

Research Article

The soft power of neutrality Dutch humanitarianism in World War I, 1914–1918

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This article focusses on examples of humanitarian actions by Dutch citizens, organizations or officials and analyses how these actions played a role in the way the Dutch defended their neutrality in 1914–1918. This linked the prime issue of national security – the upkeep of neutrality – closely to both non-governmental and more official initiatives of a humanitarian nature. Making humanitarianism part of national strategy has, in the Dutch case, not been studied in depth yet. This article gives a first overview of the nature and results of the humanitarian activities during the years when a savage war raged very close to the country's borders.

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Introduction

In June 1916 the popular Dutch poet and singer Koos Speenhoff (1869–1945) published a collection of soldier's songs, which he had performed in Dutch theatres the previous months. One of the songs was called *Neutrality* and, on the one hand, it celebrated the humanitarian character of Dutch neutrality: taking care of refugees and wounded foreign seaman and providing belligerent neighbours with food. On the other hand, the song referred to the disrespect that belligerents frequently showed for that same neutrality. Finally, Speenhoff emphasized the Dutch willingness, if the worst came to the worst, to fight for their neutrality, even with military means. This song is remarkable because it more or less summarized neutrality as the majority of the Dutch population probably experienced it. Neutrality meant upholding the principles of law and humanitarianism in a barbaric world, but it also meant

being bullied by major powers and at the same time keeping one's army in a high state of readiness continuously. This versatility forms a starting point for understanding Dutch humanitarianism and the neutral Dutch perception of 'victims of war'.¹

As the neutral Dutch lacked enemies, encounters with war victims, resulting from their neutral stance were abundant and diverse. Constantly, the Dutch had to decide how to relate to 'others', be it foreign soldiers threatening the borders or crossing them as either deserters or internees, or be it refugees trying to find shelter or alleged foreign spies, active on Dutch soil. Furthermore, neutrality meant actively looking for groups to whom assistance could be provided, either by private parties or by the government.

This article focusses on examples of humanitarian actions by Dutch citizens, organisations or officials and analyses how these actions were related to neutrality and as an inseparable consequence, with issues of national security and with strategic choices of how the Netherlands should relate to this war, raging so close to its borders. One basic premise was clear for both political and military leaders and for an overwhelming majority of the population: they very strongly felt desired to stay outside the war. The Netherlands, surrounded by three major belligerents, had nothing to gain and everything to lose by getting involved in the war militarily. Consequently, one way or the other upholding the ideal of the rule of law and humanitarianism was always connected to upholding or even strengthening the credibility of neutrality in the eyes of the neighbouring belligerents, France and Germany in particular. In other words, humanitarianism touched the very core of Dutch security policy.

First, this study elaborates on two private initiatives: sending ambulances to different fronts to alleviate the suffering and giving German children an untroubled summer holiday in the Dutch dunes or forests. These events reflect the traditional Dutch view that charity and humanitarian actions were not primarily governmental tasks. Private committees of civilians, but also the churches, were seen as prime actors. Second, the study will focus on examples where the government took the initiative, namely the decision to intern British and German POWs in the Netherlands and the policy to give refugees and deserters free entrance into the country on humanitarian grounds.

German children²

The initiative to bring children from war zones to the Netherlands to recover dates back to September 1914. A Catholic organisation³, under the patronage of the bishop of Utrecht and other prominent

Catholics, sought medical care and housing with Dutch Catholic families for Belgian children. This concerned not only children who had fled the violence of war from Belgium but also, from January 1915 onwards, children who were brought from Flanders to the Netherlands by this Committee. This was only possible through support from the German occupation authorities and the Belgian Catholic Church. Committee board members travelled through Belgium for this purpose and a permanent office was opened in Antwerp. The Pope publicly gave these activities his blessing. In 1916 over 1500 children were accommodated with Dutch host families, a number that rose significantly during 1917. During the war 1000 Belgian children enjoyed a relatively short period of recovery in the Netherlands and 3100 remained for the duration of the war. Only Catholic families of course, for Jewish children the Committee worked closely together with a similar, but much smaller Jewish charity. The work was paid for by donations from both the Netherlands and overseas.

The charity work for Belgian children enjoyed widespread public support. It was done without any government support, only the train tickets within the Netherlands were refunded. How different was the atmosphere around the arrival of German children.

