



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Neutral Protectors. The Comité Hispano-Néerlandais and the Fight for Belgium, 1917–1918

Kruizinga, S.

**DOI**

[10.1080/07075332.2023.2300729](https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2300729)

**Publication date**

2024

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

The International History Review

**License**

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Kruizinga, S. (2024). Neutral Protectors. The *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* and the Fight for Belgium, 1917–1918. *The International History Review*, 46(4), 408-425.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2023.2300729>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

# Neutral Protectors. The *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* and the Fight for Belgium, 1917–1918

Samuël Kruizinga 

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

## ABSTRACT

During the First World War, Allies, Central Powers and neutrals collaborated to keep a keyhole in their respective blockades open to allow food and other relief aid for the Belgian civilian population through. American neutrality backed by American power were essential in producing an agreement that, during more than four years of war, sent a steady stream of ships carrying goods for the Committee for Relief of Belgium. But both fell away by 1917, after which America's duties were taken up by a committee of Spanish and Dutch official diplomats. This article details how they managed to keep Belgium and Northern France fed despite a lack of clear diplomatic precedent, protected occupied populations from forcible displacement by the German army, and thwarted German attempts to seize control of Belgian relief and split the Belgian state in two. It also highlights how neutral state agents set an important precedent for the key role of neutrals, neutrality and neutral states in future humanitarian operations. Neutrals – Americans, but also Dutchmen and Spaniards – were indispensable honest brokers, privileged observers, and key conduits for diplomatic backchannels between belligerents, even in the midst of the Great War.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 21 June 2023  
Accepted 23 December 2023

## KEYWORDS

Blockade; relief; First World War; Belgium; commission for the relief of Belgium

## Introduction

Proponents of the 'hidden weapon' of blockade during the First or the Second World War, whether on the Allied, on the Central Powers or on the Axis side, argued that it was a 'total war'-winning weapon. If finely tuned to target the enemy where they were most vulnerable, it could bring victory while minimising collateral damage to allies and neutrals. In order to do that, the spatial area of effect should include the entirety of the economic base of the enemy. Areas occupied by one's enemy were therefore included in blockades in order to deny them, as much as possible, any economic advantages thereof – even if that meant that the occupied population suffered with the enemy, for the onus of that suffering could be put on the latter. Therefore, during the First World War, the Allies included all areas occupied by the Central Powers, including Poland and Serbia, in the blockade, while during the Second World War they did so for the whole of Nazi-occupied Europe. But there were some exceptions to the rule. For those areas of Belgium and Northern France occupied by Germany from August–October 1914 up until the end of the

**CONTACT** Samuël Kruizinga  [s.f.kruizinga@uva.nl](mailto:s.f.kruizinga@uva.nl)

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

war, a loophole in the ever-tightening Allied surface and German subsurface blockades was created allowing the civilian population access to food and other relief goods.

A key agent in making sure the loophole remained open was the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). Brainchild of its “chief” Herbert Hoover, the CRB procured foodstuffs and other relief goods globally, negotiated with Allies and Central Powers for their safe passage to and distribution in occupied Belgium, and in doing so kept millions of Belgians and Frenchmen alive.<sup>1</sup> Frank Angell, one of Hoover’s key aides who served as the CRB’s special representative in Belgium during 1915–1916, recorded the widespread impression that when it came to Belgian food aid, ‘the Americans were doing it all.’<sup>2</sup> However, as important as the (mostly) American CRB was to the diplomatic and economic history of the war and the Belgian occupation, the Americans were demonstrably not ‘doing it all.’<sup>3</sup> But since most accounts of the CRB are told near-exclusively through American sources, easily accessible and readable, there is a marked tendency within the international historiography of humanitarianism and the First World War to privilege views like Angell’s (and Hoover’s), which portray Europeans as minor characters in an epic tale of American humanitarianism and business-like efficiency.<sup>4</sup>

There is, however, another view, one that, instead, spotlights local European actors, who set up self-help organisations to collectively buy, distribute and/or ration foodstuffs, raw materials and finished products. These emerged in German-occupied Poland, but most notably in Belgium.<sup>5</sup> The *Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation* (CN), created by the Brussels *haute finance* in September 1914, evolved into the foremost, if unofficial, *national* organisation under German occupation.<sup>6</sup> The CN employed, directly or indirectly, tens of thousands of people, and enjoyed a symbiotic, if at times fractious, relationship with the CRB with which it cooperated closely on a number of levels. Reading the history of food relief in Belgium and Northern France solely through CRB archival materials tends to downplay the role of the Belgian *Comité National*, but, likewise, following the archival trail in the Belgian State Archives in Brussels does the same thing for the CRB. The copious amounts of mostly French-language archival sources leave the distinct impression of the CRB as a collective of bumbling Americans keen to butt in and impose their views on anything and everything.<sup>7</sup>

This article, however, highlights a *third* group of agents that has remained near-invisible in both CRB and CN archival materials, or, indeed, in most historians’ accounts of First World War-era blockade, economic warfare, humanitarian aid and occupation. In it, I will argue that these agents nevertheless played a key role in shaping occupied Belgian – and, to a lesser extent, Northern French – wartime and post-war history, and, perhaps even more notably, the blockade during the latter half of the First World War. Its focus is on the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais pour la Protection du Ravitaillement en Belgique et dans le Nord de la France*, or the Spanish-Dutch Committee for the Protection of Relief in Belgium and Northern France. This joint Spanish-Dutch organisation was set up in Spring 1917 to take over the duties of Belgian- and Northern France-based American CRB agents, who had to leave the country after the American declaration of war on Germany. In this article, I will present an institutional history of the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* (CHN) and its interactions with other parties involved with the relief in Belgium and Northern France: the CN and the CRB, of course, but also various German occupation authorities and the Dutch and Spanish governments. In doing so, this article questions what happened when American power – widely and correctly seen as crucial in brokering the agreements between Allies and Germans that made relief aid to Belgium and Northern France across competing blockades possible – fell away. How did agents from countries with much less military and political clout manage to keep the agreement, and were they able to make the job their own? And what role do the Spanish and Dutch neutralities, as interpreted “on the ground” rather than simply as official government policy, play therein?

### **Protective ministers**

Before moving to Spring 1917, I will first consider what role Dutch, Spanish and American government agents played in Belgium from the outbreak of the war. Officially, diplomatists’ roles

following the German invasion of Belgium on 4 August 1914 were confined to representing the interests of their own citizens now in occupied territories, as well as those of other countries whose interests their government was representing.<sup>8</sup> However, both Brand Whitlock, the American envoy to Brussels, and the Spanish Minister Rodrigo de Saavedra y Vincent, Marqués de Villalobar, soon became involved with schemes by local Brussels elites to procure foodstuffs for the Belgian capital, cut off from overseas sources of supply by war and, after its occupation by the Germans, by the Allied seaborne blockade of the Central Powers.<sup>9</sup> When the Belgian government departed Brussels for Antwerp in late September 1914 and then went into exile to Sainte-Adresse in France in mid-October, nearly all foreign dignitaries, including Dutch envoy H. van Weede, followed diplomatic protocol and joined them.<sup>10</sup> However, both Whitlock and De Villalobar and their staff were ordered to stay behind in Brussels and further facilitate efforts for Belgian food relief. They were joined by a junior Dutch diplomat, Maurits (often Frenchified as 'Maurice') van Vollenhoven, whose lesser rank of Secretary to the Envoy<sup>11</sup> suggested a more limited range of duties: looking after the interests of Dutch citizens and those of Allied countries (including the United Kingdom) now entrusted into neutral Dutch care. Why Van Vollenhoven and his small staff were exempt from the Dutch practice of rigidly sticking to established diplomatic protocols is unclear, but a key reason might be the perception that Dutch citizens remaining in Belgium were at risk from Belgian reprisals because of rampant, false, rumours that the German army had been able to capture the Belgian border fortifications only because they had been allowed to move across neutral Dutch territory.<sup>12</sup>

