



Johan den Hertog, Samuël Kruizinga (eds.), ***Caught in the Middle: Neutrals, Neutrality and the First World War*** (Studies of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation 5; Amsterdam: Aksant, 2011, 174 pp., ISBN 978 94 90258 03 0).

This well-written collection of essays about World War-I era neutrality concentrates on the question of whether, as Nils Ørvik has suggested, the war was the ‘seminal catastrophe’ for neutrality. On the whole the authors conclude that it was not, mainly because there were many different ways in which neutrality was pursued and some survived, albeit in damaged condition. The volume ranges broadly, covering the Netherlands, three Nordic countries, Spain, Argentina and the United States.

The emphasis is resolutely on the non-military side of the war. There are two chapters on the Netherlands’ economic diplomacy, showing how the country maneuvered between the increasingly impossible demands of the great powers. Den Hertog makes a convincing argument that the legalist/realist division attributed to Dutch wartime leaders has been exaggerated. Adherence to international law was a tactical device. Foreign minister J. Loudon used a legalistic position to avoid negotiating. This tactic also allowed him to ignore many foreign complaints about private commercial transactions. His legalistic exterior took advantage of the fact that Britain could not ignore international law, as it claimed to be fighting for ‘the rights of small nations’. Had the Netherlands remained purely passive diplomatically, however, its neutrality would not have survived.

Kruizinga takes the more controversial positions that the Netherlands Oversea Trust leaders acted to protect personal interests and that the government and foreign ministry had a disjointed policy. Ultimately the British representatives in the Netherlands were pleased with the NOT, while the Germans tolerated it – otherwise they would have been able to import even less. Without the NOT, Kruizinga believes, the Netherlands would likely not have avoided the war.

The great powers enter the picture mainly as villains, whether being a transitory neutral (the USA) or as a belligerent attempting to pressure Argentina into economic support of its position (the UK). Benjamin Coates presents interesting evidence on the views of the US State Department legal advisors, arguing that their legalistic vision of the future was simply incompatible with neutrality. Britain’s relationship with the hostile Yrigoyen government of Argentina, detailed by Philip Dehne, is a fascinating and little-

told story and shows how perilously weak the British empire could be during the war. Perhaps the problem was distance – which also limited France’s ability to influence the Nordic countries, according to Louis Clerc. France sought cooperation in both the war and the Russian Civil War, appearing particularly unsympathetic to neutrality.

Neither France nor any other belligerent had much difficulty with the neutrality of Spain, a country so internally divided and poorly armed that its participation could not have helped either side. Javier Ponce points out correctly that Madrid became a major center of diplomacy and negotiations as the Spanish foreign ministry represented many countries’ interests during the war. (This included a major role in Belgian relief efforts.) King Alfonso XIII appears in the narrative as a diplomatically and politically clever monarch who emerged with his image intact, his relationship with the Entente positive and relations with Germany aided by his personal contacts with Wilhelm II.

Denmark and Sweden enter the picture through studies of popular culture and diplomacy. The Swedish press, according to Lina Sturfelt, was influenced by gender conceptions in its perspectives on neutrality, which was feminized (Sturfelt claims this is why the attack on Belgium was called a ‘rape’) but also notes a large number of conflicting narratives which eventually converged in a view that Sweden was civilized while the rest of Europe was barbaric. Denmark’s situation is analyzed by Bjarn Bendtsen through a study of the philosopher Georg Brandes, and by Karen Gram-Skjoldager who examines the tensions that developed between those who believed in armed neutrality and those like Paul Munch who favored disarmament. Munch argued that neutrality imposed no duty to resist by force and even believed that the Danish nation could maintain moral neutrality after the occupation of 1940.

The explanations in many chapters of how neutral countries used law and guile to maneuver between the great powers has been told elsewhere – and in some cases major works on the subject are simply left uncited. The essay on Brandes would have been better placed in a work on intellectual history. In a war history an intellectual should be included if s/he had either influence or original ideas; regarding the war, Brandes had neither. Some assertions were clearly made with less thought than they deserved, such as the claim that Belgium was a ‘victim of great power designs’.

The greatest problem with this work is the editors’ decision to eschew the military side of things. To write a history of wartime neutrality without the military dimension strikes me as dancing on one leg, theoretically interesting but intellectually and practically impossible. At many points in these essays at least contextual references to the military situation would have useful. Nevertheless, the editors have done a fine job of pulling together a disparate set of topics and imposing some focus on the whole set, as well as maintaining good readability throughout.

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