In July 1916 several Dutch newspapers reported on the possible arrival of German children in the Netherlands to gain strength, due to the deteriorating food situation in Germany. Whose initiative this was, remained unclear. Some papers pointed out the vital role of the German Legation in the Netherlands, making the initiative a political move. Others indicated private charities were responsible. Moreover, the Catholic Committee that housed the Belgian children had already tried to do the same for Dutch children, living in Germany, whose parents worked in German factories. It had sought contact with German Catholic authorities. Sometimes, these children were also called “German”. But giving German children a carefree summer holiday in the Netherlands had not originated with them. It seems that various private initiatives by both Germans and Dutchmen which were mentioned in the press during the summer of 1916, were the reason for causing a bit of a fuss. Two of these initiatives came from The Charity for Child Protection⁴ and the Society for Centres for Child Recovery and Vacations became involved.⁵ The chairman of the last mentioned was Leendert Nicolaas Roodenburg (1866-1929), a liberal MP who was very active in public housing and health issues. But all Dutch organisations vehemently denied any involvement with the German legation. Nevertheless, in letters submitted to the newspapers, Dutch citizens expressed their disapproval. In their view, the Germans had committed so many horrendous acts of war, that helping their children was inappropriate, to say the least.

When in August 1916 more press reports on the German children were published, objections were also raised based on the supposedly un-neutral nature of this initiative. The Amsterdam-based and outspoken anti-German daily *De Telegraaf* argued against an 'invasion' or 'tidal wave' of up to 300.000 German children, while on the other hand, Dutch children were in need as well. The paper viewed it as a one-sided pro-German act, which possibly could lead to repercussions by the Entente. It considered it an evasion of the Allied blockade of Germany. Also, the paper reported that the German minister in The Hague had secretly instigated the whole plan.⁶ Additionally, *De Telegraaf* mentioned the role allegedly played by both the pro-German wife of ethnologist Anton Willem Nieuwenhuis (1864-1953) from Leiden University and by the pro-German Rotterdam entrepreneur Gerard Voorhoeve (1878-1948). Support for *De Telegraaf* came from both the communist *Tribune*, which also rejected the idea of alleviating the German war effort by feeding that country's children⁷ and the liberal Amsterdam professor of economics David van Embden (1875-1962), who interpreted the support for German children as helping Germany to survive the Allied blockade and thus prolonging the murderous war. Van Embden regarded this a dangerous violation of Dutch neutrality, and morally unacceptable, even more so because the German military torpedoed Dutch ships, imprisoned Dutch nationals and violated Dutch airspace. The main liberal newspapers, *NRC* in Rotterdam, and *Algemeen Handelsblad* in Amsterdam, however, argued against this opinion and did not consider receiving the children a breach of neutrality at all. They stated it was the sovereign right of a neutral to help others and the moral duty to help to alleviate the horrors of war wherever possible. Pointing to poverty within the Netherlands was, in their eyes, national egoism.⁸ The short but fierce discussion died down when on 25 August the Prime Minister declared that private initiatives to provide holidays for German children were not contradictory to neutrality.

In the meantime, almost one thousand German children enjoyed a six-week holiday in Dutch holiday colonies in the dunes or the forests or in monasteries. The supporters of this aid pointed out it was important the Dutch showed their charity and goodness in a world at war, and providing for holidays could be seen as an act of Christian kindness. Nevertheless, press coverage frequently made a difference between the real victims of the worst acts of war, the Belgian children, and the German children who had not never lived through similar ordeals. In reports it was emphasized that the German children were well-nourished and from a middle-class background, pushing the difference with the Belgian children to the limit

In 1917 German children again enjoyed some holiday weeks in Holland. German historian Marc Frey puts the number at 21,000 and the Dutch daily *Algemeen Handelsblad* mentioned 25,000⁹. In 1918 the number certainly dropped considerably.¹⁰ Additionally from November 1916 onwards, several hundred Austrian children were invited as well, mostly through channels of the Catholic Church. They were housed in holiday colonies, similar to the German children, but their physical condition was judged worse due to undernourishment. Three months later, children from occupied northern France were invited to come to the Netherlands. Again, the work of private charities, although the Dutch diplomats in Brussels, the French legation in The Hague and German authorities in Belgium were involved as well. Their number remained limited to around a modest thousand.

In September 1918 the train transports of German and Austrian children came to a halt. After the armistice was signed, the Belgian and French children were relatively quickly sent back home. But in 1919 the relief programs for German, Austrian and Hungarian children were resumed. Until the mid-1920s thousands of them would spend long holidays in the Netherlands.