Since, officially, the trio of neutral diplomats in Brussels were accredited to a government that no longer effectively ruled, their status was unclear: were they official representatives, or private citizens? Quickly, however, it dawned on the German occupational authorities that there was potentially great value in their presence. Not only might they lessen the burden on the German occupying forces by providing services to neutral and Allied citizens caught behind the lines<sup>13</sup>, semi-official representatives of neutral countries might also act as a kind of privileged observers of German occupational practices, and ideally provide a counternarrative to the burgeoning Allied propaganda that stressed the violence committed by German soldiers in Belgium.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the presence of neutral representatives could provide a useful diplomatic backchannel.<sup>15</sup> An "accidental" meeting was arranged on 25 August 1914 between the trio of remaining neutral diplomats and the highest ranking German officer in Belgium, Colmar *Freiherr* von der Goltz, at the American Legation, in which the latter promised, on behalf of his government, to treat Whitlock, De Villalobar and Van Vollenhoven as 'Etrangers de distinction'.<sup>16</sup> These 'distinguished foreigners' would, despite not being official representatives of their government, continue to enjoy some diplomatic privileges, including the right to send and receive coded telegrams and diplomatic mail, as well as unmolested travel throughout the occupied territories. But they needed permission before they could leave the country, and were explicitly forbidden from acting as go-between for the Belgian government in exile without Berlin's approval.<sup>17</sup> Finally, their privileges depended on German goodwill rather than international agreement, and thus could be revoked at any time the German government deemed that the 'distinguished foreigners' had overstayed their welcome.<sup>18</sup>

Their privileges, conditional though they were, nevertheless helped establish the neutral diplomats as essential go-betweens in the negotiations between the Allies, Germans, American entrepreneurs and Belgian financial elites that eventually produced the Commission for Relief in Belgium. Their ongoing negotiations produced, by early Summer 1915, a framework for the transport and distribution of food aid into Belgium for Belgian civilian consumption. In the agreements concluded, the Allies promised that food and other relief goods destined for German-occupied Belgium and Northern France on clearly recognisable 'relief ships' chartered to or owned by the CRB to the Dutch port of Rotterdam were exempt from seizure by the Allied surface fleet blockading Germany or from torpedoing by German submarines. At Rotterdam the CRB would transship the cargo to barges for transport *via* rivers and canals to Belgian and French inland ports, where warehouses administered by the *Comité National* were located. These

warehouses, in turn, supplied special stores where the foods were sold at subsidised prices or distributed *gratis* to those who could not afford them. The German authorities, meanwhile, officially guaranteed that food shipped into Belgium and Northern France by the CRB and distributed by the CN would be for civilian use in the occupied territories only; it would not benefit either the occupation forces or be taken from the occupied territories to feed Germany proper. In Summer 1916, these guarantees were extended to include not only food imports but also homegrown Belgian and Northern French agricultural produce, so that the Germans might not simply export Belgian products to Germany only for them to be replaced by relief goods (Figure 1).<sup>19</sup>

The German guarantees that underpinned Belgian food aid and the Belgian apparatus created to distribute it were officially overseen by the three unofficial diplomats in their new role as *ministres protecteurs* of the *Comité National*. They were fed information by American CRB agents active in Belgium, but it was up to the *ministres protecteurs* to hold all parties to account. It was a delicate balancing act, performed in the midst of the most destructive war the world had ever seen, and within audible distance of the guns of the Western Front. But the balance held, because it was ultimately in the German interest to keep the populations of Belgium and Northern France from becoming a drag on the Central Powers' limited resources, and in the Allied interest to keep the Belgian armies in the field by providing for their compatriots in the German-occupied parts of the country. Moreover, both the American and the Spanish governments were explicitly interested in the soft power projection opportunities their privileged status in Belgium provided. Moreover, it allowed them to champion a "war" aim that provided a more attractive and unifying political narrative to their populations, divided in their sympathies for the belligerents, than a neutrality that was often seen as merely passive and reactionary. Moreover, both Washington and Madrid hoped that their activities in Belgium, both humanitarian and diplomatic, might earn them a place at the negotiating table at war's end.<sup>20</sup>

For the Dutch government, however, things were significantly more complicated. On the one hand, there was a great deal of popular and official sympathy for the plight of the neighbouring Belgians. The Dutch government, in addition to housing Belgian refugees, supplied facilities to the CRB at Rotterdam port free of charge. Moreover, to provide additional aid and relief a



**Figure 1.** The *Eburon*, a ship chartered by the CRB and used for the transportation of relief goods from United States and British ports, leaves the port of Rotterdam after having unloaded her cargo, which is now bound for Germanoccupied Belgium and Northern France. The words BELGIAN RELIEF are painted on the ship's hull, clearly visible from a distance, so German U-boat commanders know the ship carried relief goods and is not to be torpedoed.

Source: Georges Rency, *La Belgique et la guerre. Vol. I: La vie matérielle de la Belgique durant la guerre mondiale* (Brussels, 1920), 171.



separate committee was set up in December 1914, serving border communities at first but quickly expanding its field of operations to the whole of Belgium (the 'Fleskens Committee', named for its chairman, parliamentarian A.N. Fleskens, but officially known as the *Royal Netherlands Committee for the Delivery of Necessities to Belgian Border Municipalities*), as well as another aid committee for Dutch citizens who remained in occupied Belgium (the 'Dutch Benevolence Society').<sup>21</sup> However, there was also, more than in either the US or in Spain, an awareness of the danger of too close an official association with Belgian relief. Conflict over feeding the Belgian population might spill over into the already complicated negotiations on trade and finance the Dutch were engaged in throughout the First World War with both the Allies and the Central Powers or, worse, invite hostile diplomatic or military action.<sup>22</sup> It was telling that Maurits van Vollenhoven, in age and rank by far the most junior of the three *ministres protecteurs*, was left in Belgium with little in the way of official instructions. Van Vollenhoven's superiors probably assumed that he would concern himself mostly with protecting the interests some 60–70,000 Dutch citizens living in Belgium.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, when they ordered Van Vollenhoven to remain in Brussels in September 1914 they probably did not think the war would last as long as it did, and had never expected the Dutch to have to play an official role in Relief. Their instructions therefore limited themselves to the admonishment to be careful and not engage in any type of diplomatic brinkmanship.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, post-war assessments of Van Vollenhoven's performance suggested that he might have taken those admonishments a bit too seriously. The Board of Directors of the CN, according to one such report, 'did not take him *au sérieux* and considered him to be lazy and unwilling to take a firm stance on behalf of the Comité National!'<sup>25</sup>

But Van Vollenhoven was only selectively lazy. Taking advantage of The Hague's lack of oversight and his unique position, he worked hard to solidify his own standing amongst Belgian high society and to improve his private finances. He managed to secure, *via* the 'Fleskens' committees, food and other items for his political allies, in addition to, according to a post-war indictment of his activities in Belgium, 'feed for his chickens, which were held by one of his mistresses'.<sup>26</sup> Worse, he was engaged in a complicated but very lucrative money laundering operation. Taking advantage of the mail privileges accorded to him as 'distinguished foreigner', he brought German marks he procured in the Netherlands to occupied Belgium in diplomatic pouches, where he converted them into Belgian francs issued by the German occupier in Belgium. These 'German' francs, which were pegged to the German mark and experienced rapid inflation, were then shipped back to the Netherlands, where they were exchanged for pre-war Belgian francs – which traded at their pre-war rate and were still valid in order to facilitate transfers from the Belgian government-in-exile *via* the CRB to the CN.<sup>27</sup> Worse still, he used the same diplomatic pouches to smuggle gold into Belgium, in violation of both Dutch and German export and import prohibition laws, selling it for higher prices than it would fetch in the Netherlands. Although The Hague remained unaware of his immoral and illicit activities until after the war, high-placed Belgians and neutrals, including CN's President Emile Francqui and Spain's De Villalobar, knew very well what the Dutchman was up to.<sup>28</sup>

In stark contrast to Van Vollenhoven, De Villalobar, an ambitious diplomat who had risen through the ranks despite the prejudices he faced due to his severe physical disabilities, had his King's ear and enjoyed an excellent working relationship with both the Foreign Minister and the Spanish Ambassadors to Berlin and London.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, the German occupiers saw him as an essential counterweight to the supposedly pro-Allied Americans, and internal German documents referred to him as someone who understood the German position. Moreover, it was hoped that, through his friendship with Francqui, De Villalobar might restrain the Belgians who, as a result of the agreements related to the CRB, could operate with a measure of independence the Germans were quickly becoming deeply uncomfortable with. All in all, De Villalobar managed, during the first years of the war, to minimise Dutch influence on food aid or the diplomacy of the blockade, using, alternatively, Dutch official disinterest, Van Vollenhoven's low reputation amongst Belgian

official circles, and the simple fact that his junior colleague's attentions were focused more on fame and money than on humanitarian pursuits.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the Spanish Legation in Brussels emerged as a key site in the machinery of Belgian food aid. De Villalobar and his staff, often in close cooperation with Brand Whitlock, managed to skillfully navigate the complicated diplomatic relationships between Spain, the US, the Comité National, the Committee for the Relief of Belgium, and the German occupational authorities in order to maintain workable relations essential for the practical operation of the blockade with respect to occupied Belgium and Northern France. However, the carefully achieved balance would be dramatically upended in early 1917, when the German High Command convinced the Kaiser and the Reich Chancellor to pursue "unlimited" U-boat warfare, resulting in an unprecedented disruption of seaborne traffic on which Belgian food aid was dependent and the end of American neutrality. Moreover, CRB agents, deemed essential by the Allies for guaranteeing independent control over the relief operations in occupied Belgium and Northern France, could not now remain in German-controlled territory.

