

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

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This well-structured and vivid article makes for an instructing reading, giving valuable empirical insights into Dutch neutrality politics during WWI. The text would gain from a clarification of its conceptual framing so to make a more focused argument regarding the relationship between Dutch (humanitarian) actions during WWI and the shaping of the country's neutrality. My second, very short point, relates to the used source material and finally I list some small miscellaneous remarks.

To enhance the conceptual framing, I would suggest the following:

First, the key-notions of the article: humanitarianism, neutrality, and international law, are very complex and historically as well as spatially situated. These notions would deserve more elaborate working-definitions so to make the text more perspicuous: What is 'international law' in 1914-1918; does the term refer to the Hague conventions of 1899 and 1907 only or to something more? How does the text approach 'humanitarianism', which is a contested concept that has prompted a lot of historiographical attention over the last decade? It is not entirely clear on which notion of neutrality the article is based: a (whose?) theoretical definition, or one that refers to how neutrality was shaped by the Netherlands (when?), or on specific practices of neutrality, which not in all cases involve humanitarian actions.

Second, to make the article stronger it would be advisable to argue why these concepts and no others are used to understand – what seems to be the actual questions - 'how the Dutch related to 'others'' and how the country perceived 'victims of war' during WWI. At times, other concepts like hospitality and charity are evoked as well – it seemed to me that, perhaps, the concept of hospitality would fit the empirical study even better. In the last section on deserters and refugees, reflections also turn around the topic of national security. Hence, a more conscious and well-founded use of the key-terms would make the article more consistent.

Third, the elaboration on key-terms and thereby the conceptual framing would be enhanced by encroaching the study more firmly within the relatively vast international literature on the history of humanitarianism. This embedding and clearer referencing of the state of the art would raise the article's relevance.

Fourth, I would recommend to focus the conclusion on how the use of these concepts and the empirical material inform our understanding of the particularity of Dutch politics during WWI. Instead, the conclusion as it stands now is somewhat misleading as it refers to the country's 'means to influence the belligerents', which, as it seems to me, is another question.

Also, in the conclusion at latest, the reader should be instructed in more detail as to the actual relationship between private and governmental humanitarian actions and their respective role for the shaping of Dutch neutrality. What shall we understand by humanitarian initiatives being ‘traditionally private affairs’ – and why were they relevant for the Dutch policy making? Which conclusion shall we draw regarding Dutch humanitarian interventions and the country’s role in the construction process of international law? Can one be more explicit as to what distinguishes Dutch politics from other neutral countries, in particular Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, as to their (humanitarian) interventions during the war?

The article would gain from providing for more transparency regarding its mixed source material, by explicating the possible perspectives it provides and biases it contains.

Small remarks:

The title: Is there a colon missing between ‘Dutch’ and ‘humanitarianism’? The notion ‘soft-power’ is not referred to in the article so that one may consider replacing it.

Quotation of historian Susanne Wolf on page 8: Where does the quotation end? The final sentence of the paragraph: ‘Internment provided a vehicle for the Dutch to prove their reliability and reaffirm their adherence to international law and unbiased neutrality’ is referenced with Susanne Wolf. The sentence seems to capture pretty well one of the present article’s main arguments. To what extent does the present study expand, nuance contradict Wolf’s research?