The fuss created by *De Telegraaf* in August 1916 had been limited in scale but linking the humanitarian act to neutrality did strike a sensitive chord, as shown by the, albeit negative, response by other newspapers and by the fact that the Prime Minister, approached by journalists, reacted. The social democrat MP Jan Duys (1877-1941) was the only politician who used German children in a public speech. In January 1917 he appealed to the Dutch government to use the Dutch humanitarian act towards the children as an argument when calling upon the German government for better treatment of Belgian men, deported to German factories.¹¹ These deportations were widely and vehemently criticised in the Netherlands. German Foreign Secretary Richard von Kühlmann (1873-1948)¹², the former German minister in The Hague, praised the wide variety of Dutch humanitarian actions, including the care for German children, in a speech at the *Reichstag* on 29 September 1917. This did not go unnoticed in the Netherlands, especially as negotiations were ongoing over German coal supplies to the Netherlands. Also, German newspapers such as the *Vossische Zeitung* and *Die Woche*, uttered words of praise for Dutch charity towards German citizens.

Ambulances

The Dutch ambulances and hospitals in the belligerent countries drew much more publicity than the German children. Dutch medical historian Leo van Bergen has done valuable research on this subject. He concludes that, as they were privately funded and based on private initiatives from a neutral

country and moreover were active on both sides of the front, their neutrality might seem undisputed. Contemporary Dutch commentators confirm this view and pointed out, sometimes in impassioned speeches and articles, that this medical support proved that neutral countries could fulfil important humanitarian tasks. It showed that neutrals were no passive bystanders, but positive, active participants, especially in a humanitarian way. But analysing individual motives more in-depth; Van Bergen concludes that the motivation for medical work at the front was also based on less idealistic reasons, such as the lust for adventure, the wish to be away from home and individual sympathies for one of the warring states. The most telling example was the Dutch ambulance led by the medical doctor Arius van Tienhoven (1886-1965) working on and sympathising with the Serbian side. Van Tienhoven had led an ambulance during the Balkan War of 1912, an experience that had made him supportive of the Serbian case. Former Prime Minister Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), to name another example, was involved in the Dutch support for the Hungarian Red Cross. This support was definitely very one-sided.¹³

On the Allied side, the Dutch hospital in Paris (in the former café *Pré Catelan* in the Bois de Boulogne) must be mentioned. It was well publicized as an important Dutch humanitarian feat. Nevertheless, it is hard to find concrete evidence that the Dutch government used this private medical assistance to the belligerents diplomatically in order to strengthen its political stance. One rare example is the report made by the diplomat and entrepreneur Jan Jacob Rochussen (1871-1928) when visiting Paris during the crucial month of January 1919, when the Allied support for the Dutch was at a low ebb. Rochussen reported that prominent French guests and reporters had been invited to the lunch to mark the departure of the Dutch medical team especially to help spread a positive image of the Dutch.¹⁴ Earlier, in 1915, the Belgian envoy in The Hague, Albéric Fallon (1862-1925), had made some positive remarks to his government on the Dutch ambulance in France.¹⁵

As the ambulances were mostly financed by gifts from the public, they gave the Dutch population a feeling of actively participating in reducing the suffering of the war. And as there were many press reports on their whereabouts, they must have contributed to the general idea of the useful work neutrals could do. Active government interference or meddling is hard to prove. That is completely opposite to the next two cases, which were initiated by the government.

Internment

In June 1917 the Dutch minister for Foreign Affairs hosted a remarkable international conference in The Hague. Under the chairmanship of the Dutch envoy in Scandinavia, the British diplomat Thomas Leigh, baron Newton (1857-1942), head of the POW department of the Foreign Office and the British Director of Prisoners of War, general Herbert Belfield (1857-1934)¹⁶, negotiated with major general Emil Friedrich (?-1918)¹⁷ and dr. Eckardt from the *Auswärtigen Amt*. The discussion focused on the internment of German and British POWs in the Netherlands for the duration of the war and the exchange of POWs who, for medical reasons, were eligible for leaving the camps. The treaty was signed on 3 July 1917. It was a perfect example of what the Dutch, who followed the Swiss example, saw as their humanitarian role in times of major conflicts. A few days after the signatures were set, a Dutch officer and two medical doctors left for Berne to see how the Swiss had organised the exchanges and internment.¹⁸

The Dutch of course already had wide experience with housing internees, dating back to October 1914 when 30,000 Belgian and some German and British soldiers had entered the Netherlands. This internment was based on the 1907 Hague Rules. During the war, the number of internees rose because crews of warships, U-boats and military aircraft ended up in the Netherlands as a result of accidents, crashes or other mishaps. Not only the men but also the ships and planes were interned and sometimes bought by the Dutch army.