### **The Comité Hispano-Néerlandais**

CRB-'chief' Hoover, although not in favour of American belligerency, had prepared for its eventuality. He also saw it as an opportunity to curtail De Villalobar, whom he considered old-fashioned and unpredictable. Apparently unaware of Van Vollenhoven's unpopularity amongst the Belgians, his financial and political improprieties, and his complicated official relationship with the Dutch government, Hoover suggested a Dutch committee headed by the Brussels-based diplomat take over the CRB's duties in Belgium, while the CRB would continue securing relief goods and sending ships destined for Belgium from its bases in the US, London and Rotterdam.<sup>31</sup> Unexpectedly, the Dutch came out in support of Hoover's scheme on 14 February 1917. Why The Hague suddenly opted for official and increased involvement in the CRB is unclear, but it is highly likely that the Dutch government was all too aware that U-boat warfare and British reprisals against it threatened to cut off the Netherlands from much-needed overseas supplies, which critically altered the Dutch strategic landscape. This, in turn, heightened the value in opening an additional diplomatic avenue to Americans, Allies and Germans, if only to impress on them the vital need of keeping the sea lanes to Rotterdam, though which occupied Belgium and Northern France were fed, open.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the Spanish government refused to be sidelined.<sup>33</sup> The Spanish Ambassador to London, Alfonso Merry del Val y Zulueta, claimed that since both his and De Villalobar's signatures were on the official agreements signed by both the German Governor General and the *ministres protecteurs* on the distribution of food aid in Belgium, and that leaving them out of the arrangements risked invalidating them. Behind the scenes, Merry del Val even threatened to send Spanish observers to Belgium unilaterally and frustrated efforts to obtain the official patronage of the Queen of Holland for any sort of replacement of the CRB's agents in Belgium. But after it became clear that Hoover would not consent to a solution without Dutch involvement, Villalobar changed tack. He agreed to the formation of a *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais pour la Protection du Ravitaillement en Belgique et dans le Nord de la France* that would set up at its offices at the CRB Belgian headquarters on 66 rue des Colonies in Brussels, and would take over the CRB's inspection duties in Belgium. But he then slyly suggested to the Germans that all of The Hague's candidates for the committee's top jobs were pro-Ally, while insisting to the Allies that the new committee be made up solely of professional diplomatists.<sup>34</sup> This double game was meant to ensure that the Dutch could only send inexperienced staff to support Van Vollenhoven, whom the Spanish confidently felt De Villalobar could control.<sup>35</sup>

His diplomatic brinkmanship resulted in the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* being jointly headed by directors Pedro Saura, a confidant of De Villalobar and Merry del Val's, and Godfried Langenberg,

a very junior official from the Dutch ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>36</sup> Spanish designs to neuter the Dutch committee members thus seemed to have been successful. But to everyone's surprise, Langenberg proved supremely capable, and was able to quickly effect a 'reset' of Belgian-Dutch relations by having a frank discussion with Francqui and warning him to mollify his 'anti-Dutch attitude', lest he officially inform the Dutch government – kept in the dark by Van Vollenhoven – of their unfriendliness.<sup>37</sup> But Langenberg did not entirely supplant Van Vollenhoven, nor Saura De Villalobar, if only because they were the only diplomats with anything resembling formal accreditation to the German occupiers. Moreover, De Villalobar refused to let others run the show, while Van Vollenhoven (successfully) attempted to use his position as *ministre protecteur* of the new committee to have The Hague promote him.<sup>38</sup> Both officious diplomats formally asked the Germans to renew the conditions of their stay, made in September 1914, so they could continue to enjoy certain diplomatic privileges and act as 'ministres protecteurs' of the CN and as 'haut patrons' of the new *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*. In return, the head of the German *Political Department* of the civilian occupying forces, Oscar *Freiherr* von der Lancken, demanded that Van Vollenhoven and De Villalobar guarantee that relief ships would continue sailing despite the danger of U-boats and British reprisals, and that the Belgian civilian population would continue to enjoy a weekly bread ration of 300 grams. This they refused, but following negotiations with Von der Lancken – who strongly suggested the demand was made not by the German foreign office but by the General Staff, whose influence in Berlin grew by the day – Van Vollenhoven and De Villalobar took advantage of their semi-official status by signing a promise as 'Etrangers de distinction', not as official representatives of their governments. This ruse satisfied (or escaped the attention of) the German military, clearing, on 15 June 1917, the last hurdle for the replacement of CRB officials in Belgium with 'delegates' of the CHN.<sup>39</sup>

### Guarantees

In theory, the CHN's task was simple: making sure the Germans stick to the guarantees agreed with the CRB in Summer 1916.<sup>40</sup> But that was much easier said than done. The basic agreement on Belgian relief seemed ironclad, and is portrayed as such in most post-war accounts: all Relief imports and all Belgian native produce are for the civilian population of the occupied territories' consumption *only*, and can in no way, shape or form benefit the German war machine. However, the Germans, the Allies, the CRB and the CN disagreed on whether the agreement covered any and all native harvests, or only produce up to the amount produced before the war – meaning that any surplus over the pre-war average *could* be exported or used by the German military. A further bone of contention was the food bought or consumed by German soldiers and civilians in Belgian restaurants and ships.<sup>41</sup>

Further complicating the CHN's duties was the institutional make-up of occupied Belgium and Northern France: a civilian *Generalgouvernement*, headed by a governor responsible only to the Kaiser and a support staff furnished by the German foreign office, controlled most of pre-war Belgium and some border strips of Northern France, while other areas nearer to the North Sea and to the western front were considered military rear or staging areas and controlled by the German Navy or Army.<sup>42</sup> The agreements on food aid import and distribution were signed on behalf of all German occupational authorities by the Governor General, and in theory bound the German government in its entirety and covered all occupied territories, but not every branch and level of the three different occupational authorities complied, or even knew about, them. Moreover, the level of freedom accorded to CHN's agents – and the CRB's before that – was much more circumscribed in the areas controlled by the military, where they could only move around escorted, then in the General Government. Finally, as the war moved into its third year soaring prices and scarcity within the *Reich* itself, coupled with ever-increasing demands of the Fourth and Sixth German Armies stationed in the *Etappen* areas, increased the pressures on



Germans in Belgium to take whatever they could get their hands on. At first the CHN was willing to admit that the top civilian administrators in the General Government were sincere in their commitments to the agreements in order to keep Belgian food aid coming into the country, but they were increasingly unable to impose their views on the military and on lower administrative levels.<sup>43</sup> But it quickly emerged that even the civilian administrators were actively looking for ways to stretch the Relief agreements and engage in subterfuge. Even the new Governor General Ludwig von Falkenhausen, who had succeeded Von Bissing in May 1917, refused to specify whether the German interpretation of the agreement covered *all* Belgian produce or only those up to the pre-war maximum, thus making sure the Germans reserved some 'wiggle room' for themselves.<sup>44</sup> All of this meant that German government agents, Belgian middle-men, Army purchasing agencies and private companies exhausted every effort to buy up what they could.<sup>45</sup>

