

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

Leo Van Bergen

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

The article of Wim Klinkert on Dutch neutrality is a more than fine one, but that will be no surprise to anyone who knows Wim's work. In less than 6000 words (endnotes excluded) he presents a well-drawn picture of humanitarian aid contributed to and confirmed the Dutch neutral status as well as attributed to Dutch self-consciousness and high esteem. In Klinkert's words: '[It] strengthened their self-image as a peaceful, forward-looking and morally superior nation.' So no criticism in general, leaving us with some details.

In my view Klinkert could have focused a bit more on the fact that the care for refugees, especially when given by the organization that comes first in mind: the Dutch Red Cross, was minimal in 1914 because of the DRC's focus on military needs. That in 1918 the DRC did assist in 'humanitarian' relief to refugees, was again a result of military needs. The Dutch army wanted to have the refugees removed as quickly as possible from the militarized zones. And he could (not necessarily: 'should') have mentioned that the exchange of POWs didn't always went as smooth as expected or at least hoped. 'Total chaos' were words not seldom heard. And yes, the minister of Justice will indeed have thought that German deserters should not be evicted because of the chance they would receive the death penalty. For readers not familiar with the actual execution policy in WWI-Germany (or knowing the execution policy of WWII-Germany) this could be a confirmation of the believe that German soldiers were in grave dangers of losing their life by order of their own military. Therefore, a remark that in WWI chances on this in Germany actually were slim, and certainly much slimmer than in f.i. France or England, would not have been a superfluous luxury.

To end some (in the meantime maybe already corrected) typos: 'And as they were many...' should be 'and as there were many...' 'The treatment of POWsW' has to be 'of POW's' and 'Germans deserters' 'German deserters'. And I think with 'chainman' 'chairman' is meant.

Leo van Bergen

Medical historian