



Book Review



Anet Bleich, *De stille diplomaat; Max van der Stoel 1924–2011* [The Silent Diplomat: Max van der Stoel 1924–2011] (Amsterdam 2018), 495 pp.

After years of preparation the biography of Max van der Stoel, the first OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), has been published. It is a robust publication of almost 500 pages, devoted in particular to Van der Stoel's work as a Dutch politician in national and international politics. The book is only available in Dutch language. This is understandable in view of its strong focus on Van der Stoel's role in the Dutch political scene, which probably would not attract too many non-Dutch readers.

The book gives an excellent overview of Van der Stoel's rich career and personal life, which has been characterized by a consistent and strong attention for the respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the world, during a time when this was far from granted. As a matter of fact the author clearly elaborates Van der Stoel's role in shaping the international human rights agenda. She explains his human rights attitude as a result of the Second World War, during which Van der Stoel as a young man was confronted with the brutality of the Nazi regime during the German occupation of the Netherlands. He came out of the war as a man of principle and integrity with a strong belief in the importance of the Atlantic alliance for maintaining our freedom (p. 27). This attitude has been consistent in all the years of his active life in politics.

In the last phase of his life, Van der Stoel started writing his own autobiography and the author frequently quotes from it. This has given the author a good insight about Van der Stoel's own views on certain events in his life which were valuable for the biography, apart from the various discussions the author had with him in the last years of his life.

It is clear that any selection of issues to be dealt with in a biography is largely dependent upon the views of the author and always bears some arbitrariness in it. In this case most of the book is devoted to Van der Stoel's life in Dutch politics and, in particular, to his years as a Foreign Minister from 1973–1977 and

1981–1982, which the author considers as one of the two main highpoints in Van der Stoel's life. The other highpoint is his period as OSCE HCNM (1993–2001). Unfortunately the attention to this last period is quite limited: only 18 pages are devoted to it. Although the chapter on his period as HCNM is informative, obviously much more could have been said about this. Many experts considered the chances of failure in this last position much higher than chances of success in the highly volatile post-Cold War period in Central and Eastern Europe. To the surprise of many, Van der Stoel managed to make the new conflict prevention instrument the 'flagship' of OSCE due to his unique diplomatic skills. In particular the interesting and careful process followed by Van der Stoel in developing his vague OSCE mandate as HCNM would have deserved a longer discussion. But as said before: any selection of issues to deal with in a biography is potentially arbitrary.

The book is somewhat hybrid in the sense that it not only aims at offering a biography of Van der Stoel, but also describing, sometimes in a quite detailed manner, the main developments in the world in the period of his active political life. This has resulted in an interesting historical overview, although not all of it would have been necessary to understand the developments in Van der Stoel's life as a person and politician.

At the same time, some important periods of Van der Stoel's life attract less attention. In particular the section about his period as member of the Dutch State Council (1986–1992) is mainly filled by his external activities, while his work inside the Council is hardly dealt with (pp. 319–322). It seems that the author did not even interview any of Van der Stoel's colleagues from his State Council period with the result that this chapter in his life got clearly insufficient attention, even if Van der Stoel's work as a Council member would have provided additional insights in his long career. As a matter of fact it was definitely not a nominal Council membership. Moreover, although the author mentions some of Van der Stoel's extra-State Council activities, his chairmanship of the Netherlands Helsinki Committee (from 1988 until the start of his HCNM position in 1993) is not mentioned, although in this capacity Van der Stoel was intensively engaged in work with the underground civil society in Eastern Europe in the last years of the Cold War. In this capacity he also backed highly critical statements about activities of the Dutch government, when these were considered to be in violation of the Helsinki Agreements.

Apart from these somewhat critical observations, the author has succeeded in grasping Van der Stoel's life and career very well. The book fortunately also deals with the lesser known parts of his career, including what the author calls a 'bizar' position Van der Stoel took on at the end of the Cold War. From 1988 until its dissolution in 1992 Van der Stoel was the head of the ultra-secret

'stay-behind organization' in the Netherlands that was in charge of the preparation of a possible occupation of the country by the Soviet Union. The author correctly raises the question of why Van der Stoel joined this mysterious club (during his time as State Council member), while already in the 1960s the *raison d'être* of this group was seriously questioned. The author could only speculate about the reasons behind Van der Stoel's decision to accept this position, as he never made public statements about this issue himself.

The biography eloquently describes Van der Stoel's almost proverbial modesty, which was expressed in the smallest things, such as eating and living. It was totally fine for him to have a quick lunch of cevapcici on wobbly plastic seats in the Albanian quarter of Skopje in order to save time. Frans Timmermans' observation that Max 'suffered from being invisible through his work behind the scenes' (p. 360) in my view shows a lack of understanding of Van der Stoel's very efficient methods in giving conflicting parties the feeling that they themselves found the solutions. In this way Van der Stoel was the ideal conflict prevention man, who needs to work in a low profile manner, while at the same time effectively fighting for the respect of the human rights of minorities and other vulnerable groups. Van der Stoel definitely did not give the impression of having "suffered" from this role. The biography extensively and correctly describes how modest Van der Stoel was and how much respect he gained from his counterparts through exactly this behavior. He was, in the words, of the author 'a modest, but very ambitious politician' (p. 350).

Despite my few critical remarks, the author has published a well-written and very interesting book commemorating a modest but highly effective human rights defender who should have won the Nobel Peace Prize for which he was nominated twice.

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