The CHN hesitated, however, to formally complain to either the Allies or the CRB that relations with the German occupiers were deteriorating, afraid that doing so would give hawks within the Allied and American governments the excuse they need to demand closing the last gap in the blockade and cutting off Belgium completely from relief aid. They did, however, threaten the Germans that they *might*, and even leaked a (non-attributable) story to the Dutch press in order to put pressure on Von Falkenhausen and his Political Department chief Von der Lancken.<sup>46</sup> However, the Germans were feeling pressures of their own. In early 1918, the arrival of fresh but hungry troops from the Eastern front in Belgium and Northern France in preparation for the Spring Offensive put additional strains on the food supply of the German armed forces. Both individual soldiers and the various German army service corps active in the *Etappen* or front area under control of the Fourth and Sixth Armies resorted to simply requisitioning Belgian foodstuffs, or created Belgian companies were created to act as fronts for the *Nationalvereinigung für Kriegsfürsorge an der Westfront* and other Army purchasing agencies.<sup>47</sup> The port of Antwerp, in particular, developed into a German Army entrepot for transporting Belgian livestock, feed, foodstuffs to the front. Faced with these flagrant violations of the Relief guarantees, the CHN decided on 'une surveillance permanente' of practically all German organisations involved in the production, distribution, or transportation of foodstuffs across all three occupation zones. From April 1918 onwards, for example, CHN agents were present at every major railway station and on those near the German or Luxembourg border, as well as on the 'border' between the *Generalgouvernement* and the Navy or Army-controlled zones. The goal was to provide the *Politische Abteilung*, still firmly under civilian control, with irrefutable proof that certain 'organismes', especially those created or sponsored by the army, were intent on flouting the guarantees against German consumption that underpinned Belgian civilian food aid. However, the CHN's detective work was not appreciated, and the CHN was even accused by Von der Lancken of unneutral behaviour by attempting to 'entrap' the Germans.<sup>48</sup> The CHN replied curtly that there was no reason to doubt 'l'absolue neutralité' of their efforts, and that angry replies only served to further solidify their suspicions. This seemed to have pushed the Brussels-based neutrals to a breaking point: on 1 June 1918 the CHN concluded that German transgressions had attained a 'systemic character'. In other words, neither they nor the Allies could trust the German occupational authorities to keep their word.<sup>49</sup>

### **Activists and Zentrales**

The CHN also had to deal with other German attempts to circumvent the agreements made with the CRB, the *ministres protecteurs* and the Allies. In these agreements, the task of redistributing food to Belgian and Northern French civilian populations was left to the the *Comité National* and its subsidiary, the *Comité Français*. This gave them considerable autonomy vis à vis the German occupational authorities, and allowed it to act, *via* its redistributive network, as a surrogate national government. The Germans, in turn, saw the CN as a key threat to their political goals of either fatally undermining the Belgian state or even destroying it outright, in order to ease its political submission to, or even its outright incorporation into, the German Reich post-war.<sup>50</sup>

It could not, however, simply ban the *Comité National*. Doing so would be considered a breach of the agreements regulating Belgian relief, which stipulated that the CN would redistribute the goods imported through the CRB. The German occupational authorities therefore enlisted Belgians themselves to do their dirty work for them. In doing so they combined two of their policy objectives: the shorter-term goal of ending or curtailing the CN's political role and the longer-term goal of weakening or fragmenting Belgian state structures. The Germans identified the 'Society for Popular Uplift' (*Vereniging Volksopebeuring*) as a key weapon in their fight to achieve these dual goals, began to funnel money into its coffers and started turning it from a Flemish self-help organisation into a secessionist organisation.<sup>51</sup> From 1916 onwards, the 'Society' began to explicitly target the *Comité National*, painting it as the creation of French-speaking financial elites who did not have the interest of the Flemish-speaking working class at heart. It blamed the CN for the worsening economic conditions in the country, claiming that they were a result of redistribution rather than a decline in imports.<sup>52</sup> By contrast, the 'Society' painted itself a bottom-up Flemish initiative, more egalitarian in its approach. Challenging the CN on its own turf was made easier by the fact that the CN was not an official state entity – it was, in fact, never incorporated at all: a bit of legal trickery employed at the beginning of the occupation to make the CN harder for the Germans to control. It there could not claim any sort of legal monopoly on food redistribution, and agreements made with it lacked legal protections.<sup>53</sup> In late 1917 Belgian newspapers, aided by German censors from the Political Department, began a press campaign aimed at riling up Flemish 'activists' – those willing to collaborate with the German occupier to achieve Flemish independence – by claiming that the dwindling rations were caused by Allied intransigence and CN corruption. Belgian-produced foodstuffs and other essential materials, such as coal, were then diverted from CN stores to those operated by the 'Society' in the Flemish provinces. Finally, redistribution of these goods and criticism of the CN were tied to the Flemish political cause: when, for example the Antwerp city council refused to rename French street names into Flemish, German occupational authorities forcibly transferred warehouses in Antwerp from *Comité National* to the 'Society's' control.<sup>54</sup>

The *Generalgouvernement* also used other means to increase its control over Belgian produce to further both the Reich's economic ends and its political agenda in Belgium. Occupational authorities created *Zentrales* ('cooperatives') of producers and consumers, ostensibly to minimise overhead and waste in distribution of raw materials required for production and to come to an equitable distribution of produce across all end users. The first, inaugurated on 23 July 1915, was the 'Zentral-Ernte-Kommission', or Cooperative Harvest Commission, for producers and merchants of wheat and grain.<sup>55</sup> In 1916 and 1917, obligatory membership of cooperatives was introduced for Belgian producers of potatoes, charcoal, sugar, fats, and other raw materials. These *Zentrales* were dominated by German manufacturers or their Belgian middle-men, allowing German agents to influence patterns of production and distribution – usually to the detriment of Belgian consumers. As this interfered with the principle of equitable distribution, the CHN negotiated with the *Politische Abteilung* to include Belgian representatives in the board of the *Zentrales*, but although this was agreed to in principle these representatives were given little of substance to do, or were simply ignored.<sup>56</sup> Other German attempts to subvert Belgian food and industrial production, either to hasten the separation of Belgium into Flemish and Walloon proto-states, to benefit their own wartime needs, or establishment an economic foothold in a post-war Belgian state, included the closure of most consumer industries and reorienting them for war work, and promising those willing to work in German-controlled factories extra Belgian potatoes, sugar and jam.<sup>57</sup>

These developments greatly perturbed the CHN directors and the *ministres protecteurs*. Taking away control over Belgian-produced foodstuffs and raw materials from the CN threatened the Relief agreements and thus the import of much-needed foodstuffs, if only because CHN inspectors were not allowed into 'Society for Popular Uplift' warehouses and could only do so much to influence the policies of the *Zentrales*. Moreover, the CHN was brought at the heart of what was now becoming an internecine conflict over the future of the Belgian polity, which was fraught with risk – not least because the Flemish movement had significant political support in the Netherlands (Figure 2).<sup>58</sup>



**Figure 2.** After the First World War, commemorative postcards were sold which featured photographs of the three “protective ministers” of the Comité National: De Villalobar, Whitlock, and Van Vollenhoven. De Villalobar wears an ornate uniform, as does Van Vollenhoven. Whitlock is dressed in a comparably simple suit. Source: Private collection of the author.

In response to the triple threat of Flemish separatism, economic meddling *via* the Society and the *Zentrales* and systemic German breaches of the framework agreements regulating Belgian food aid, the CHN and the *ministres protecteurs* took drastic steps. Success was far from assured, and failure would have resulted in a severe political and economic crisis with dire consequences for both the populations of Belgium and Northern France, the fate of the blockade and of economic warfare, and quite possibly the war itself. In a piece of diplomatic brinkmanship, the Dutch legation in Berlin on 8 July 1918 unofficially suggested that it was very close to stepping away from the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* and close off Rotterdam port to CRB ships. Doing so would put an end to Belgian relief. More so, the Dutch legation suggested it would publicly put the blame on Germany, unless it immediately and fully abided by the guarantees given by Governor-General Von Bissing. By unilaterally and secretly threatening Berlin to end Belgian food aid, The Hague played a dangerous game, but one that allowed the Allies and the CRB to remain blissfully unaware of the extent of German interference with Belgian relief – and thus prevent inflamed Allied or American public opinion from forcing their governments’ hands and ending Relief – so that the CHN would have a final chance to get the Germans to back down.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, Van Vollenhoven and De Villalobar successfully demanded the right to defend the *Comité National* in Belgium’s censored newspapers: after all, the Germans argued that their criticism of the CN was part of a healthy, public debate, so why not invite other participants to join in?<sup>60</sup> The final ingredient of the three-pronged attack was spearheaded, uncharacteristically, by Van Vollenhoven. Against explicit instructions from the Dutch Government, he successfully warned off key elements amongst the Dutch political elite who were friendly to the cause of Flemish independence from officially supporting the ‘Society for Popular Uplift’, thus depriving it of critical international support.<sup>61</sup> What is more, Van Vollenhoven also got the Dutch government to end support for the ‘Fleskens’ committee – which primarily served Flemish-speaking border communities – and redirected all their aid to the CRB and the CN. How he did this is not clear from the archival record, but it makes sense that he managed

to play into Dutch fears that any move to oppose the maintenance of Belgian political unity and the CN could be seen as explicitly anti-Ally and un-neutral.<sup>62</sup>