The first step taken by the Dutch government to voluntarily assist in alleviating the suffering of POWs had taken place in 1915 when the government facilitated the transport to exchange POWs between Germany and Britain. The Dutch Red Cross, which was responsible for administrating these exchanges, provided food and medical needs. The unrestricted U-boat war brought these transports to an end, however. By then about 1,200 wounded POWs had made the trip.¹⁹

The idea to exchange or intern POWs who were in such a medical condition that they would never be able to join the army again, had at least two fathers, both from neutral countries: the Swiss journalist Louis de Tscharner²⁰ and the Norwegian banker F.E. Steen. In the autumn of 1913, De Tscharner published some articles in German and Swiss newspapers²¹, suggesting that Swiss neutrality would be strengthened when the country would intern severely wounded POWs. This idea, internment and exchange, was taken over by the Swiss Red Cross in the first weeks of the war. The first success was booked in March 1915 when, after an intervention by the Pope, exchanges between France and

Germany commenced, led by the Swiss Red Cross. In total 11,000 POWs were transported back to their respective home countries until November 1916. Internment in Switzerland became an issue for the respective governments in 1915, when, again supported by the Vatican, the Swiss government negotiated with French and German official representatives for less severely wounded POWs, for instance, soldiers with tuberculosis, to be interned in Switzerland. An agreement for 200 internees was reached in January 1916. It was the beginning of a very successful program. In November 1918 Switzerland housed 25,600 French and German soldiers.²² Even some 1,400 British soldiers found refuge here.²³ Dutch newspapers reported on the Swiss humanitarian initiatives from late 1915 onwards. *NRC* for example on 20 December 1915 included an article titled “Switzerland as hospital”, while several papers on 27 August had reported that the Entente and Germany had concluded an agreement on internment in Switzerland. We can assume the Dutch government was well informed on the Swiss actions through its legation in Berne.

The path towards Dutch internment showed many similarities with Switzerland. Steen, the Norwegian banker, had visited POW camps in Germany already early in the war. The German director for POW affairs, general Friedrich, supported Steen’s suggestion for exchanges and brought Steen into contact with the German Red Cross. When, in London, Steen told about his experiences and contacted Louis du Pan Mallet (1864–1936), member of the government committee on POW and Victor Cavendish, duke of Devonshire (1868–1938). These men brought him into contact with the British and the International Red Cross and both organisations supported his aim. Back in Berlin, Steen arranged a meeting between the British and German Red Crosses to be held on neutral territory: not in Switzerland, the British preference, but in The Hague, the first choice of the Germans. The Dutch Red Cross facilitated this conference in 1915. Although the basis for the exchanges of 1915 and 1916 was laid, the German demand to have negotiations by government officials delayed a more comprehensive agreement.²⁴ That is why it took until 7 June 1917 before the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs could open the Hague Conference. As mentioned, the negotiations came to an end on 2 July. It took until the end of December 1917 however, for the first POWs to arrive on Dutch territory. Until the end of the war, some 9,500 British and German soldiers and some civilians were interned in The Netherlands. Simultaneously over 12,000 severely invalided POWs were repatriated via Dutch territory, as had been the case in 1915–1916. Eligible for internment were both sick and wounded, who were expected to recover faster when removed from the POW camp, and POWs whose prolonged stay in a POW camp might severely endanger their health physically or mentally. Also, NCOs and officers who had been imprisoned for

over 18 months and civilians were eligible. Excluded were men who were mentally ill or suffered from a contagious or incurable disease. The housing and food were to be paid for by the countries of origin; the medical services were done partly by the British and Germans themselves, partly by the Dutch. The Dutch Red Cross handled administration and postal services. Most officers and NCOs, some of whom had private incomes too, lived in private houses, the others lived in camps but enjoyed a high degree of freedom of movement as well. The Dutch authorities had earmarked certain cities and certain areas for either the British or the Germans, to avoid confrontations. Rotterdam, for instance, was a 'German' city and The Hague was a 'British' one. It is noteworthy that the Dutch were voluntarily adding to the rather large number of foreign refugees and soldiers already in the country. This, among others, gives the treaty its importance.

