

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

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I really enjoyed this paper, which is well written and gives great examples of a nation's approach to neutrality in the first world war. The examples are at both governmental and individual organisational level, and raise valid questions about the degree to which a government can ever be neutral, what its motivations for trying to be neutral are, and what impact that attempt at neutrality might have.

Essentially this is a set of practical examples of doing good (taking a neutral position) vs being good (actually being neutral), and they demonstrate some of the challenges – is it neutral to take in starving children (displaying humanity) but only predominantly from one country (and therefore not being impartial)? In other words, to what degree are the humanitarian principles independent of each other (see below), and does it matter?

I think the paper would have been easier to digest had some of these terms been discussed and defined at the outset, as they are sometimes blurred in the paper. "Neutrality meant upholding the principles of law and humanitarianism in a barbaric world" is a good example. Humanitarianism is typically considered to involve complying with 4 or more principles, of which neutrality is just one – and impartiality (treating only on basis of need), independence and humanity are the most common others. Some times neutrality seems to be used here in lieu of one of the others; for example "objections were raised on the basis of the supposedly un-neutral nature of (taking in only German children)." This case would seem to be a failure of impartiality, not a failure to be neutral. To say that "humanitarianism touched the very core of dutch security policy" is similarly problematic. Humanitarianism is about the alleviation of suffering based on need alone, not security.

Even an simple exploration of the definitions of neutrality would be helpful: Neutrality is either **the formal position taken by a State which is not participating in an armed conflict or which does not want to become involved (ICRC)** (which the Dutch government would seem to have met) **or the state of not supporting or helping either side in a conflict, disagreement, etc** (Oxford Languages) (which the Dutch government would seem not to have met). Not participating in conflict vs not helping either side may seem a small difference, but it matters – as taking in a vulnerable population from one side might be seen as helping, while not taking part in the conflict itself.

So there is a lack of clarity about the terminologies used that sometimes makes the messaging harder to understand – but the paper is still very valuable. I love the idea of the benefits to a society, in particular in terms of its identity and sense of self-worth, of a government whose policy actively supports a humanitarian approach (even if the government isn't itself humanitarian). I enjoyed the explorations of the motivations behind a neutral posture, and again whether it matters

whether you “are” neutral, or simply behave neutrally. I found the historical case studies to be compelling and heartening examples that others might follow.