Having scored these major concessions from the Netherland government, the CHN sent De Villalobar to The Hague in July 1918, together with the directors of the CHN and representatives of the *Comité National* to discuss the future of Relief – the end of the war still nowhere in sight – with American representatives from the CRB's Rotterdam and London offices. Some of these unofficial talks were also attended by German representatives from the Government General, making them the first direct negotiations between Germans and American representatives since the US broke off diplomatic relations early in 1917. In The Hague, all outstanding issues of disagreement were settled, with the General Government's the Political Department officially agreeing that CHN surveillance would be stepped up to ensure compliance with the Relief guarantees. In turn the Americans and, even more importantly, the Allies who controlled access to Rotterdam, promised that Relief shipments would continue for the foreseeable future.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, the negotiations in The Hague finally cleared up the fundamental disagreements on whether all or just most of the Belgian native produce would have to be reserved, by including in it a secret annex negotiated with the CHN and De Villalobar allowing the Germans the right to continue to import a limited and named number of Belgian agricultural products.<sup>64</sup>

### **Neutral or pro-Belgian?**

While the CHN struggled to keep the framework agreement on Belgian food aid alive and minimise German meddling in Belgian economic and political affairs to a minimum, combination of U-boat warfare and increased demand for transport ships to ship US goods and soldiers to Europe decreased the tonnage available for Belgian food aid. The CRB had calculated that Belgium and Northern France needed a minimum of 110,000–120,000 tons of food delivered to Rotterdam every month, but from February–September 1917 the monthly average was less 50,000 tons. And even though the CRB had managed to secure promises of additional tonnage from the Allies and Washington, during the harsh winter months of November 1917–March 1918 only 408,000 tons of food arrived in Rotterdam: 267,000 tons short of the minimum amount agreed to. In March 1918, the official bread ration was cut from 330 to 250 grams, but harsh weather conditions exacerbated difficulties in transporting food from warehouses to consumers, meaning that in parts of Belgium people received even less.<sup>65</sup> The CHN was able to negotiate an emergency loan of wheat and potatoes – in effect an advance on shipments agreed to for later in the year, to be delivered immediately – from the nearby Netherlands to help prevent a catastrophe. This helped ensure that the amount of foodstuffs imported for redistribution by the CN actually rose from 1917 to 1918.<sup>66</sup>

The situation in the *Etappengebiet* near the front line was, on the whole, worse than in the *Generalgouvernement*, which covered the most of Belgium. Here, the German Fourth and Sixth Armies were more sanguine in simply confiscating what they wanted or needed and less amenable to allowing CHN agents to check for compliance to the Relief agreements. Moreover, moving foodstuffs from warehouses to stores for distribution was more difficult as the Army monopolised road and rail transport. Finally, the two armies' rear areas grew – shrinking the territory controlled by the *Generalgouvernement* – commensurate with its increasing demands on land for foresting and grazing.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, in August 1918, the Allied counter-offensive gathered steam, and the Germans began a retreat, further extending the border of the *Etappengebiet* north into occupied Belgium. To aid its operations, the German military had ordered towns and cities near the front line to be hurriedly and forcibly evacuated, which interfered with the distribution of food aid by the CN and its French subsidiary.<sup>68</sup> In order to offer more effective coordination for urgently needed relief aid, the CHN agreed with German army HQ that it would send one of its four directors, Dutchman A.J. van Maasdijk, to the French city of Charleville, on the outskirts of the Ardennes near the Franco-Belgian border.<sup>69</sup>

**Table 1.** Imported food distributed by the CN, 1915–1918.

	Kg.	Index
1915	955,207,239	100
1916	848,016,465	89
1917	631,165,234	66
1918	743,039,835	78
<b>Total</b>	3,177,428,773	

Source: Albert Henry, *Le ravitaillement de la Belgique pendant l'occupation allemande* (Paris, 1924), 171; Peter Scholliers and Frank Daelemans, 'Standards of Living and Standards of Health in Wartime Belgium', in *The Upheaval of War: Family, Work, and Welfare in Europe, 1914-1918*, ed. Richard Wall and Jay Winter (Cambridge, 1988), 142.

The haphazard and often heavy-handed German evacuation policy came with an obvious human cost, which made many within the CHN lose any sense of neutrality in dealing with the German authorities by explicitly siding with Belgian and French local interests. Moreover, in this phase of the war many CHN personnel went far beyond their brief. They assisted in the evacuation of wounded or undernourished French citizens to the Netherlands, and director Saura, deeply shaken after witnessing the death of a French mother, even took in her three French children himself. Maasdijk, meanwhile, continually pleaded with General Headquarters to stop the mandatory evacuations, and even had significant success in doing so. He managed to convince HQ to abandon plans to force march the inhabitants of major towns like Tournai and Charleville further to the rear, and even agreed to let them stay behind to welcome their Allied liberators. And he managed to secure promises that the retreating Germans would leave stores of food for distribution behind.<sup>70</sup> Even so, refugees streamed from the *Etappen* areas to the *Generalgouvernement*. Worsening the humanitarian crisis was the spread of a highly infectious and deadly influenza strain (mislabeled the 'Spanish Flu' by contemporaries) amongst those fleeing the front lines. Straying even further from their official brief, and without any instructions from their capitals, CHN agents helped the CN set up sanitary stations at key junctions in the roads north, to care for and isolate those stricken by the pandemic.<sup>71</sup>

From September 1918 onwards, Allied advances gained pace, and the end of the German occupation was nigh. Its final days saw desperate attempts by Germans and collaborationist Belgians to strip the country of economic assets and what food remained.<sup>72</sup> Here, too, the CHN and the *ministres protecteurs* interceded with the Governor General to stop the looting and the wanton destruction of Belgian property, especially warehouses and harbour installations vital for the transshipment and distribution of relief goods.<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile, unrest in Germany proper morphed into a revolutionary movement, which swept up sailors and soldiers, and reached Brussels on 8 November 1918.<sup>74</sup> Street fights between soldiers loyal to Kaiser and to the Revolution broke out, and several high ranking German officers, including Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, had to be escorted to the safety of the Dutch border by De Villalobar. On 9 November, Von Falkenhausen surrendered to revolutionary soldiers, who promptly raised the red flag over the Palais de la Nation – the former Belgian parliamentary building which had been in use as the Governor General's headquarters. De Villalobar and Van Vollenhoven headed negotiations between surviving elements of the former occupying authorities, the revolutionary Soldiers' and Workers' Council, and representatives of various Belgian political parties and interest groups, including the *Comité National*, with an eye to preventing violence and re-establishing food aid and redistribution. They managed to re-open the Belgian waterways for food transit, stopped the sale of alcohol in Brussels, and undid all of the former Governor General's institutional efforts to split Belgium into a Flemish and a Walloon state. But even their actions, and the arrival of three German divisions loyal to the new Socialist government sent to restore order could not stop the violence and chaos in the Belgian capital, made worse by the 200,000 refugees<sup>75</sup> the city was harbouring. Meanwhile, news of the Armistice of 11 November had become known in Belgium through Dutch newspapers: communication with German army headquarters had been completely severed. Now on their own, the remnants of the German civilian occupational authority, the CHN,



their Belgian interlocutors and the *ministres protecteurs* decided, apparently on their own, to send an emissary across the cease-fire line to visit the headquarters of the Belgian army.<sup>76</sup> On 13 November, De Villalobar and Saura met with the Belgian King and impressed on him the urgent need of re-establishing order in Brussels. This was taken extremely seriously, also because the other Allies hinted that continued German violence in Brussels could violate the Armistice!<sup>77</sup> To prevent the resumption of warfare and Brussels from collapsing into revolution, the Belgians and the Allies therefore sped up the timetable of the capital's liberation, while the visit also spurred talks that would lead to the formation of a unity government and a new post-war Belgian constitution in order to head off a potential revolution.<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusions

One reading of the history of the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, presented in this article, is how much of it was made possible by odd characters thrust by fate into unexpectedly important positions. The rivalry between the vainglorious De Villalobar and the conniving Van Vollenhoven was a vital component of the politics of Belgian food aid at its most trying junctures during the last year-and-a-half of the war. De Villalobar could play the role he was born to play: as “man on the spot” who alone could execute his King's vision of Spain's role as interlocutor and, eventually, peacemaker. Van Vollenhoven, meanwhile, operated out of the shadows, taking advantage of his country's lack of interest in the precise details of what he was doing to get rich and improve his position. Any incompatibilities between competing Spanish and Dutch official visions of neutrality and political strategy during the war could thus be smoothed over in occupied Belgium and northern France. Their personal ambitions were, after 1917, intimately connected with the continued success of the Belgian relief operation. Moreover, they were joined by an unexpectedly effective team of Spanish and Dutch directors who, perhaps by virtue of nothing much being expected from them, went above and beyond the call of duty.