The arrival of the POWs was widely reported in the Netherlands, not only in the daily papers but also in the illustrated magazines, showing, for instance, pictures of German naval officers parading the streets of Rotterdam in full uniform. Especially the fact that some 'famous' figures were among the internees drew popular attention to the exchange.²⁵

Why did the Dutch government take the trouble? Economically the country started to experience shortages, while it had to house well over 150,000 refugees already. With the rationing of basic foodstuffs, rising unemployment and rising prices, the Dutch population was probably not eager to accommodate more foreigners, moreover, they were representatives of the armies that harmed Dutch interests and lives. On the other hand, the humanitarian tradition must have played a part. The Dutch general, Marcus Onnen (1853-1918) who supervised the internment, told the British government at the turn of 1917-1918: "The Netherlands government have considered it to be the duty of a neutral state to soothe as much as possible the misery created by war." ²⁶ Also, in several cities private committees were formed to help with transport and to help internees adjust to their new, temporary, country.

Second, the Dutch government might have thought that providing this help could strengthen its position towards the belligerents. By performing a humanitarian deed, other negotiations, like the essential ones with the Germans on coal deliveries, might become a little easier.

Third, it gave the country a positive image and the internment was a sign of international recognition of its neutral status. The German ambassador in The Hague at least expressed his gratitude and sent words of praise to the German Foreign Office.²⁷ The Dutch minister himself used the successful negotiations in The Hague as an argument that he might play a more prominent role in the search for

a general peace. Through his acquaintance with the politician and diplomat James Bryce (1838–1922) – they had met in Washington before the war – he tried in September 1917 to organise peace negotiations.²⁸ It came to nothing. But in the British press and the House of Commons on 31 July 1918 the Dutch were praised for their humane and generous deeds, recognising at the same time the predicament the neutral country was in.²⁹

Fourth, in the wake of the Hague talks the German minister in the Netherlands, Von Kühlmann, made an attempt to initiate peace negotiations with the British. The Dutch chainman was informed, but the middleman chosen by Von Kühlmann³⁰ did not win the trust of the British, and neither was support from Berlin given wholeheartedly.³¹ In 1918 the Dutch would again play a limited role as middlemen when in the spring Germany and in September Austria tried to use The Hague as a point of contact with the Entente. Both attempts failed.³²

Finally, the fact that representatives of the belligerent's blocks were brought into personal contact with each other did make it easier to solve other humanitarian problems and make life more bearable for POWs afterwards. This was a positive short-term effect. In the longer term, when the war was over, the Swiss and Dutch humanitarian deeds furthered the development of international humanitarian law. The result was the 1929 Geneva Convention on the treatment of POWs.³³ The Netherlands, which lost out on both housing the Peace Conference and international organisations after the war, as Switzerland enjoyed more international support, had to settle for the Permanent Court of International Justice and the Academy of International Law, both established in The Hague in 1923.³⁴

British historian Susanne Wolf, in her study on internment, concludes, “by scrupulously upholding the terms of the 1907 treaty with regard to internment [The Netherlands] made a very public reaffirmation of the status of that treaty and the international laws that, it hoped, would ensure that the Netherlands neutrality was respected. As the host of the 1907 Peace Conference, the importance of the Netherlands as a neutral nation of standing was also tied up in the status of the treaty. If it failed, then the standing of the Netherlands would also be reduced and it would be considered as just another small European neutral. Secondly, the internment of soldiers from both sides of the conflict gave the Netherlands a reason to maintain strong diplomatic contact with both sides of the conflict, on terms that it could control. Unlike the diplomatic talks over trade, this was an area in which the Dutch held all of the cards and could, to a large extent, dictate the policy. Having British and Germans internees

gives the Dutch a certain diplomatic bargaining power and opens diplomatic channels to promote their neutrality. Internment provided a vehicle for the Dutch to prove their reliability and reaffirm their adherence to international law and unbiased neutrality.³⁵

Deserters and refugees

Queen Wilhelmina, in her official Queen's Speech at the opening of the parliamentary year in September 1914, had proclaimed: "Deeply concerned with the fate of all peoples who have been dragged into battle, the Netherlands willingly bears the extraordinary burdens it is imposed upon and receives with open arms all unfortunates who seek refuge within its borders". This declaration by the government, based on what was considered traditional Dutch hospitality and willingness to grant asylum to refugees, was the formal basis on which all refugees were welcomed in the Netherlands during the war. After a peak of one million at the end of 1914, the number of refugees dropped significantly to about 200,000 in 1918. But during the war things changed. People entering Holland were more and more split into two categories, refugees and aliens. Especially the last group caused concern for state security and led to a stricter government policy on internal security. Refugees on the other hand remained welcome without many restrictions, as the last, relatively modest, influx of Belgian and French refugees in October 1918 showed.

