

The Dutch navy, Dutch state formation and the rise of Dutch maritime supremacy

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This paper discuss if the Dutch navy and the Dutch admiralties had an important role in the creation of the very successful Dutch maritime economy during the Eighty Years War, that is from 1568 to 1648. It argues that the Dutch navy was large and efficient and that the five admiralties were effective links between the dynamic Dutch maritime communities and Dutch federal naval power.

Most historians, who have studied Venice or England as dominating powers in maritime trade, associate this with a strong navy. Entrepreneurial merchants, efficient shipping and a powerful navy run by the state for the protection and active promotion of economic interests are common parts of explanations of the rise of these maritime powers. But in the Dutch case, the navy is normally absent in explanations of maritime supremacy. When the navy appear in Dutch history it is customary to describe it as weak and inefficient rather than as a positive part of Dutch maritime power. Some historians even believe that there was no permanent Dutch navy before 1652, some argue that it had few or no specialised warships and relied on hired merchantmen, that the personnel policy was poor, that officers were too much mercantile in their mind and lacked military discipline, that the navy was backward in tactical skills, and that its administration was inefficient due to influence from regional interests. In fact, there is a strong tradition which describes the whole Republic as a weak state dominated by local interests. In that tradition, it is impossible to use Dutch sea power as an explanation of Dutch maritime supremacy. That supremacy in shipping and trade is explained as based on economic and technological superiority. The fact that it was created in exactly the same period as the Dutch Republic was involved in a long and intense war with the Spanish monarchy is normally regarded as irrelevant.

A post-modernist would probably tell us that the Dutch navy has been left out of the discourse of Dutch maritime supremacy. Instead, it has been placed in the discourse about the Dutch federal state where it is analysed as an illustration of how weak this state was. There are exceptions, primarily Immanuel Wallerstein and Jonathan Israel, who have argued that the Dutch state *was* important for Dutch maritime supremacy. However,

they have not discussed *how* naval policy, organisation and strategy actually were connected to the creation of Dutch maritime supremacy. Recent studies of the navy, especially by Jaap Bruijn and Victor Enthoven, have presented a positive view of the admiralties as competent organisations. There are still, however, a lack of strategic perspectives on Dutch maritime and naval history up to about 1650, and a serious lack of integration of naval history with the political and economic history of the Dutch society.

From the late sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, Holland, Zeeland and Friesland, that is, the maritime provinces of the Dutch Republic, formed Europe's leading maritime society. This society had a great mercantile community, a huge mercantile marine, a large seafaring population, many ports, shipyards and a large market for naval stores. Dutch maritime activities are normally described as superior to those of other nations and proofs of the Dutch society's ability to combine technology, entrepreneurship and low transaction costs. The Dutch was in this period the naval enemy or ally of Spain, Portugal, England, France, Denmark-Norway and Sweden. In the naval histories of these countries, the Dutch navy is treated with respect, admiration or envy. In 1639, it won one of the most decisive victories ever achieved in a major fleet contest against Spain-Portugal in the Channel, and in 1658-59 it saved Denmark from possible extinction as an independent state by Sweden. In 1667, it attacked the English fleet in its bases, in 1672-73 it waged a very successful defensive campaign against the combined fleets of France and England, and in 1688 it achieved an invasion of England in an excellently administrated surprise mobilisation of a major fleet. In a European perspective, the Dutch navy is a strong candidate for the position as the most successful naval organisation of the seventeenth century. It was also one of the largest navies in Europe in this century. In proportion to the population, the Dutch spent much more on their navy than the taxpayers of England, France and Spain.

Dutch naval strategy ought to be studied as a part of the policy of a state which, out of instinct or rational calculation, was guided by the imperatives of the *entrepot economy*. Entrepots or centres for trade, information and shipping, were typical for pre-modern economies. Market-places were formed where goods were stockpiled for further transportation. They were necessary in order to achieve some kind of steady distribution, a reasonable balance of demand and supply and a degree of price stability in a world of slow and uncertain communications. The sea lines of communication to the entrepot must also be safer than to alternative entrepots. Protection of these lines, as well as obstructions of those of competitors, was therefore very important or decisive for a successful entrepot economy.

