945 was very harsh, and many Dutch starved, giving the winter the name Hongerwinter (Hunger winter). On May 5, 1945, following Allied victories in Germany, Germany finally surrendered, signing the surrender to the Dutch at Wageningen. This day is still remembered and there is an official committee, see National 4 and 5 May Committee. On January 11, 1942, the Japanese invasion of the Dutch East Indies had started. The Dutch surrendered on March 1, when Japanese troops landed on Java. Dutch citizens were captured and put to work in labour camps. The Japanese surrendered on August 15, 1945, after the Americans had dropped two atomic bombs on Japan.