Among the 'aliens' the group of Germans deserters, fleeing to the Netherlands was the most extensive. Since 1915 the policy was to let deserters stay in the Netherlands freely, as soon as their desertion was established. Otherwise, they had to be interned. Moreover, the Dutch government had to be convinced that the deserter would not join another army, as that would constitute a breach of neutrality. In August 1916 the minister of Justice decreed that deserters could not be evicted from the country, because they might receive the death penalty in Germany. In 1917 at least 3,000 German deserters lived in and wandered through the Netherlands, some as petty criminals or hired as spies, others with a simple job or unemployed.³⁶ Rotterdam was their most popular city of destination, because work in all forms imaginable was available, plus the possibility to sail to Britain. There was no legal obligation to intern this group and the German authorities made it clear they would not pay for this category.³⁷

The war brought still another category across the Dutch border: POWs who had fled from their camp or from the place where they worked. They were mostly soldiers of the Entente powers, held in Germany. Also, Eastern European civilians, who lived in German camps or worked in the German

munitions factories, escaped and sought refuge in neutral Holland. Many Poles and Russians started to arrive from 1915 onwards. Most Russians were looked after by charities in Rotterdam. The many hundreds of Poles and Russians were not popular among the local population and caused the authorities even more headaches after the Russian Revolution, when they were seen as a hotbed for Bolshevism, more so as the Dutch communist party became very active among the Rotterdam Russians. From September 1917 until June 1918 2,200 Russians left for Britain³⁸, but enough remained to worry the authorities. All in all, especially the Eastern Europeans, but also the deserters, in some respects, resembled the 'enemy aliens' in belligerent countries. They were not considered refugees, like the Belgians in 1914, and were never marked as such. They were aliens, under the, by now very inadequate alien act of 1849. This required police surveillance, registration, and restrictions on their movements. It also resulted in a significant increase in quarantine and medical checks at the border. This developed step by step during the second half of the war. These measures were based on their presumed security risk because poverty drove them easily into espionage or, especially after the Russian Revolution, into Bolshevik groups. In this respect they were considered much more dangerous to state security than the German left-wing political opponents of the *Kaiser* who had stayed in Holland during the war, fleeing German conscription and political persecution.

In June 1917 the government decided to construct a special camp to house deserters who behaved 'anti socially', refused to adjust or showed extreme leftist tendencies.³⁹ Mostly Germans and Eastern Europeans were put here. It housed around 700 men.

In May 1918 the government submitted a law in Parliament, to establish a stronger legal base for the supervision of aliens. It was the first substantial adjustment of the Aliens Act of 1849. The government stated that the main reason for the proposal had been that aliens were considered as possible grave threats to public health, public morale and to internal and military security and that some of them were of questionable repute. Additionally, the government stressed the Netherlands just followed the example of other neutrals, Switzerland in particular. That country had taken similar measures in November 1917, and the neutral and humanitarian character of the Swiss was, of course, beyond doubt. The new bill gave the Dutch authorities the right to accommodate aliens in camps, even against their will and restrict their movement through police control and registration. Of course, they would remain free to leave the country if they wished. Parliament discussed the proposal on 29-31 May, which was one of the rare moments when the humanitarian character of Dutch policy was explicitly scrutinized in Parliament. The central question was if the proposed legal powers, which could be

interpreted as aiming to remove unwanted, meaning socialist and communist, elements from society, violated Dutch hospitality, one of the very principles of Dutch humanitarianism. A parliamentary majority thought this was not the case; sufficient guarantees were built into the law to prevent misuse. Nonetheless, to oversee its implementation, an interdepartmental committee was set up. The law became effective on 17 June. As a result border checks and quarantine facilities were expanded and the police in the major cities intensified the checks on coming and going of aliens and issued special ID cards. This meant that in Rotterdam, the city with the largest number of aliens, 9000 Belgians, 3500 Russians and 4000 other nationalities had to be kept an eye on.⁴⁰ The law remained in force after November 1918; additionally, a law to enforce stricter border controls was approved by parliament in 1920.⁴¹

Concluding remarks

Traditionally Dutch neutrality is closely linked to the Dutch legalistic approach to international relations.⁴² By furthering international and humanitarian law the Dutch not only served their own interest in order to survive as a small state, but also strengthened their self-image as a peaceful, forward-looking and morally superior nation. The harsh realities of the First World War showed how feeble this stance in fact was, while simultaneously emphasising the need to prove the relevance of neutrality in order to stay out of the war. This made humanitarian actions form a more prominent element in the Dutch position. These actions were not primarily based on law but on what was considered traditional Dutch virtues such as providing hospitality for those who suffer and alleviating sufferings of war wherever possible.

