Maartje Abbenhuis, ***The Hague Conferences and International Politics, 1898-1915*** (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 304 pp., ISBN 9781350061347).

This is a book about The Hague. Yet, rather than as an object of local or even national history, The Hague here figures as the central hub in a global history – a history of international politics. Just when the centennial celebrations of the 1919 Versailles peace conference and the resulting League of Nations are reviving historians' attention for the role 'Paris' and 'Geneva' played in this history, the book reminds us of the fact that the international politics of 'peace through law' actually took off on Dutch soil, during the Hague peace conferences of 1899 and 1907. Reconsidering the impact of these conferences, while avoiding the 'Hagueiographic' tendencies dominating existing literature, the book offers an important contribution to the study of international politics and international law in the early twentieth century. Approaching the history of 'The Hague' primarily as the history of an idea that can be traced through newspapers and other sources from across the globe, it moreover opens new perspectives on what the 'impact' of such events could be, originally drawing on the possibilities offered by digital repositories that facilitate such a reconstruction of international public opinion.

Summoned by the Russian Tsar to discuss the threat posed by the rapidly developing armament race of the late nineteenth century, the Hague peace conferences assembled representatives from 26 (in 1899), and 44 states (in 1907) respectively to discuss matters of war and peace. The conferences resulted in an impressive list of international conventions on matters such as military conduct, arbitration and the rights of neutral powers during war, as well as in an important precedent for later platforms of international cooperation. Yet, the outbreak of war in 1914 traditionally dominated assessments of their impact. Recent studies however have argued how international legal norms, even when they were palpably violated during the First World War, continued to influence how the war was perceived.[1] Following up on this literature, New Zealand-based historian Maartje Abbenhuis contends that the Hague conferences were crucial in establishing these norms, both in political circles and in public opinion. In fact, from 1899 onwards, 'The Hague' became a central concept in international parlance to describe the ideals of peace and norms of humanitarianism associated with an international politics of 'peace through law'.

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Drawing from newspapers and periodicals from 27 countries from all continents, Abbenhuis analyses how the concept emerged in 1898 with the publication of the Tsar's proposal. Based on publications such as the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the Argentine *El Sol del Domingo*, the Russian *Vledomosti*, the *North China Herald*, the Melbourne *The Australasian* or the *Gazette Algerienne*, the *Figaro*, the *Berliner Tageblatt* or the *New York Times*, Abbenhuis documents how 'the Tsar's rescript was addressed from church pulpits, in public meetings, at trade union events and political rallies. It was voiced in petitions, resolutions and open letters addressed to the Tsar, his representatives and governments around the world' (38). Combining this innovative history of worldwide public opinion with more traditional sources of international politics such as diplomatic correspondence and political diaries, Abbenhuis consequently confirms that the exceptional public attention – that far exceeded the circles of peace activists known to historiography so far – forced governments to move beyond their initial reluctance in subscribing to the Tsar's initiative.

That Abbenhuis is thus able to establish the wide spread of the idea of 'The Hague' at least until 1915 – the year in which a third Hague conference was to be organised – is first of all important for historians of international politics, as she makes clear in particular when discussing the impact of 'The Hague' on public discourse on international crises such as the Boer War. Moreover, by demonstrating how indeed, a 'public sense of justice' contributed to upholding international conventions on for example the use of dum-dum bullets, the book is also highly relevant for historians of international law, who often dismiss early twentieth-century ideas of international law being 'sanctioned' by public opinion as highly utopian.

Historians of the Low Countries, finally, will find in the book a fascinating account of how the reputation of The Hague in only a few years' time shifted from that of a 'quiet, unassuming town of well-to-do elites, odoriferous canals and a few diplomats' to that of a 'city of peace' (170) – a successful branding operation that in 1913 was widened to include the entire Netherlands when the Dutch authorities deliberately included the opening of the Peace Palace in the celebrations of the centennial of the Netherlands' independence. That readers may sometimes find it challenging to keep track of the actual political developments commented upon in the many captivating quotes and illustrations weaved into the narrative, should not in any way discourage them from taking up this important monograph.

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1 See for example Isabel V. Hull, *A Scrap of Paper. Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War* (Ithaca 2014).