In that perspective it is interesting that the Dutch Republic became the world's first entrepot on a global scale in the decades around 1600, at a time when it had to fight hard for its survival. It is tempting to see much of the Holland-Zeeland centred state formation process, which created the Republic, as driven by the ambition to protect the area as a profitable

centre for European and eventually global trade and to obstruct similar ambitions of competitors. The Dutch Revolt began as a religious and political conflict in several provinces but when its centre moved to Holland and Zeeland in the 1570s it also got a strong economic and maritime aspect. The early Dutch state was essentially composed of only Holland and Zeeland and it survived because these provinces were almost insular and maritime in their outlook. They developed both a strong maritime economy and the means of promoting and protecting it with armed force at sea. Dutch state formation process was of course more complex than that, but the entrepot-centred explanation can not, as is often done, be dismissed with the argument that the Dutch state was weak and its navy inefficient. On the contrary it showed very good ability to act as the instrument of an ambitious and expanding maritime state.

The Dutch navy controlled the sea along the coast and the inland waterways already from the early years of the Revolt. It could break all attempts of blockade of Dutch ports. It could enforce blockades on the enemy - most notably on Antwerp from 1585. Finally it could effectively ruin Iberian trade with northern Europe. Before the Revolt, that is, up to the 1560s, *both* the northern Netherlands and Spain were flourishing seafaring nations. Already in the early years of the revolt, Spain's northern shipping and trade deteriorated dramatically. It never recovered. This happened before 1585 when England entered the war, so it must have been the Dutch and not the English who closed the Channel for the Spanish merchants. Furthermore, the Dutch themselves to a considerable extent took over the Spanish trade and began to sail not only on the Iberian Peninsula but also on the Mediterranean. From the late sixteenth century the Dutch mercantile marine became supreme in Europe while that of Spain declined.

In economic history it is common to explain Spanish maritime decline as an effect of "the war" or as a part of a more general Spanish "decline". It seems however more appropriate to explain it as the *practical effect of Dutch sea power*. The Dutch navy and privateers closed the Channel and increased Spain's costs of protecting trade, while the navy at the same time offered protection to Dutch trade at a competitive cost. At sea, the revolt was an immediate success in terms of increased Dutch competitiveness and that economic success financed the continuation of the war with Spain. Holland was already before the revolt a shipping centre in northern Europe and in the last decades of the sixteenth century it increasingly became a shipping centre of Europe, primarily by profitable shipping of Baltic grain to the Mediterranean, that is, to the very centre of the Spanish monarchy which also controlled much of Italy.

Obviously, Spanish-Italian shipping interests - which up to then had been strong and dynamic - might have profited from this Baltic-Mediterranean trade if the Spanish monarchy had been able to offer it effective protection in the Channel and North Sea. As it was, these areas were effectively controlled by Holland, their main competitor with which Spain was in war. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Dutch skills (and Habsburg

lack of skills) in using violence at sea was an important part of the competencies which formed the profitable Dutch entrepot for European trade.

The same picture reappeared when the war started again in 1621 after the Twelve Years Truce. Spain decided to take to the offensive at sea rather than on land and launched embargoes and determined attacks against Dutch trade, especially from Dunkirk. This forced the admiralties to concentrate on trade protection through patrol squadrons, blockades of Flanders and convoys with warships in the North Sea and to ports in France and the Mediterranean. But Spain was unable to protect her own European trade and the Dutch trade supremacy remained largely unchallenged in spite of the fact that Europe's largest power did its best to destroy it. This is not the picture normally painted in Dutch historiography. Instead, many Dutch historians explain losses and reverses at sea in these years by the inefficiency of their own navy and its convoy and blockade system, not by the fact that the Republic also had an active and powerful enemy.

