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**IN WAR AND PEACE:
THE DUTCH AND THE BALTIC
IN EARLY MODERN TIMES**

On a summer's day in July, 1645, the Danish King Christian IV was forced to watch from a window in Kronborg Castle as Dutch warships passed through the Sound unhindered. Although the ships lowered their flags somewhat, as a mark of respect for Danish sovereignty over the Sound, their intentions were obvious: to force a passage through the Sound. The Dutch action made two things clear. The time-honoured *Dominium Maris Baltici* loudly proclaimed by Denmark, and later by Sweden, namely sovereignty over the Baltic Sea, proved in practice to be difficult to enforce, and the Dutch Republic showed itself to be well able to protect effectively both its trading interests and its international politics. Thus the situation which had developed during the 16th century, in which Holland especially played an increasingly strong role in the Baltic grain and bulk trade, was also backed up militarily. A commercial superpower showed itself to be perfectly capable of vigorous military action.¹

But there was more. The Peace of Brömsebro in 1645 made it clear that there was also a new reality in the Baltic Sea area: the rise of Sweden to become a superpower in the region and, as a result, the decline of Denmark. The fact that the Swedish government not only obtained great stretches of Danish territory in the Peace of Brömsebro, but also the privilege of exemption from duty in the Sound, gave Sweden definitive supremacy over Denmark.

This position was further confirmed by the Peace of Westphalia, which not only gave Sweden the status of guarantor of the new international political situation, but also vital German Baltic territories which meant

¹I would like to thank Mrs Anja Tjaden, of the University of Groningen, who showed me the page-proofs of her very interesting article, see: A.Tjaden, 'The Dutch in the Baltic (1544 - 1721)', in: G.Rystad (ed.), *In Quest of Trade and Security. The Baltic in Power Politics*, Lund 1994, 61-136.

that the estuaries of the rivers Oder, Elbe, and Weser effectively came under Swedish control. Thus, the Swedish government acquired exceptional advantage for favouring its own subjects at the cost of foreign - read Dutch - merchants by means of raising the tolls. Or, as an angry Dutchman put it in 1675 in his "Considerations concerning the Commerce and Navigations in the Baltic Sea",

that Sweden has brought practically all profitable ports in the Baltic Sea under her jurisdiction and by doing so has to all intents and purposes completely surrounded and besieged the Baltic Sea. Thus Sweden has begun to introduce monopolies in its provinces, cities and harbours which benefit its own merchants and ships by levying only a small toll on them whereas foreign ships, and especially Dutch ships, are taxed so excessively that they can no longer profitably sail to Swedish ports.

Of course, this picture was somewhat exaggerated. Great numbers of Dutch ships would continue to sail in Swedish territory throughout the whole of the 17th and 18th Centuries. But this complaint does go to the root of the problem which the States General would have with Sweden throughout the second half of the 17th century. That is, how could the members of the States General make sure that the Dutch share of the Baltic trade - not unjustly described by the author of the Considerations as a "great wondrous tree of prosperity" - would remain more or less the same.

Basically, there were two possibilities open for this: diplomatic means and force of arms. In pursuit of the first of these, there were endless discussions between Sweden and the Dutch Republic during the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th century. With hindsight, the negotiations over the so-called Treaty of Elbing in 1656, for example, in which Dutch diplomacy seemingly achieved a success, were notorious. The members of the States General, however, refused to vote for the result of the negotiations, which was in fact a renewal of old agreements from 1640 and 1645. They now demanded - in the form of the so-called *elecidiaties* - no discrimination towards Dutch ships in Swedish ports and equal tolls for all merchants. Only in 1660, after the death of Charles X, and under pressure from the military defeats against Denmark

and the Dutch Republic, would the Swedish government agree to this.

Seven years later, however, under pressure from the French expansion into the Southern Netherlands, The Hague was forced to drop the *elecidaties* as the price for the famous Triple Alliance with England and Sweden. Twelve years later, in 1679, after a war with Denmark, Brandenburg and the Dutch Republic, which went very badly for Sweden, the peace negotiations in Nijmegen gave back to the States General what Grand Pensionary De Witt had given away: the clause granting them the status of most-favoured trading nation, and with it the ardently desired *elecidaties*. In Nijmegen, Swedish diplomats had to agree to what they had been able to resist for ages, namely, a virtually complete mutual freedom of trade. This in fact meant the consolidation of the Dutch commercial advantage. In other words, the acquisition of trade advantages was closely bound up with the international political and military situation.