The prominent historian and current affairs commentator Herman Colenbrander (1871-1945) argued shortly after the war ended that being at the same time independent as well as hospitable formed the core of the Dutch calling in Europe, a calling that was, in his eyes, successfully fulfilled in 1914-1918.⁴³ This focus on hospitality and alleviation of suffering gave the Dutch public the idea that their country really mattered in a positive way, while surrounding states only resorted to barbaric violence. It became, one can say, part of the Dutch “culture de neutralité”⁴⁴. It was showing the willingness to make sacrifices to compensate for the privilege of being an island of peace and quiet in a sea of violence. It gave reason for pride, adhering to high-standing moral values, when the legal frameworks, which had been so important for the Dutch before 1914, failed to provide safety. On the

other hand, both the case of the German children and the voluntary internment showed that criticism based on its own worsening living conditions and on providing help to nationals of belligerent countries that physically and economically hurt the Dutch was never far beneath the surface. Moreover, the Dutch government was prepared to take harsh measures against aliens were considered to have disruptive effects on the internal affairs of the country.⁴⁵ Like with other unusually severe measures, civil conscription, for instance, it pointed to similar actions in Switzerland and Scandinavian neutrals to justify its policy.

The Dutch government did not propagate its humanitarian role very openly. This was partly because traditionally humanitarian initiatives were private affairs, partly also because it preferred silent, covert diplomacy to guard its neutrality. The humanitarian initiatives complemented a range of services provided to the belligerents such as postal services, the Red Cross information Bureau in The Hague and diplomatic representation on behalf of belligerents. Abbenhuis states in her study that by this range of activities, the Dutch first and foremost aimed to stay neutral. And since politically, economically and militarily their means to influence the belligerents were feeble or even completely lacking, they did not have many options.⁴⁶

References

¹ See for the Netherlands in the First World War M. Abbenhuis *The Art of Staying Neutral* (Amsterdam 2006), W. Klinkert *Defending Neutrality, the Netherlands Prepares for War, 1900–1925* (Leiden/Boston 2013) and W. Klinkert, S. Kruizinga and P. Moeyes *Nederland Neutraal, 1914–1918* (Amsterdam 2014).

² On *Ferienkinder*, see Christa Hämmerle, *Kindheit im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Wien/Köln/Weimar, 1993, and Eberhard Demm, “Deutschlands Kinder im Ersten Weltkrieg: Zwischen Propaganda und Sozialfürsorge,” *Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift* (2001), 60, 51–79, and Friederike Kind-Kovács, “The ‘Other’ Child Transports: World War I and the Temporary Displacement of Needy Children from Central Europe. Les déplacements temporaires d’enfants déshérités en Europe centrale pendant la première guerre mondiale,” *Revue d’histoire de l’enfance irrégulière* 15 (2013).

³ RK *Huisvestingcomité* founded on a German example by Karl Joseph Schulte (1871–1941) sending children to Switzerland and helping POWs. The Dutch committee was led by Arnold Kellenaers (1881–?) (editor of a Catholic magazine for small entrepreneurs) and his German born wife Anna Damerau (1883–1957) from Leiden.

⁴ Liefdewerk voor Kinderbescherming.

⁵ Prominent Dutch medical doctors, educators, philanthropists and pedagogues had founded this Society in 1901. Genootschap voor Kinderherstellings- en vakantiekolonies. See J.M. Fuchs en W.J. Simons, *Ter wille van het kind Vijfenzeventig jaar Centraal genootschap voor Kinderherstellingsoorden 1901-1976* (Naarden 1977).

⁶ 9 - 17 August 1916.

⁷ 11 Augustus 1916.

⁸ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 14 August 1916.

⁹ *Algemeen Handelsblad* 27 November 1917.

¹⁰ M. Frey *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Niederlande* (Berlin 1998) 312.

¹¹ Proceedings Second Chamber of Parliament 24 January 1917, 1212. See also *Het Volk* 2 December 1916. More generally on aid to children related to the blockade, see: T. Zahra *The Lost Children* (Cambridge 2011) 37-38 and B. Cabanes *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism* (Cambridge 2014) 270-277.

¹² Markus Bussmann "Richard von Kühlmann und die Niederlande" *Jahrbuch Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien* 9 (1998), 139-173.

¹³ Leo van Bergen, "'Would it not be better to just stop?'" *First World War Studies* 2 (2011) 165-194,

¹⁴ Rochussen to Van Karnebeek 17 January 1919, in C. Smit *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland* (The Hague 1964) 888-889.