Spain actually had a larger navy than the Republic during most of the war from 1568 to 1648. This, rather than any Dutch naval weakness, was the cause of frequent Dutch maritime losses. However, in spite of its efforts, Spain failed to undermine the Dutch economy and suffered defeats both in trade warfare and battle fleet contest. Dutch maritime trade both survived and flourished, while that of Spain and Portugal declined. This transformation may be explained with various economic factors but, as the two states were in war with each other, all economic analyses must include the costs of destruction and protection. Spain obviously failed to destroy the Dutch entrepot, in spite of its, in theory, overwhelming resources. The Dutch naval convoy system was the first large-scale state-operated convoy system ever by a sailing navy. It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the Dutch use of violence and protection at sea was of superior quality and better organised, especially as the Republic had only about one tenth of the population of the Spanish monarchy. After the end of the war in 1648 the Dutch navy even began to cruise in Spanish waters in order to protect shipping, their own of course, to Spanish ports. The Spanish government helped them in this as the Spanish navy was unable to protect shipping even around Iberia.

The efficiency of the Dutch navy in trade protection is difficult to measure in the absence of more detailed studies of, not only how many ships were lost (that is known), but how many which safely reached their destinations. Just like studies of trade warfare during the world wars of the twentieth century, texts about convoys tend to focus on actions and dramatic losses, not on statistics of arrivals in ports. Accounts of convoy warfare usually tend to overestimate the success of the attackers as these normally can choose to attack when they are likely to succeed. It is also uncertain if Dutch trade suffered seriously or not in the war period 1621-48. Jonathan Israel believes that this was the case, and he has located the zenith of Dutch trade supremacy to the decades after 1648. Other

historians consider it possible that this stage was reached already in the 1640s and again in the 1680s. This implies that the Dutch trade even may have profited from the war, which indeed is a challenge to interpretations of the Dutch admiralty system as a failure. It is any case obvious that the Dutch lost their maritime supremacy much later and then not as the result of naval inferiority.

Instead of analysing these questions, most historians have focused their interest on the supposed inefficient use of naval resources under control of the five admiralties of Rotterdam, Amsterdam, North Holland, Zeeland and Friesland. Even for the post-1652 navy, which most historians admit was better, this decentralised naval organisation is regarded as an obstacle to efficiency, as it meant that the navy was dominated by local mercantile interests. The fact that the navy was divided into five admiralties is regarded as an illustrative example of the weakness of the Dutch state. Historians and sociologists working in this tradition have a high opinion of the value of centralisation and bureaucracy. The Dutch navy, administered from the world's largest centre for maritime enterprise, is consequently supposed to have been inefficient and a victim of the lack of a central bureaucracy in The Hague.

I am not going to explain in detail how the admiralties were organised but a few points are essential. First, the Admiralties were *federal* institutions, not provincial. Representatives for the States General, that is: the federal Republic, were members of their boards, and the admiralties were required to co-operate under the leadership of the States General and the Admiral General (the Stadholder). Operational fleets were normally composed of warships from several admiralties, which shared federal responsibilities of sending armed force to sea. Second, the admiralties were also the only existing federal tax and customs authority in the Dutch Republic. They had the right to raise customs from all foreign trade of the Republic, formally for convoy purposes. This was the financial base of the navy and it was raised by the administrative staff of the admiralties, not by the provincial tax authorities.

Local members of each admiralty college had much influence over its management, not the least because of their networks of contacts with the maritime communities in the region where the admiralties worked. But was this a source of inefficiency, corruption and weak naval strategy as traditional Dutch naval historiography asserts? I wish to argue that it was mainly a source of strength and an essential part of Dutch naval efficiency. The great problem in sixteenth and seventeenth century European state formation and the development of strong armies and navies was not to create central authorities with formal power. It was rather to make the *local elites* interested in the new project; the early modern fiscal-military state. Many elite groups were suspicious or openly hostile to this expensive project and that made it difficult for central states to mobilise local resources. But, *if* members of the local elites were willing to put their authority, patronage and competence behind the policy of the state and help it to raise funds for that policy, the central state might become very strong.

From that perspective, the Dutch admiralties were the infrastructure of an ingenious early modern state where the local elites could connect their interests to a coherent policy implemented by the central state. As the state also represented other interests than those of the maritime provinces the state could use the navy as an instrument of national policy, provided that these other interests also were willing to pay for the navy. Through the admiralties, the Dutch state developed the core competence which was necessary to run a large, modern, permanent navy. Through the admiralties, this navy interacted with the Dutch market for maritime technology, personnel, provisioning, naval stores and accumulated know-how about seafaring. This market was the largest and most successful of its kind in the world in the seventeenth century, and other states frequently relied on it when they searched for warships and maritime competence.