Taking the importance of the Baltic trade as a starting point, the diplomacy of the States General with regard to the Baltic had a clear aim. In a pamphlet from 1657 called "Dialogue between a Dutchman and a Dane concerning the Present State of Affairs", the Dutchman outlined this policy as follows:

for we are only trying to keep everything as it has always been and maintain the existing balance, so that not only we but everyone else will be able to carry on with free and unrestricted shipping traffic and trade.²

This meant nothing less than that The Hague wished to preserve the existing situation as long as possible, in order to maintain the Dutch trade domination, via the defending of the principle of the freedom of the seas. For that reason, the strong, firmly established commercial contacts of Holland - or rather Amsterdam - with a large number of Baltic ports should continue to exist.

This decision had, naturally, an effect on Dutch foreign policy. From

²W.P.C. Knuttel, *Catalogus van de Pamfletten-verzameling berustende in de Koninklijke Bibliotheek IV*, 's-Gravenhage, 1920, Nr. 7831; *t'Samen-spreack, tusschen een Hollander ende Deen, over dese tegenwoordighe tijds gelegent-heydt*, Leyden, 1657, p. 2.

the middle of the 17th century on, The Hague had two axioms with regard to the Baltic: one or other of the constantly bickering Nordic monarchies, Denmark or Sweden, should be closely connected to the Republic by means of alliances. At the same time, neither of the monarchies in the Baltic Sea region should be allowed to gain the upper hand. The Dutch were not prepared to accept a Danish or Swedish *Dominium Maris Baltici*.

This policy was not only the result of considerations relating to trade. The conflicts of interest with England, which in the 1650's, 60's and 70's would result in three trade wars, and the French threats after 1672, encouraged the Dutch Republic to look for a reliable Scandinavian ally, especially in view of English commercial rivalry in the Baltic. This, however, was never a permanent alliance. Sometimes, for example in the 1640's, or the first years of the 18th century, there was a clear Dutch-Swedish alliance; at other times, for example in the 1650's and 1670's, a Danish-Dutch alliance was the cornerstone of Dutch Baltic policy.

In short, the choice made by The Hague, and also, by the way, the choices of Copenhagen and Stockholm, were primarily governed by political strategy and/or *ad hoc* commercial arguments. The most important thing, however, was the preservation of the existing *status quo*. In this respect, the 1670's were a transitional period for the United Netherlands. The war against France in 1672 brought to an end a period of mainly naval orientated foreign policy. As has already been mentioned, this policy had climaxed in three naval wars against England. Under Grand Pensionary De Witt, the Dutch Republic, although sometimes against her will, had as a superpower mainly tried to defend her commercial interests herself. The failure of this policy was made dramatically and unmistakably clear in that disastrous year, 1672.

For the Republic the confrontation with France as an expansionist continental enemy meant a new struggle for survival, a struggle which would only come to an end in 1713 with the Peace of Utrecht. One can argue that after 1672, Dutch international political thinking was completely dominated by the continual diplomatic and military confrontations with France and by what followed on naturally from this, especially as the century progressed, that is, the problems of the Spanish succession.

At this point one should remember that there wasn't actually any Dutch policy for Northern and Eastern Europe in the form of a cohesive, integrated regional political overview. Developments in Northern and Eastern Europe were generally seen by the government offices in The Hague in the light of whether they had any relevance for the international political and strategic chess game against France. In this sense a sharp distinction must be drawn between the Dutch attitude towards states such as Denmark and Sweden, and powers such as Russia. The first two were not only regarded as commercially interesting, but were also seen as potential allies against France. For this reason, in the years 1697-1700, for example, Dutch diplomats at the Swedish and Danish courts were particularly active in thwarting all kinds of French intrigues. In Moscow, on the other hand, the States General was simply not represented.³

Curiously enough, the famous Great Russian Embassy, which was a guest of the Republic in 1697/98, had no effect on official Dutch policy with regard to Russia. Russia was not considered to have enough weight to count on the international stage, let alone that the members of the States General should be prepared to support Russia against Turkey by naval means. Quite the contrary, Tsar Peter I received absolutely nothing in response to his impassioned requests. The costly Levant trade was regarded as too important to snub the Sultan.⁴

Although the official aim of the Russian mission was not realised, the Tsar's representatives did manage to complete some other parts of their task, such as the placing of a few Russian volunteers - volunteers in the Russian sense - and the recruiting of craftsmen, sailors, officers and technicians. Ten ships were chartered to transport all of the goods they had stocked up.⁵

Even more important was the fact that the Russian diplomats came

³O. Schutte, *Nederlandse Vertegenwoordigers in het Buitenland 1584-1810*, The Hague 1976, p. 276.