¹⁵ Fallon to Beyens 12 August 1915, in C. Smit *Bescheiden betreffende de buitenlandse politiek van Nederland* (The Hague 1971) 477.

¹⁶ He had also negotiated in Berne to arrange POW-affairs with the Swiss.

¹⁷ From the *Kriegsministerium*, he had negotiated in Berne and Copenhagen before.

¹⁸ S. Wolf *Guarded Neutrality* (Leiden/Boston 2013) 150-151.

¹⁹ See for the example C. Cotter (*S'*) *Aider pour survivre* (Geneva 2017) 177-178, 412-413.

²⁰ G. Werner "Les prisonniers de guerre" in: *Recueil des Cours. Académie de droit International* 21 (1928) (Paris 1929) 75-85 and T. Fuchs "Interniert in Appenzellerland" *Appenzellische Jahrbücher* 141 (2014)

50–65.

²¹ Among others “Neutralitätsfragen” in: *Berliner Tageblatt* 23 September – 31 October and 15–18 November 1913. See Cotter, 179–180

²² E. Favre *L’internement en Suisse des prisonniers de guerre* (Geneve 1917) and Cotter 180–183.

²³ H.P. Picot *The British interned in Switzerland* (London 1919).

²⁴ H.C.C.J. van der Mandere *Het Nederlandsche Roode Kruis van 1917–1920* (Amsterdam 1921).

²⁵ The German naval officers Carl von Müller (1872–1923), Heinrich von Hennig (1883–1947), Wolfgang Tirpitz (1888–1968) and the British international soccer player Steve Bloomer (1874–1938).

²⁶ See NA, archive dienst geïnterneerde krijgsgevangenen (agency for interned POW) and NRC 14 January 1918.

²⁷ Smit, *Bescheiden* (The Hague 1973) 57.

²⁸ Smit, *Bescheiden* (The Hague 1964) 253; C. Smit *Nederland in de Eerste Wereldoorlog* Groningen 1973, 113–114 and P. Moeyes, “J. Loudon” in W. Klinkert, S. Kruizinga and P. Moeyes (eds.) *Nederland neutraal* (Amsterdam 2014) 201 and 204.

²⁹ *Daily Telegraph* 29 July 1917 and discussion in the House of Lords 7 March 1918.

³⁰ Hermann von Hatzfeldt Wildenburg (1848–1933).

³¹ Smit, 1973, 118.

³² Smit, 1973, 127.

³³ John Yamaill, *Barbed wire disease* (Stroud 2011) 167–169

³⁴ Macmillan *Peacemakers* (London 2001) 35. The UK and the US preferred the peace conference in a neutral country, which the French strongly opposed.

³⁵ Wolf 259, 261–262.

³⁶ This was an official number; thousands more lived outside the grip of the authorities. It is even probable over 10,000 German deserters stayed in The Netherlands, see De Roodt, *Oorlogsgasten* (Zaltbommel 2000) 215–216; N. Bosboom *In moeilijke omstandigheden* (Gorinchem 1933) 326 and *Proceedings Second Chamber* 23 December 1915, 920.

³⁷ De Roodt, 215–216.

³⁸ De Roodt, 270.

³⁹ In the Dutch contemporary documents sometimes called a ‘concentration camp’. De Roodt, 230.

⁴⁰ Roodt, 340.

⁴¹ On the Dutch passport system and border controls see L. Lucassen, “A Many-Headed Monster” in J. Torpey (ed.) *Documenting Individual Identity* (Princeton 2001) 235–255 and F. Bethlehem, “Een civiele staat van beleg” *Militaire Spectator* 187 11 (2018) 582–597.

⁴² M. Kuitenbrouwer “Nederland en de mensenrechten” in M. Kuitenbrouwer (ed) *Geschiedenis van de mensenrechten* Hilversum 1995, 156–201, there 160 and A. Wijffels “Nederland en het einde van de belle époque” in W. van Noort (ed) *Nederland als voorbeeldige natie* (Hilversum 2006), 53–72.

⁴³ Colenbrander in *Nederland in den oorlogstijd* 132.

⁴⁴ Cotter, 256.

⁴⁵ W. Klinkert “‘Due to the Special Circumstances...’: Dutch Legislation Relating to Internal and External Threats, 1914–1920” *First World War Studies* special issue on State of Emergency Regimes in the First World War Era, to be published Autumn 2023.

⁴⁶ Abbenhuis 35–36 and 115.

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