The role played by the CHN and the neutral diplomats, before and after 1917, was thus an important one. Neutrals – Americans, but also Dutchmen and Spaniards – thus played key roles in Belgium and Northern France during the First World War. They were honest brokers, as privileged observers, and as key conduits for diplomatic backchannels. That this happened was not entirely a conscious process; this article has highlighted how much of it occurred *without* formal instructions from the neutral representatives' capitals. Madrid's government and king simply seems to have trusted De Villalobar to have their best interests at heart, while The Hague simply ignored Van Vollenhoven and left him to his own devices. But their actions did bind both states, who got officially involved in 1918 and engaged in a game of diplomatic brinkmanship that ended up saving Belgian relief by keeping the keyhole in the blockades open, and seriously impeding German plans for splitting up Belgium and making its economy subservient to German demands.

The Spanish-Dutch Committee and the *ministres protecteurs* did more than simply replicate what American agents had done before 1917. They aggressively and proactively collected data on German breaches of the negotiated framework of Belgian food aid and used it as a political tool, haranguing German officials and selectively communicating or withholding information to the Allies and the Americans. Using guile and diplomatic brinkmanship, they thwarted German plans to dismantle the CRB and Belgium proper, and far exceeded their brief by strongly coming out in support of Belgian state institutions. Without their doing so, Belgian relief might not have survived the last two years of the war, with catastrophic consequences for the civilian population of Belgium and Northern France and grave repercussions for the diplomatic relationships between neutrals and belligerents, for Belgium and the Allies, and quite possibly for the outcome of the war. That an arrangement concluded in October 1914, when the war was expected to last

perhaps a few more months, managed to remain in effect until the end of the war was a miracle; this article helps explain how it came to be.

What is more, the humanitarian duties of the CHN and their Dutch-Spanish protective ministers only increased in the wake of the Allied counter-offensive of August 1918, and their political responsibilities in the power vacuum from 9–13 November: they played significant roles in preventing the German retreat from turning into a humanitarian catastrophe, in maintaining the Armistice in the crucial days following 11 November 1918, and in shaping the post-war Belgian constitutional and socio-political landscape.

The history of neutrality during the First World War has usually been written as one of failure, especially in the light of its inability to stop the blockade from impacting their freedom of political and economic action.<sup>79</sup> But this article has highlighted how agents from smaller neutrals took on surprisingly active roles, even without the presence of agents of American power to back them up. And there is yet another way in which the history of the *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais* flies in the face of historiographical consensus: it highlights the continuing importance of state agents in providing humanitarian aid, rather than assuming that non-governmental actors like Herbert Hoover's CRB alone were pushing the boundaries of humanitarianism and were at the forefront of creating an 'international humanitarian order'.<sup>80</sup> Despite their subsequent erasure from the historiographical record, Spanish and Dutch neutral state agents not only played key roles in the practical operation of the blockade, they helped set an important precedent for the key role of neutrals, neutrality and neutral states in future humanitarian operations.<sup>81</sup>

## Notes

1. See e.g. Branden Little, "Band of Crusaders. American Humanitarians, the Great War, and the Remaking of the World" (PhD, University of California, 2009); Thomas D. Westerman, "Rough and Ready Relief. American Identity, Humanitarian Experience, and the Commission for Relief in Belgium, 1914-1917" (PhD, University of Connecticut, 2014); Ryan Thomas Austin, "Creating a 'Piratical State Organization for Benevolence,' the Commission for Relief in Belgium: 1914-1915" (PhD, Iowa State University, 2009); Jeffrey B. Miller, *Yanks behind the lines. How the Commission for Relief in Belgium saved millions from starvation during World War I* (Lanham, MD, 2020).
2. Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford, California, Frank Angell Papers, Box 3, typescript "The Belgians Under the German Occupation", n.d. (written in late 1916 and slightly revised in December 1918), p. 1. Cited in Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "A Civilian War Effort: The Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918," in *Remembering Herbert Hoover and the Commission for Relief in Belgium: Proceedings of the Seminar Held at the University Foundation on October 4, 2006* (Brussels, 2006), 24–37. See also Brand Whitlock to State Department, 16 February 1917, in *The Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York/London 1936), 216-217: 'the fact that the whole of Belgium and Northern France are entirely dependent upon the relief work being conducted by the Americans'.
3. A similar point is made by Tammy M. Proctor, "An American Enterprise? British Participation in US Food Relief Programmes (1914–1923)," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 29–42.
4. George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. The Humanitarian, 1914-1917* (New York, 1988), 13, 378; Clotilde Druelle-Korn, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I* (Cham, 2019), 326; Sébastien Farré, "La Commission for Relief of Belgium: Neutralité, Action Humanitaire et Mobilisations Civiles Durant La Première Guerre Mondiale," *Relations Internationales* 159, no. 3 (2014): 79. For another group of oft-overlooked actors, see Elisabeth Piller, "Beyond Hoover. Rewriting the History of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) through Female Involvement," *The International History Review* 45, no. 1 (2023): 202–24.
5. Robert Blobaum, *A Minor Apocalypse. Warsaw during the First World War* (Ithaca, NY/London, 2017), esp. 102-119;
6. Technically, what became the Comité National wasn't official founded until November 1914. But its predecessor, the Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, held its first meeting on 1 September 1914, and in these meetings many of the key ideas and concepts animating the later Comité were first developed before its operation was extended from the Brussels metropolitan area to all of occupied Belgium. See State Archives of Belgium (SAB) 446/3234: Minutes of the meeting of the Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, 1 September 1914. The decision to extend its operation was made on 18 October (SAB 446/3235: Minutes of the meeting of the Comité Central de Secours et d'Alimentation, 18 October 1914) and put into operation in early November (SAB 446/2969: 'Rapport présenté au Comité National de

