

# Review of: "The soft power of neutrality Dutch humanitarianism in World War I, 1914-1918"

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**Wim Klinkert**

## **The soft power of neutrality: Dutch humanitarianism in World War I 1914-1918**

Professor Klinkert has written an article on a thus far largely ignored topic and if only for that reason it should be welcomed. Neutral Holland was quite active in the humanitarian field during the Great War, and professor Klinkert discusses the main activities: the fostering of Belgian children from war torn areas, a scheme to give German children a safe environment and proper food during a summer holidays spent in Holland, the sending of volunteer-ambulances to the warring nations, an exchange programme for Prisoners of War from Germany and Britain, who were to spend the rest of the war under more favourable conditions in neutral Holland, and the reception of prisoners, deserters and refugees who escaped across the Dutch border.

For the Dutch government these activities made eminent sense: it reinforced Holland's neutral status to the belligerents, showed them how useful a small neutral nation could make itself, and illustrated to the Dutch population that to be neutral was to be morally superior. Whereas the warring nations were involved in mass murder and destruction, the neutrals maintained and put into practice true humanitarian norms and values.

But neutrality is a complex concept. For the Dutch, it was a government policy rather than a national attitude: Holland was neutral, but the Dutch people had divided loyalties: some were indeed purely neutral, but others were pro-German or pro-Entente, or anti-German (because of the invasion neutral Belgium) or anti-British (the Boer-war still rankled). In short: the neutral stance of the Dutch state was a policy that served the nation's interest, and though it was supported by the vast majority of the Dutch population, it did not mean that in their likes and dislikes the people were as neutral as the policy.

Officially that should not have mattered, but in order to safeguard its neutral status it was important for Holland to be seen to act in properly unbiased and neutral fashion, especially in the eyes of the belligerent nations. This was a major concern for the Dutch government. Take the case of the ambulances, for instance. As professor Klinkert rightly observes, the ambulances were private initiatives that were privately funded and peopled by volunteers. But there was a balance in their distribution. It was not the case that there were five Dutch ambulances in France and none in Germany, and one would therefore suspect that the Dutch government carefully monitored their impartial distribution. Unfortunately that government role is not discussed.

Another example is the project to invite German children to spend a carefree holidays in the Netherlands. Again this was a private scheme, but in this case there was some opposition in the country, as some claimed that the scheme assisted Germany in fighting off the effects of the allied economic blockade and could therefore be interpreted as an un-neutral act. Here professor Klinkert makes the government's position crystal clear: the Dutch prime-minister (and minister of the Interior) 'declared that private initiatives to provide holidays for German children were not contradictory to neutrality'. The organisers of the scheme had actually suggested in a statement that the prime-minster had given his personal permission, but this was strenuously denied: the government had not approved or permitted the scheme, all it had done was to confirm that it did not in any way violate Dutch neutrality. This is a fine example of the neutrality-minefield that the Dutch government had to walk for more than four years: the private initiative itself did not clash with Holland's neutral status, but official government support or approval would have (or at least, could have been interpreted as such). Perhaps the clarity of the article would benefit if the government position and its attitude towards private humanitarian initiatives was made more explicit.

On the other hand there were the government's own projects. Professor Klinkert focuses on a PoW-exchange programme that was negotiated in the Hague between Dutch, British and German representatives in June 1917. Under the terms of the agreement, some 9,500 German and British prisoners of war were allowed to spend the rest of the war in neutral Holland, where personal freedom was greater and living conditions more favourable. The advantages for the British and German soldiers were obvious, but what was in it for Holland? Professor Klinkert gives a very succinct and clear summing up of the motives that induced the Dutch government to set up this goodwill-mission. To what extent this goodwill mission actually paid off is more difficult to establish. Professor Klinkert mentions Dutch diplomatic disappointments at the end of the war, when the Netherlands were not chosen to house the Peace Conference and other international organisations, like the League of Nations. However, this was also due to a major event that is unfortunately not mentioned in the article: in November 1918 the German (ex-)Kaiser Wilhelm II fled to Holland, and although the Dutch government were not at all happy to receive this unexpected guest, it was felt that a neutrality policy that had welcomed all refugees throughout the war could not now be reversed. However, granting asylum to the man whom the allied press had labelled a warmonger and child murderer did nothing to endear the Dutch to the victorious powers. Hence the diplomatic fallout.

In his conclusion, professor Klinkert rightly observes that the Dutch government's humanitarian initiatives as well as its attempts to further the development of international and humanitarian law were mainly intended to serve Holland's chances to survive as a small, independent nation. However, he also claims that it was intended to strengthen Holland's 'self-image as a peaceful, forward-looking and morally superior nation'. I wouldn't quibble with the 'peaceful' (although the Dutch colonies would have thought differently on the subject), and will ignore the 'forward-looking' (there seems to have been little interest in seeing Holland as a cutting-edge nation), but I seriously doubt whether the general Dutch view of neutrality by the end of the war was as 'morally superior' as he claims. The South African bishop Desmond Tutu was to observe many years later that "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor," and similar doubts about the country's neutral status had been expressed in Holland by 1918. How superior was neutrality if it meant that government and press did not speak out against the German violation of neighbouring small nation Belgium's neutrality in 1914? How independent was a neutral nation if in practice it meant giving in to pressure from all belligerents?

The allied economic blockade was deemed illegal by the Dutch government, yet nothing was done against it. The sinking of neutral ships by U-boats was completely unwarranted under international law, yet only token protests were issued.

In his article professor Klinkert tends to make little or no distinction between the Dutch government and people, not in the humanitarian initiatives and not in their attitude towards neutrality. In both cases I feel that a distinction would be useful: it would highlight the difference between private individuals' humanitarian initiatives and the government's more practical political considerations, and the widening gap between neutrality as the government's strategy to keep Holland out of the war, and the increasing feeling among many Dutch citizens that maintaining neutrality meant the sacrifice of national pride and patriotism; of national sovereignty, in fact.

N.B. In the opening line, professor Klinkert refers to Koos Speenhoff as a 'poet and singer'. At the risk of presenting myself as a massive literary snob, might I suggest 'popular entertainer' instead?