⁴J.S.A.M. van Koningsbrugge, 'Of Diplomats, Merchants, and Regents; Dutch-Baltic relations in the period 1696-1709', in: J. Braat et al. (ed.), *Russians and Dutchmen, Proceedings of the Conference on the Relations between Russia and the Netherlands from the 16th to the 20th century held at the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, June 1989*, Groningen 1993, p. 160.

⁵R.K. Massie, *Peter the Great, his life and world*, New York 1989, (4th ed.) p. 185.

into continual contact with Amsterdam merchants and administrators. These relationships would turn out to be of immeasurable value for the Russian war effort in the Great Northern War. Amsterdam merchants such as Christoffel Brants, Jean Lups, and Arnold Dix, despite an officially proclaimed trade embargo, would keep Russia supplied with many thousands of weapons throughout the whole of the Northern War. These merchants, by means of their connections in the Amsterdam financial market, would also play an important role in the financing of the Russian war effort. Moreover, they were responsible for the paying of the whole Russian diplomatic machinery.⁶

Nicolaas Witsen, Russia expert, administrator of the Dutch East India Company, representative of the States General, and mayor of Amsterdam, was the central figure in these Russian-Dutch relations.⁷ After the departure of the Great Embassy, it was he, more than anyone else, who continued to serve Russian interests. Through his high position as mayor of Amsterdam and as a representative of the States General, he held the *de facto* leadership of the pro-Russian lobby in the central Dutch and States administrative organs. Without the Russian visit, the formation of this lobby of administrators and merchants would have been much more difficult. The Russian visit to these parts did not only result in an intensification of Dutch-Russian contacts, but also worked as a catalyst for closer cooperation and mutual promotion of interests for all those who felt themselves to be involved with Russia for economic or political reasons. In an administratively very complicated state such as the Republic of the United Netherlands the importance of this was obvious. That is, Amsterdam opted for Russia.

The official line of behaviour from The Hague was rather different.

⁶Van Koningsbrugge, 'Of Diplomats, Merchants, and Regents...', pp. 161-162, 170-171.

⁷J.F. Gebhard, *Het leven van Mr. Nicolaas Cornelisz. Witsen (1641-1717)* I, *Levensbeschrijving*, Utrecht 1881, pp. 428-447; E. Vinter, 'Niderlandy i Rossii nakanune Severnoj voyny: Nicolaas Vitsen i Petr. I', in: *Mezdunarodnye svjazi Rossii v XVII-XVIII v.v.* 24, Moscow 1966, pp. 292 ff. For Dutch-Russian relations in the last quarter of the 17th century, see: M.I. Belov, 'Rossija i Gollandija v poslednej cetverti XVII', in: *Mezdunarodnye svjazi Rossii v XVII-XVIII v.v.* (24), Moscow, 1966, pp. 58-83.

Since January 1700, in fact, there had been a defensive Triple Alliance between Sweden, the Republic, and Great Britain. When Sweden was also attacked by Denmark and Saxony, it was a joint Dutch-British naval force together with a Swedish invasion force which forced peace on Denmark in August 1700.⁸ Grand Pensionary Anthonie Heinsius, and with him the establishment in The Hague, expected a lot in return from the Swedish King Charles XII. When the Spanish war of succession burst into full force in 1702, they counted on Swedish military support. This would never materialize, but Heinsius and his supporters continued to hope for years. As a result Sweden needed to be supported diplomatically as well as financially. Amsterdam, however, went its own way. Throughout the whole of the Northern War, weapons would reach Russia from Amsterdam. This sometimes happened with the assistance of Witsen himself. Thus, at the beginning of October 1701, he allowed 2000 muskets to leave the harbour at 3 o'clock in the morning.⁹

This example illustrates the difference in political thinking between The Hague and Amsterdam. The Hague may well have had one policy towards the Baltic but this policy did not always coincide with what interested merchants or lobbies of merchants wanted. The Dutch attitude towards the Baltic in the Great Northern War was, as a result, somewhat ambivalent: political and commercial interests did not always coincide.

The Dutch government, then, officially, nearly always chose a policy of preservation of the Baltic equilibrium in order to maintain her trade advantage. But was this substantially different to what was thought in Scandinavia itself about the matter?

In the second half of the 17th century Sweden was the dominant factor in the Baltic. Older Swedish historiography is often extremely negative about the regency period after the death of Charles X in 1660.¹⁰ In addition to such qualifications as swindlers and profiteers, the regents were

⁸A.L. van Schelven, *Philips van Almonde, Admiraal in de gecombineerde vloot, 1644-1711*, Assen 1947, pp. 137-145.

⁹Russian State Archive for Old Files (RGADA), list 50, opis 1, Ed. chr. 3, p. 1701.

