

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

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Thank you for the opportunity to preview this article which I believe to be an interesting historical contribution to evolving discussion around the role and ethics of government in the humanitarian space. In this article, Klinkert links the humanitarian actions of Dutch citizens, organizations, and government as tools of “soft power” to support or amplify the national policy of neutrality that the Dutch took during WWI. As a non-historian myself, the author introduced a fascinating information on the Dutch government and people that I knew little about. However, I think an exploration of the definitions and normative concepts of soft power, humanitarianism, and neutrality would be helpful to ensure a clear and consistent use of terms in this context to support the argument of the author.

The term “soft power” was coined by Joseph Nye in the 1980’s to signal the ability of a government to influence the behavior of another to get the outcome they want, not via coercive use of “hard power” such military or economic might, but to attract or co-opt them to want what they want. According to Nye, soft power rests on three resources: it’s culture (in places in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when others see them as legitimate and having moral authority). Therefore, “soft power” is a tool of government for national strategic objectives that is imbued with motive, agenda, and intent to persuade or influence another government.

Were the Dutch actions described, in fact, elements of “soft power?” It is problematic to conflate the actions of private Dutch citizens and organizations, such as the Catholic charities arranging holidays for children or private ambulances, with action designed and directed by the government as a tool of “soft power.” Perhaps the most appropriate example of the Dutch government’s “soft power” of neutrality is the treatment of POWs from both belligerent powers. Here the Dutch government is living up to their claim to be neutral in the international legal sense, and legitimizing their foreign policy declaration, both elements of “soft power” that could influence belligerent powers to maintain the wish of the Netherlands to stay out of the conflict. There is not, however, any description of how POWs were treated to support the claim of humanitarianism, other than both sides of POWs were allowed to enter the country. Are there other examples of the government (not private citizens or organizations) doing “neutrality” well that would support the author’s claim of the Dutch “soft power of neutrality” as part of the Dutch national security strategy?

Furthermore, many humanitarians have argued that government action cannot be called humanitarian as such because government is not inherently neutral. A government always has a strategic perspective or objective with any endeavor undertaken. Even work previously labeled “humanitarian” in times of crisis is said to attempt to “win hearts and minds” and

has been deemed problematic given the motivations and intent behind the work, that is, not purely focused on alleviating suffering but to gain influence. The purpose of humanitarianism is defined by 4 principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence. Humanitarian action taken by one government with the goal to influence a strategic outcome runs counter to the pure and fundamental principles of humanitarianism.

Did the Dutch government's work described meet the principles of "humanitarianism?" It seems that while the Dutch legally claimed "neutral status" in the international legal sense, the government was not truly *independent* in that they were not able to make operational decisions autonomously irrespective of other considerations. They were, as described in the article, very vulnerable, with political, economic, and diplomatic pressures from both the Allies and Axis powers to balance with their security and economic well-being of the Dutch people to take into consideration. The *humanity* principle also relies on the principle that actions do not interfere with the dynamics of the conflict, but it seems the author argued against this by citing the Dutch minister who implicated the Catholic charity work as leverage to advocate for Belgium prisoner treatment in Germany or Dutch people receiving more German coal. I did not see any evidence of Dutch government directed "humanitarian" work in the sense of pure humanitarian principles.

I think the article highlights the otherwise unexplored humanitarian work of Dutch citizens and private organizations that indeed supported or amplified the Dutch governments' neutral stance, albeit not as formal tools of "soft power." Perhaps this work did more to win the "hearts and minds" of the Dutch people themselves rather than have any influence over belligerent powers and the outcome of the war, providing the Dutch people with a purpose of which to be proud while their government dealt with the difficult task of keeping both Allied and Axis powers at bay.