- Secours et d'Alimentation par le Comité de Secours et d'Alimentation de l'Agglomération Bruxelloise, 31 December 1914).
7. Sophie De Schaepdrijver, 'A Civilian War Effort: the Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918', in Bertrand Patenaude et al eds., *Remembering Herbert Hoover and the Commission for Relief in Belgium: Proceedings of the seminar held at the University Foundation on October 4, 2006* (Brussels, 2007) 24-37; Druelle-Korn, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I*, 9; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *De Grote Oorlog: Het Koninkrijk België Tijdens De Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 2. druk (Amsterdam, 1997), 122-23; Truus van Bosstraeten, *Bezet maar beschermd: België en de markies van Villalobar tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Leuven/Voorburg, 2008), 47, 57.
  8. See e.g. Branden Little, 'Evacuating Wartime Europe: U.S. Policy, Strategy, and Relief Operations for Overseas American Travelers, 1914-15', in *Journal of Military History* 79:4 (2015) 929-958.
  9. Manuel Aguirre de Cárcer, ed., *La neutralidad de España durante la Primera Guerra Mundial (1914-1918)*. Vol. I (Madrid, 1995), doc. no. 79, 101-102: De Villalobar to Salvador Bermúdez de Castro, Marquis of Lema (Foreign Minister), 3 September 1914; doc. no. 83, 104-105: De Villalobar to De Lema, 16 October 1914.
  10. Oscar von der Lancken, *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre, 1888-1918*. Potsdam – Paris – Brüssel (Berlin, 1931), 142-43; M.W.R. van Vollenhoven, *Memoires. Beschouwingen van Belevenissen, Reizen En Anecdoten* (Amsterdam/Brussels, 1948), 274-76.
  11. In Dutch "Gezantschapsraad".
  12. C. Smit, *Bescheiden Betreffende de Buitenlandse Politiek van Nederland, 1848-1919*. Derde Periode, Vierde Deel 1914-1917. Grote Serie 109 (The Hague, 1962), doc. no. 157, pp. 127-128: Van Vollenhoven to foreign minister John Loudon, 24 September 1914; doc. no. 193, pp. 181-182: Loudon to Van Vollenhoven, 10 October 1914.
  13. The Dutch legation in Brussels would serve as de facto protecting power for the interests of, inter alia, Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and Greece.
  14. John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities 1914. A History of Denial* (New Haven, CN and London, 2001), 175-226.
  15. See the reports by Oscar von der Lancken, collected in Michaël Amara and Hubert Roland, eds., *Gouverner en Belgique occupée: Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz, rapports d'activité, 1915-1918*, Comparatisme et société 1 (Bruxelles, 2004). See esp. 'Rapport d'activité du début novembre 1915 la fin janvier 1916', 161-195, there 162-163, and 'Rapport d'activité du début août la fin janvier 1917', 230. He repeats many of the arguments in his post-war autobiography: von der Lancken, *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre*, 149.
  16. Vollenhoven, *Memoires*, 278-83. Quotes from von der Lancken, *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre*, 145.
  17. See also SAB 446/647: De Villalobar to Franqui, 19 February 1918, in which De Villalobar chides Franqui for suggesting that he abuses his neutral position to ferry messages from the Belgian and French governments to The Hague.
  18. Aguirre de Cárcer, *La neutralidad*, doc. no. 44, 65-67: De Villalobar to Marqués de Lema, 7 September 1914.; DNA 2.05.43/435: Van Vollenhoven to Loudon, 21 november 1914.
  19. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. The Humanitarian, 1914-1917*, 39-179; Druelle-Korn, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I*, 35-36, 41-42, 139-200; Philippe Martin, "De Betekenis van de Commission for Relief in Belgium in Het Nationaal En Internationaal Spanningsveld (1914-1919)" (PhD Universiteit Gent, 1981), 104, 110-11; Austin, "Creating a 'Piratical State Organization for Benevolence'", 183, 185, 194-95.
  20. See, inter alia, Samuël Kruizinga & Marjet Brolsma, "Poor Little Belgium": Food aid and the image of Belgian victimhood in the United States' in Samuël Kruizinga ed., *The Politics of Smallness in Modern Europe. Size, Identity and International Relations since 1800* (London [etc.]: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) 73-96; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Champion or Stillbirth: The Symbolic Uses of Belgium in the Great War" in Tony Judt et al., eds., *How can one not be interested in Belgian history? War, language and consensus in Belgium since 1830* (Dublin-Ghent, Trinity College/Academia Press, 2005) 55-83, esp. 65-68; Sophie De Schaepdrijver, "Occupation, Propaganda, and the Idea of Belgium" in Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites eds., *European Culture in the Great War: the Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914-1918* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) 267-294; Branden Little, "An Explosion of New Endeavours: Global Humanitarian Responses to Industrialized Warfare in the First World War Era," *First World War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014), 1-16.
  21. Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, Rapport d'activité du début février la fin juillet 1916, 197-228, there 219; Vollenhoven, *Memoires*, 293. Other Dutch aid committees supplied foodstuffs and loans to several Northern French cities and to Dutchmen living in German-occupied territory. See Druelle-Korn, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I*, 141-42, 178-82.
  22. See for an overview Samuël Kruizinga, *Overleconomie in oorlogstijd. De Nederlandsche Overzee Trustmaatschappij en de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Zutphen 2012).
  23. Dutch National Archives (DNA) 2.05.232/4: Van Vollenhoven, 'Memorie', 1924, 1; DNA 2.05.232/4: 'België gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Mijn interventies ten behoeve der verdrukte bevolking en het werk der Ministers-Protecteurs 1914-1918', 3. The former source suggests 60,000 Dutchmen living in Belgium on the eve of the German occupation, the second 70,000.
  24. See e.g. Smit, *BPNL GS 109*, doc. nr. 287, pp. 267-277: Loudon aan Van Vollenhoven, 21 december 1914.

25. DNA 2.05.43/383: Statement by Langenbergh, 19-20 June 1920. Cf. von der Lancken, *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre*, 167.
26. DNA 2.05.43/383: Statement by Langenbergh, 19-20 June 1920; DNA 2.05.43/383: Untitled and undated memorandum, with minute 'Aan Beelaerts gezonden'.
27. On German monetary and fiscal policy in occupied Belgium, see Reinhold Zilch, *Okkupation und Währung im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Goldbach 1994), 97-241.
28. SAB 446/317: De Villalobar to Francqui, 27 January 1917: 'Croyez-moi le petit message en haut lieu au sujet des impertinences de ce Monsieur s'impose de plus en plus'. See for details on Van Vollenhoven's schemes DNA 2.05.232/2: Report B.J.C. Loder, 19 October 1920; DNA 2.05.43/380: Untitled and undated memorandum, attached to Dutch Legation Brussels to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 18 December 1924; DNA 2.05.43/380: Memorandum 'Goud', n.d. [1923?]. Van Vollenhoven later claimed not to have known that his actions breached German law, but he was explicitly warned by the Germans that all money transfers from neutral to occupied territories had to be approved by German authorities and converted under German fiscal rules. See SAB 446/320: Von der Lancken to Van Vollenhoven, 15 November 1917.
29. Van Bosstraeten, *Bezet maar beschermd*, 21, 23, 49, 59, 74. See also C. Smit, *Bescheiden Betreffende de Buitenlandse Politiek van Nederland, 1848-1919. Vol 148* (The Hague, 1974) doc no. 926, p. 1068: Fallon aan Hymans, 27 april 1918.
30. De Villalobar's genuine friendship with Francqui is demonstrated, inter alia, in SAB 446/317: De Villalobar to Francqui, 9 September 1916 and 2 May 1917. For German assessments of De Villalobar, see Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, Rapport d'activité du début mai à la fin juillet 1915, 95-120, there 96-97 and 99; apport d'activité du début février la fin juillet 1916, 197-228, there 198-199.
31. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. The Humanitarian, 1914-1917*, 313-30.
32. Johan den Hertog, "The Commission for Relief in Belgium and the Political Diplomatic History of the First World War," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 21, no. 4 (2010): 603-6.
33. Tracy B. Kittredge, *A History of the C.R.B.* (s.l., 1918), 436.
34. Allan Nevins, *The Letters and Journal of Brand Whitlock ...* (New York, 1936), 398-370; George Gay and H.H. Fisher, eds., *Public Relations of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. Documents, Vol. II* (Palo Alto, CA, 1929), doc. no. 498: Percy to Poland, 14 April 1917.
35. For more evidence on the tempestuous relationship between Spanish and Dutch representatives in Brussels, see Sophie De Schaepdrijver and Tammy M. Proctor, *An English Governess in the Great War: The Secret Brussels Diary of Mary Thorp* (Oxford, 2017), 153 (31 August 1917).
36. *Le Comité Hispano-Néerlandais pour la Protection du Ravitaillement en Belgique et dans le Nord de la France. Sous le haut patronage de L.L. E.E. M.M. les Ministres d'Espagne et des Pays-Bas. Avant-propos. Résumé de ses interventions. Documents officiels* (Antwerp, 1919), 3-7.
37. DNA 2.05.43/383: Statement by Langenbergh, 19-20 juni 1920.
38. SAB 446/317: Franqui aan van vollenhoven, 7 juni 1917; van vollenhoven to Franqui, 6 June 1917; Spanish Gezantschap Spanje aan van vollenhoven, 6 June 1917; Franqui to van vollenhoven, 5 June 1917.
39. Gay and Fisher, *Public Relations II*, doc. no. 506: Zimmermann to Spanish Embassy Berlin, 15 June 1917; von der Lancken, *Meine Dreissig Dienstjahre*, 204-5; Vollenhoven, *Memoires*, 326; Martin, "De Betekenis van de Commission for Relief in Belgium in Het Nationaal En Internationaal Spanningsveld (1914-1919)," 231-32. Cf. DNA 2.05.232/4: 'België gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Mijn interventies ten behoeve der verdrukte bevolking en het werk der Ministers-Protecteurs 1914-1918', 18.
40. Gay and Fisher, *Public Relations II*, doc. no. 494: Balfour to Don Alfonso Merry del Val, 6 April 1917; doc. no. 495: Cambon to Poland, 13 April 1917.
41. See SAB 446/233: CRB aan De Villalobar, Whitlock, Van Vollenhoven, 25 January 1917.
42. Martin, "De Betekenis van de Commission for Relief in Belgium", 26, 155; Druelle-Korn, *Feeding Occupied France during World War I*, 191-92.
43. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 75-78, 81-84. See also DNA 2.05.43/1021: Franqui to De Beaufort, 2 October 1917, with attached 'Aide mémoire', s.d.
44. Cf. George Gay and H.H. Fisher, eds., *Public Relations of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. Documents, Vol. I* (Palo Alto, CA, 1929), doc. no. 351: Von Falkenhausen to De Villalobar, 13 November 1917.
45. DNA 2.05.43/1021: 'Aide-mémoire' of the CHN, 19 September 1917.
46. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 139-41. E.g. *De Telegraaf*, 24 February 1918, 'De nood in België'.
47. *Ibid.*, 111-12: CHN to De Villalobar and Van Vollenhoven, 20 December 1917.
48. See *Ibid.*, 75-78.
49. See *Ibid.*, 187-191.
50. Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, 'Rapport d'activité du début août à la fin octobre 1915', 121-160, there 140.
51. *Ibid.*, 'Rapport d'activité du début août la fin janvier 1917', 229-264, there 244-245; 'Rapport d'activité du début février à la fin juillet 1917', 265-314, there 288-289.
52. SAB 446-295: Comité National East-Flanders Provincial Department to Franqui, 22 August 1917. The press campaign made thankful use of the arguments put forward by other social and political organisations com-

