

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

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Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

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To maintain impartiality in the eyes of belligerents is one of the most delicate efforts while soldiers and people from warring parties keep trying to push into the borders and look for opportunities to survive while pressures on domestic economy keep mounting.

When the war was being waged across its borders and the European neighbouring countries were putting their lives as well as social, political and economic institutions and resources to stake, pressures naturally had to mount on neutral states to take sides as the war began to be increasingly defined in terms of the principles of morality versus immorality. The Netherlands' efforts to maintain neutrality within this larger context were commendable. Further, the humanitarian actions undertaken by the government and civil society actors to provide shelter to Belgian and German children and provisions of relief and sanctuary for POWs and war internees required utmost and fine judgement of impartiality.

It is no surprise that small powers can be bullied to accept the ideological positions of great powers. Unlike great powers, upholding and maintaining neutrality is quite difficult for a small power which the Netherlands did during the first World War.

While Realism as a theory of International Politics focuses on the roles and interests of Great Powers towards shaping global politics, any attempts towards a systematic study of foreign policy choices of small states are commendable because small states due to their power limitations introduced unique dynamics to their foreign policy.

The idea of Neutrality has also a trace of realism in it as the neutral countries cannot forgo their military preparedness while engaged humanitarian activities.

The strive for Neutrality that the Netherlands made during the first World War indicated that neutrality is a positive concept. As neutral state does not merely abstain from participating in wars or the concept does not mean passivity in International Politics rather neutrality demands from a state efforts either to contribute to peace making or alleviation of human misery through humanitarian activities.

However, it needs to be underlined that the humanitarian activities undertaken by a neutral country represents not only the desire of a country to enhance its image as a peace-loving state with large soft power potential, it is also partly a compulsion for a country to avoid pressures to join the war as well. If a neutral country as well as a small power like the

Netherlands had tried to insulate its borders amid the warring countries, it would have utterly failed to do so. So humanitarian assistance is not merely a choice for a country.

Neutrality can be self-proclaimed being de-facto or can be de-jure being materialised and formalised through international agreements. The latter is more stable than the former for the simple fact that great powers agree to its non-violation. The neutrality of the Netherlands was self-proclaimed unlike Belgium which was guaranteed but ironically the latter failed during the first World War. While there is likelihood that the signatory states would refrain from aggressive behaviour against the neutral state, during war times the international structure represents more of an anarchic structure and resembles a lawless world as defined by the realists. Hence, during these tumultuous times, the legitimacy and legality behind neutrality becomes fragile.

If a country is swayed more by the virtues of neutrality than by the expediency of military alertness, it will remain out of sync with the real world. The Netherlands probably succumbed to Germany's military adventures during the Second World War for this reason.

Rather than being a strategic policy choice for a country, demands of the war situations and strategic location of neutral states determine the success of their neutral policy course and fate to a large extent. For instance, the avowed neutrality of Belgium during the first World War and of the Netherlands itself during the Second World War failed because their location and demands of the Wars largely dictated their failures.

Bringing in a touch of realism to the idea of Neutrality, the idea has been explained by the article more as strategic and security policy rather than an ideal or culturally embedded concept. Further, the author argued humanitarian activities of the Netherlands were driven by the considerations to secure the country from the belligerents by enhancing the credibility as a neutral country instead of being pursued as an ideal or a moral principle.

A glance at the evolution of research in the area of understanding history and politics of the World Wars makes it very clear that it is almost dominantly and exclusively covered with the roles and interests of big powers/warring parties while glossing over the strategic desirability of morality and impartiality as well as of humanitarian activities undertaken by the neutral countries. Hence, a careful study of the roles and interests of the Netherlands towards its steadfast efforts at maintaining neutrality during the World War I is quite illuminating. However, it needs to be understood at the same time that despite a state's desire to maintain neutrality, there are a host of external factors as well that count for the success of neutrality during wartimes.