It would have been natural if the Dutch state also had relied on this strong market and merely hired ships on it. But this state, from an early time of its history, created a permanent navy of its own and hired ships only for brief extraordinary efforts. This ambition to gain control over the core competence of sea power in spite of that a large Dutch market for armed force at sea existed is interesting. It reveals that the Dutch socio-economic elite understood the value of permanent organisation for warfare at sea. Local elites did not use the navy for leasing their ships to it - they used it to build a force of specialised warships suited to *protect their shipping*. The admiralties were responsible for maritime law, dockyards, magazines, shipbuilding, maintenance of the state's warships, buying of naval stores and the employment of flag officers and captains, who in their turn were responsible for the manning and provisioning of the warships. In 1626, a permanent corps of captains was established, decades earlier than a similar corps was established in England. Warships were built both by the admiralties' dockyards and by private shipbuilders and the navy could benefit from the rapid advances in technology and rational shipbuilding which was one of the foundations of Dutch maritime supremacy.

This organisation has been criticised as too decentralised, too much controlled by local shipping interests, corrupt in handling money and contracts and inefficient in raising taxes, as the members of the boards were unwilling to put financial pressure on the trade of their own province. As the Dutch navy actually was large, and as corruption and tax and custom evasion was notorious in seventeenth century Europe, this criticism seems a bit misplaced. The system must have had advantages which ought to be studied more in detail. First, fund-raising and preparation of operational fleets were placed under control of those which urgently required the navy: the shipping interests. This must have put pressure on the organisation to raise funds efficiently and rapidly channel them to the fleet. Vested interests in shipping and trade must have limited corruption. Second, the funds were brought under control of individuals with wide experience of shipping, shipbuilding and trade and with much local influence in the world's dominating maritime centre. The admiralty boards thus had networks of contacts to find out when and where mercantile interest required convoys to suit their business and the flow of

trade which was central in the Republic's economy. They could pass judgements on how ships were built, maintained and equipped, they had experience of buying naval stores and they had access to much information about the qualities of officers and potential officers. Close contacts with shipping and trade gave low information costs and easy access to relevant competence. Consequently, the admiralties' interests in shipping and trade must have had a positive effect in reducing transaction costs for the navy.

The system certainly favoured the mercantile interests, but it is not easy to understand how that could be a major disadvantage for a state which depended on trade and the elite's ability to invest profits in loans to the state. The division into five admiralties, which often has been criticised as an organisational failure and a waste of resources, were, in an early modern perspective on state formation, a useful and possibly optimal solution to the problem of mobilising resources for the central state from local communities with a strong tradition of autonomy. The Dutch admiralty organisation, a result of the Dutch revolutionary process of state formation from below, provided a network of contacts between federal policy-makers and local interests, sentiments, resources and know-how. During the seventeenth century, these links between state and maritime communities created a large and efficient navy.

This also makes it easier to see the Dutch Republic as a normal leading maritime power with close and fruitful interconnections between merchants, shipping and the navy. The navy was a central part in the development of the world's first global entrepot economy which in its turn was the motor of economic development within the Republic. This economy was based on Dutch naval ability to keep the sea lines of communication to Dutch ports open. Dutch trade supremacy, the Dutch fiscal-military state, the Dutch navy and Dutch technology for trade and warfare at sea were created in an interconnected process, where those who were successful at sea quickly joined the elite and reinforced its ability to lead a maritime war and a maritime state. Opportunities connected with the sea were quickly perceived by this elite, and perceptions were rapidly transformed into action, where the Dutch were often able to gain an advantage over the Iberians in technology, trade and warfare.

The result was a new European and global network of trade, centred on the Dutch entrepot protected by a new state. The socio-economic elite ran the state they had created from below during the revolt against their prince, and they were willing to use their social capital in order to make it work. The Dutch political system was to an unusually high degree based on the ability of the local societies to use the central state in their interest and co-ordinate their own activities through the state. This relation between state and society was a central part of the institutional framework which made life in the Dutch Republic more predictable and consequently more favourable for entrepreneurial initiatives and investments of capital in business. The Dutch navy and the admiralties were central parts of this special but highly successful state-society relationship and they ought to be studied as such.