- plaining about elements of CN policy. See e.g. SAB 446/295: Société coopérative Les Magasins Communiaux de Centre (La Louvière) to Comité National, 17 September 1917; SAB 446/296: General Council of the Belgian Labour Party to Franqui, 30 September 1917; DNA 2.05.43/1021: Commission Ouvrière d'Alimentation of the Belgian Labour Party to Comité National and Ministres Protecteurs, 1 September 1917; .
53. Schaepprijver, *De Grootte Oorlog*, 121.
  54. E.g. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 119, "Distribution de Charbon pour des Flandres", tak St. Truiden', 13 December 1917.
  55. Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, Rapport d'activité du début mai à la fin juillet 1915, 95-120, 99-100.
  56. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 114: Memorandum pour la Deutsche Vermittlungsstelle C.N., 28 December 1917, by Van Vollenhoven and De Villalobar, with annex 'Memorandum sur la collaboration des conseillers belges aux travaux des Centrales', s.d., by the CHN.
  57. See Sophie De Schaepprijver, *De Grootte Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België Tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog* (Antwerpen/Amsterdam, 1997), 230.
  58. As was noted with interest by the Political Department of the Government General: Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, 'Rapport d'activité du début février la fin juillet 1916', 197-228, 207.
  59. DNA 2.05.232/4: 'België gedurende de Eerste Wereldoorlog. Mijn interventies ten behoeve der verdrukte bevolking en het werk der Ministers-Protecteurs 1914-1918', 10, 20.
  60. Copies of the 'Bulletin' published by the CHN are archived in BSA 446/299.
  61. Cf. DNA 2.05.232/4: Van Vollenhoven, 'Memorie', 1924, 3.
  62. Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, Rapport d'activité du début février la fin juillet 1916, 197-228, 219 (footnote).
  63. *Ibid.*, Rapport d'activité du début février 1918 à la fin juillet 1918, 357-384, 373.
  64. *Ibid.*, 377-78. Specifically, the annex allowed for German cows to graze on Belgian fields, hay and straw to be furnished to German horses accompanying billeted German soldiers, exports of certain types of vegetables to Germany, a "relaxed" attitude towards packages sent by German soldiers from Belgium containing small amounts of foodstuffs, and the sale of Belgian beers and other spirits to the German army.
  65. George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918* (New York, 1996), 445-446.
  66. See DNA 2.05.232/4: Van Vollenhoven, 'Memorie', 1924, 3; Gay and Fisher, *Public Relations II*, doc. no. 650: Von der Lancken to Van Vollenhoven, 17 May 1917; Smit, *BPNL GS 109*, doc. nr. 114, p. 129: Van Vollenhoven to Loudon, 29 May 1917.
  67. Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, Rapport d'activité du début août la fin janvier 1917, 229-264, 248.
  68. The German military also offered higher rations for Belgian and French civilians willing to work on defensive installations and infrastructure. Gay and Fisher, *Public Relations II*, doc. no. 432: CRB London to CRB Representative in Brussels, 19 September 1918.
  69. For difficulties in establishing direct contact with the *Comité Français*, see Gay and Fisher, *Public Relations I*, doc. nr. 304: Hoover to Guérin, 14 August 1918; doc. no. 305: Memorandum by Hoover, 14 August 1918: 'Reorganization of the Comité d'Alimentation du Nord de la France.'
  70. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 48-50, 68-69: "Rapport spécial" by Saura and Langenbergh, 26 October 1918; "2me Rapport spécial", 19 November 1918.
  71. Cf. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918*, 469-470.
  72. *Comité Hispano-Néerlandais*, 271-73: Rapport au 1er novembre 1918.  
Cf. Sally Marks, *Innocent Abroad: Belgium at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 171-72; Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover. Master of Emergencies, 1917-1918*, 469-70.
  73. SAB 446/318: Francqui to De Villalobar, 6 November 1918.
  74. De Schaepprijver, *De Grootte Oorlog. Het Koninkrijk België Tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog*, 270, 307.
  75. According to official Belgian statistics, the population of the Brussels metropolitan area was 800,195 on 31 December 1913, and had grown to 1 million by November 1918. The Comité National estimated that the difference was explained by the 'population flottante' from Belgium and France that had fled to Brussels. SAB 446/2975: 'Comité de l'Agglomération Bruxelloise. Rapport General sur l'activité du Department de l'Alimentation 1914-1918', 20.
  76. Aguirre de Cárcer, *La neutralidad*, Doc. no. 318, 370-371: De Villalobar to Álvaro de Figueroa, 1st Count of Romanones (Foreign Minister), 11 November 1918; Doc. no. 319, 371-372: De Villalobar to Count de Romanones, 13 November 1918. For the Dutch view, which aggrandizes Van Vollenhoven's role but is mostly compatible with the two reports sent to Madrid: DNA 2.05.232/4: 'Mijn bemiddelingen tusschen den Duitschen soldaten- en arbeidersraad en de Belgische autoriteiten. De laatste dagen van de oorlog in 1918', n.d.; Vollenhoven, *Memoires*, 340-41, 364-76. See, finally, Amara and Roland, *Gouverner*, "Jusqu'à l'évacuation. Les événements à Bruxelles pendant les journées qui précédèrent l'évacuation", 385-392. This report by Von der Lancken was drafted on 20 November 1918. For a general overview of the November 1918 revolution in Brussels, see José Gotovitch, 'Révolution à Bruxelles. Le Zentral-Soldaten-Rat in Brüssel', in Roland Baumann & Hubert Roland eds., *Carl-Einstein-Kolloquium 1998. Carl Einstein in Brüssel. Dialoge über Grenzen = Carl Einstein à Bruxelles. Dialogues par-dessus les frontières* (Frankfurt am Main/New York, 2001) 237-257.



77. Aguirre de Cárcer, *La neutralidad*, Doc. no. 321, 373-375: De Villalobar to Count de Romanones, 14 November 1914; Doc. no. 322, 375-376: De Villalobar to Count de Romanones, 17 November 1914.
78. For details, see Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *Bolwerk Brugge. Bezette Stad in 14-18* (Brugge, 2014), 189.
79. See Samuël Kruizinga, "Neutrality," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War. Volume II: The State*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge, 2014), 542-75, 712-14.
80. Daniel Roger Maul, "The Rise of a Humanitarian Superpower: American NGOs and International Relief, 1917-1945," in *Internationalism, Imperialism and the Formation of the Contemporary World. The Pasts of the Present*, ed. Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo and José Pedro Monteiro (Cham, 2018), 127-146; Neville Wylie, "Neutrality and the politics of protection: the United States as a protecting power, 1914-17," in Elisabeth Piller and Neville Wylie eds., *Humanitarianism and the Greater War, 1914-24* (Manchester, 2023) 124-146 makes a similar claim based on a very different case study, as does Marina Pérez de Arcos, "Finding Out Whereabouts of Missing Persons: The European War Office, Transnational Humanitarianism and Spanish Royal Diplomacy in the First World War," *The International History Review* 44:3 (2022) 497-523.
81. The author would like to thank the convenors and the participants of the conference "The Blockade in the Era of the Two World Wars, 1914-1945" held in Trondheim (Norway) on 19-20 June 2022, my fellow guest editors Alan Kramer, Elisabeth Piller and Jonas Scherner, and two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

*Samuël Kruizinga*, Department of History, European Studies and Religious Studies, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

## ORCID

Samuël Kruizinga  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9943-3532>