

Conny Kristel, *De oorlog van anderen. Nederlanders en oorlogsgeweld, 1914-1918* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2016, 368 pp., ISBN: 978 902 349 739 4).

The writing of the history of the Netherlands in the First World War is experiencing somewhat of a renaissance. It is entirely apt that during the centennial commemorations of this global conflict, a new work appears that analyses the ways in which individuals in the neutral Netherlands considered the world at war. Conny Kristel's book, *De oorlog van anderen, Nederlanders en oorlogsgeweld* [The war of others. The Dutch and war violence], asks the question: what did ordinary Dutch citizens think about the war as it unfolded? Kristel analyses 23 diaries along with a range of letters and popular culture artefacts, including newspaper articles, songs, literature, photographs, films and cultural productions, to answer the question. The primary focus of the book is on the military conflict waged closest to the Netherlands itself, namely on the western front and on the war at sea and in the air between the German, French, Belgian and British forces.

Much like individuals in Europe and around the world, many Dutch took up diary writing at the outbreak of war to document this phenomenal event. The Dutch literary icon Louis Couperus, did too. He explained his reasons for doing so in his own diary, published as *Brieven van een nutteloze toeschouwer* (Letters from a useless observer) in 1918. But unlike Couperus' work and unlike the thousands of war diaries available in the archives of belligerent countries, there are few extant diaries to draw on in the Netherlands. Because of the country's neutrality, few considered their wartime musings to have any value in the war's aftermath. It is remarkable, then, that Kristel found 23 useful exemplars.

In drawing together her history, Kristel concentrates on four themes. Her first theme focuses on the emotional pull of the war on the Dutch, who read about it in their newspapers, watched it unfold on news-reels in cinemas and confronted the impact of the conflict in a range of direct and indirect ways. Although the Netherlands was a neutral country, the war was not a 'far-off' event for its people. The German invasion of Belgium passed by the Dutch border. Residents had to deal with refugees, escaped prisoners of war (POWs), the internment of foreign soldiers as well as the mobilisation of its own conscript army and the imposition of a military state of siege. They also endured severe rationing, damaging food and fuel shortages as well as occasional military incursions (including aerial bombardment and the sinking of fishing and merchant vessels). These neutral war experiences also impacted

on how the Dutch interpreted the military events in which they played no direct hand. There was no enthusiasm for war in the Netherlands.

Another major theme of the book looks to the Dutch population's feelings of 'helplessness' (*machteloosheid*). The Dutch were well aware that their fate as a small and neutral country depended on the decisions made by the great military powers. That understanding had repercussions on how they perceived the war and gauged its relevance. Kristel's third theme deals with the centrality of international law in Dutch interpretations of the war's obvious violence, which were particularly vested in the rights of civilians. Finally, Kristel acknowledges the importance of the war in shaping popular expectations for the Netherlands' post-war future. How would the country fare in a post-war world? What hopes and ambitions did the Dutch have for their future?

Using a plethora of personal anecdotes and perspectives, Kristel narrates a history of the Dutch people as engaged witnesses, readers and thinkers of the war. In so doing she offers a corrective of the notion that neutral populations were passive observers. Her chapters cover the German invasion of Belgium, the conduct of the military theatres on the western front, U-boat warfare, the British blockade, aerial bombardments, the arrival of refugees and the revolutions at war's end. She illustrates how the Dutch public was incensed at incursions of international law, how it increasingly considered the conduct of the war as trespassing the limits of 'civilisation' and how it often cast Germany as the worst offender. Above all, she highlights how the war overwhelmed the Dutch, as it overwhelmed almost everyone in Europe, yet also how it held their fascination, sometimes in macabre ways. As Kristel presents it, the 'war of others' also offered the Dutch a window on themselves. As she concludes: 'the First World War was only in the strictest sense a war of others' (277, my translation).

Altogether this is an engaging contribution to the history of the Netherlands in the First World War. Kristel sketches a colourful picture of how ordinary Dutch men and women encountered news of the war and shaped that information. Her work broadens the social and cultural history of the period. It augments the existing historiography and serves as a useful addition to Ismee Tames' *Oorlog voor onze gedachten* [The war for our thoughts, 2006]. Yet it also left me wanting more. Kristel shines in her use of vignettes and richly illustrated examples. These are handsomely interspersed throughout the volume. But it is only at the end of the book that she returns in a systematic way to the questions she started with. And even then she does not answer them in-depth. Did the Dutch have a unique 'war culture'? Did their understanding of the war impact on their sense of self? How did their insecurities and helplessness alter as the war progressed? And how did the war shape their hopes for the future? There are glimpses of analysis and some wonderful insights throughout the book – particularly noteworthy is the section on the Somme newsreels for example – but they deserved to

be foregrounded and to be integrated more decisively. Kristel asks lots of excellent questions about the Dutch as neutrals in an inescapable war and presents a wealth of evidence. I would have liked to have seen more made of her excellent insights. For sheer engagement, however, *De oorlog van anderen* is a lovely read.

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