¹⁰E. Carlson, *Geschichte Schwedens*, dl. IV, *zum Reichstage 1680*, Gotha, 1855, pp. 515-516, 542-543, 553-556; G. Wittrock, *Förmyndares finanspolitik*, Uppsala, 1914-1917 passim; O. Varenius, *Räfsen med Karl XI:s förmyndarstyrelse*, Uppsala 1901-1903 passim.

blamed for the unsuccessful war of 1674 and the years following, which Sweden waged as the ally of France against Brandenburg, Denmark, and the Dutch Republic. Contributions of more recent date pay more attention to the deeper background of Swedish politics.¹¹ In this connection it would be wrong to speak of a re-evaluation; rather this changed approach should be seen as a reorientation, since there is a *communis opinio* that this regency period can hardly be regarded as one of the most morally uplifting periods of Swedish history. Slowly, however, the conclusion has been reached that the Swedish attack on the Dutch ally Brandenburg in 1674, as a token of support for the French, was primarily motivated by the Swedish desire to maintain the balance of power in Europe. At first sight this is a rather drastic standpoint: France at that moment appeared to be the one power which was really threatening the international balance.

We may well ask what lay behind this choice. The French attack on the Northern Netherlands in 1672 did not result in any immediate changes to Swedish foreign policy. Since the death of Charles X in 1660, this policy had been marked by the desire to remain neutral in new international conflicts. At the same time attempts were made to keep the army and the navy in a reasonable condition in order to maintain the status of superpower and guarantor of the Peace of Westphalia in the eyes of the world. This was an attitude of "all bark and no bite" which resulted from the conviction that the foreign policy championed by Charles X was doomed to failure.¹² It had become obvious that any major Swedish attempt to upset the local Baltic balance of power could almost be guaranteed to result in large-scale international resistance. Dutch intervention in the relief of Danzig (1656) and Copenhagen (1658/9) had unmistakably revealed the weakness of the Swedish internal lines of

¹¹B. Fahlborg, *Sveriges yttre politik 1668-1672*, tome III, Stockholm, 1961, p. 287 a.f. A. Stille, *Studier över Bengt Oxenstiernas politiska system och Sveriges förbindelser med Danmark och Holstein-Gottorp 1689-1692*, Uppsala, 1947; G. Rystad, 'Sweden and the Nymegen Peace Congress', in: H. Bots, *The Peace of Nymegen 1676/1678/79*, Amsterdam, 1980, pp. 132-133.

¹²B. Odén, 'Karl X Gustav och det andra danska kriget', *Scandia* 27, 1961, pp. 88-94; 105-107.

communication.¹³ The realization that a subsequent confrontation could severely damage or destroy Sweden's laboriously built up position of power simply compelled neutrality.

The poor state of Swedish finances strengthened this opinion. Very quickly after 1660, the high costs of the army and the fleet outstripped the moderate income of the exchequer. A reduction of 50% in the actual strength of the army hardly had any effect. The simple truth was that Sweden in peacetime did not possess the means to maintain a reasonable fighting force, and that even the upkeep of the overseas garrisons was too heavy a burden.¹⁴ The soldier-kings Gustavus Adolphus and Charles X, whose armies were always, euphemistically speaking, *selfproviding*, had always been able to hide this behind their wars of conquest. The government could do little more than ceaselessly plead for the preservation or restoration of the peace and status quo in Europe through her diplomats, and thus disguise the weakness of the kingdom.¹⁵

Even after 1672, the Swedish government regarded neutrality as the most desirable option. The assembly of a peace congress in Cologne in the autumn of 1673 under Swedish mediation was a result of this. When these negotiations were broken off in February 1674, Stockholm was left with empty hands.¹⁶ In the area of tension between the scarcity of means and the preservation of the international balance of power, Sweden in the years 1672/4 understandably opted for diplomacy. Only by this means could the old Swedish pretensions to being a superpower, although camouflaged, be maintained. The intervention on behalf of France by means of an attack on Brandenburg in 1674 thus meant a double break with the past. Not only was the diplomatic path now definitively closed, but at the same time it was made clear that Stockholm in fact no longer had an independent foreign policy. French threats to stop the subsidies outlined in the alliance treaty of 1672 had sufficient weight to bring about the Swedish attack on

¹³N.F. Noordam, *De Republiek en de Noordse Oorlog 1655-1660*, Assen, 1940, pp. 20-43; G. Clemensson, *Flottans förläggning till Karlskrona*, Stockholm, 1938, pp. 12, 35 and 46.

¹⁴Stille, *Studier...*, pp. 24, 248; Fahlborg, *Sveriges förbund med Frankrike*, p. 310.

¹⁵M. Roberts, *Essays in Swedish History*, London, 1967, p. 230.

¹⁶J. Römelingh, *De diplomatieke betrekkingen van de Republiek met Denemarken en Zweden 1660-1675*, Amsterdam, 1969, p. 164.

Brandenburg. Sweden had become a satellite state of France.

As already concluded, Sweden did not pay a political or territorial price for this betrayal, but a financial one. The political equilibrium in the Baltic was maintained by recognizing Dutch economic superiority.

The events of the years 1674-79 were not without consequences for Swedish foreign policy. The priority of King Charles XI in this situation was very simple: Sweden's dependence on external financiers should be ended. The kingdom would thus regain its freedom of action and from that position would try to avoid any involvement in a new war. Just as in the regency period, the preservation of the balance of power in Europe was the main aim. Unlike in the regency period, however, this should happen from a position of power and not of weakness. The strengthening and reorganization of the armed forces got the highest priority. The question was how to realize these aims and thus succeed where the previous regime had failed: namely in balancing income and expenditure.

Reduktion made this all possible. The repossession by the crown of estates which had been passed out by the regency government as sweeteners to the aristocracy not only reduced the latter's influence, but also restored the balance between national expenditure and income.¹⁷ This aim was so successfully achieved during the reign of Charles XI, that the national debt at his death in 1697 was only 11 million *riksdaler* (rix-dollars).

This was certainly due to the frugality of the monarch himself, who even saved money by eating at his mother's table. And that was not all: Charles XI can be described as an enlightened monarch *avant-la-lettre*, who, as far as possible, tried to keep an eye on what was going on in his kingdom by personal observation. Thus he travelled through the country as a kind of Haroun Al-Rashid, and as a result of this conduct has entered history as *kung grå kappa*, King Grey Coat.

The reduction had a great impact on the reform of the armed forces. The enormous increase in royal properties made a system called *indelningsverk* possible. This system bound the forces to the land. Every member of the army or navy, dependent on rank and job, received either a *soldattorp*, a small plot of land, or a portion of the farmers' rents or taxes in money and/or kind.¹⁸ These soldiers continued to perform an ordinary

¹⁷Roberts, 'Charles XI', pp. 233-234.

¹⁸A. Åberg, 'The Swedish Army, from Lützen to Narva', in: M. Roberts, *Sweden's*

social function, but they were at the same time regularly called up for manoeuvres and instruction. Soldiers recruited in a certain area remained there. Thus, territorial entities came into existence, which could be swiftly transformed into a fighting force. As a result, the number of expensive mercenaries could be drastically reduced.

The *indelningsverk* gave Sweden back a part of her international prestige. Nevertheless, restraint and a reluctance to become involved in international conflicts remained the major goal. Within this rather strict framework, as far as Sweden is concerned, we can nevertheless speak of an anti-French course in the 80's and 90's. The French measures against the Huguenots, which brought about a large-scale diaspora, caused nothing but horror in Stockholm. In addition, the Swedish government was led by the Francophobe Count Bengt Oxenstierna who had no time at all for the French. The value of Swedish friendship should on the other hand not be exaggerated. It's true that a few Swedish regiments were active on the side of the maritime powers in the Nine Years War, but these had already been recalled by 1693. In addition, the fact that all shipping traffic to France was forbidden in 1689 and that 150 Swedish ships were arrested did not make the friendship any closer. The mediatory role played by Sweden at the Peace Conference at Ryswick (1697) thus meant nothing else than the logical consequence of the primary foreign-political aims of Charles XI: restraint in foreign conflicts.¹⁹

Thus, on the eve of the Great Northern War, the official line towards the Baltic was the same in Stockholm as it was in The Hague, that is directed towards the preservation of the existing balance of power. That this same equilibrium would be dramatically changed in the Great Northern War was not the fault of the States General. Their involvement in the War of the Spanish Succession meant that they could not support their Swedish allies as strongly as they perhaps would have wished to. On the other hand, it was the stubbornness of the youthful Charles XII, not for nothing given the clear epithet *iron head* by the Turks, which would cost the Swedish kingdom its status as a superpower. The fact that Charles refused to see that he could not possibly win against a coalition of such

Age of Greatness, London/Basingstoke, 1632-1718, pp. 129-168.

¹⁹G. Nordmann, *Grandeur et Liberté de la Suede*, Paris - Louvain 1971, pp. 107-109.

powerful enemies as Denmark, Russia, Saxony, and later Prussia and Hannover, caused the dream of the Baltic balance of power to go up in smoke. After the defeat of Sweden at Poltava, the Baltic awaited a new lord: Peter the Great.