

Introduction

From the outset the conflict between the Dutch insurgents and their Spanish sovereign lord captured the imagination. Against all expectations, Philip II and his successors failed to win a conclusive victory over their rebellious Dutch subjects. In 1648 the mightiest European power of the sixteenth century, the Spanish empire, was compelled to admit defeat at the negotiating table in Münster and recognise the breakaway Dutch provinces as a sovereign state. Though there is no doubt that the Dutch Revolt ultimately led to the creation of the Republic of the United Provinces (also referred to as the Dutch Republic), over the course of time opinion as to how this happened and what the decisive factors were has varied considerably. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Dutch historians saw the Eighty Years War (1568–1648) as a religious conflict and a general war of independence against foreign rule, with the ultimate aim of establishing a nation state in the northern Low Countries. This was an unsurprising interpretation in a period dominated by nationalism, but it had little to do with historical reality: it was precisely the efforts of the Burgundian Habsburgs to transform the Low Countries — roughly the area covered by the present-day countries of

the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg — into a unitary state that constituted one of the main causes of the conflict that erupted in 1568.¹

In 1648 the northern provinces gained recognition as an independent sovereign state. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this had always been the objective. The division of the Low Countries into a northern and a southern part — the Dutch Republic and the Spanish (later Austrian) Netherlands — was mainly the result of an unforeseen combination of circumstances in the political, religious and social spheres, as well as the military domain. Modern historiography has devoted a great deal of attention to the first three factors, but much less to the military side of the story.² This book describes the military factors underlying the division of the Low Countries and the creation of the Republic. It is important to understand these factors because the birth of the new state was to no small degree determined by the balance of military power on land and at sea. That in the north the provincial States and the Calvinists gained the upper hand and in the south the Spanish rulers and the Catholic Church was the result of eighty years of warfare. It was also something that no-one had foreseen in 1568.

Eighty Years War or Revolt?

Since the second half of the twentieth century historians have preferred to speak of the Revolt in the Low Countries or the Dutch Revolt rather than the Eighty Years War. For the reasons set out below, we reserve the term Dutch Revolt for the first phase of the Eighty Years War, in order to make it clear that it was a conflict in which subjects rebelled against the legitimate authority of their sovereign lord, in other words an internal war. At the same time, it was a religious war between the adherents of Rome and those of the Reformation. For Philip II, the Revolt in the Low Countries endangered the one true religion, the Catholic faith, and his reputation as its most prominent champion. For the insurgents, it was a matter

of being able to practise their faith and keep their privileges, which in their view their ruler had overriden. Ideology and politics thwarted every attempt at conciliation. For this reason, historians Jan Juliaan Woltjer, Henk van Nierop and Hugo de Schepper describe the Dutch Revolt as a civil and a religious war. Just as in France in the same period, Catholics and Protestants were on opposite sides, as were royalists and rebels.³ But there was also a considerable difference between the situation in France and that in the Low Countries: France was already a more or less centralised state, while the Low Countries were a composite state whose component parts had formed part of the Burgundian possessions of the



The *Leo Belgicus*, a map of the Low Countries in the form of a lion by Claes Jansz Visscher, dating from 1609. The sword with a seal in the lion's claws is a reference to the Twelve Years Truce between Spain and the Republic. Below right Mars, the god of war, sleeps on the barrel of a cannon. And so, in the words of the print, people can '*Veylich Reyssen*' (travel safely) and '*Vredich Lantbouwen*' (farm their land in peace). On the left the northern and southern Netherlands are depicted as two women sitting peacefully side-by-side. At the top of the map are the arms of the seventeen provinces, while on the right ten townscapes in the north and on the left ten in the south form the border of the print.

House of Habsburg for varying lengths of time. In the Dutch context, therefore, the term ‘civil war’ requires further explanation.

On account of their widespread landed possessions and the important political and military positions they held in various provinces at the same time, high-ranking Dutch nobles like William of Orange saw the Low Countries as a single entity. This was, however, a minority view. Most of the inhabitants put the interests of home town and province first.⁴ Their national consciousness, if we may call it that, was therefore limited to their local province, district or town. During the Revolt, different groups confronted each other at local level. The cause was often existing feuds between urban factions, the distribution of economic and political power between rival cities — between Amsterdam and the other towns of Holland, for example — or old conflicts between town and country, like that between Groningen and the area around it (the *Ommelanden*). These local civil conflicts amalgamated with the struggle against Spanish authority. In its first two decades the Eighty Years War was a rebellion against the sovereign lord and at the same time a civil war between the inhabitants of the Low Countries, who sooner or later were compelled to take sides, either for the legitimate authority of King Philip II as duke of Brabant, count of Holland or in some other capacity, or for the insurgents led by William of Orange.

In addition, every war has its own dynamic and the Dutch Revolt was no exception. The vagaries of the conflict radicalised the Revolt — Protestants and Catholics became irreconcilable adversaries — and induced provinces sharing the same strategic interests to form alliances. Initially, these cooperative ties extended over all the Low Countries. At that point there was no question of a north-south confrontation, in the sense of a northern part striving for independ-

ence and a loyal south. The course taken by the war and the military strengths and weaknesses of the insurgents meant that the resistance in the northern Low Countries was able to stand firm while in the south the authority of the sovereign lord was re-established. As a result, the Revolt was gradually transformed in the 1580s and 1590s into a regular war between states: the rebellious provinces united in the Union of Utrecht (1579) against the reconquered provinces governed from Brussels and Madrid.

The British historian Geoffrey Parker demonstrated convincingly as far back as the 1970s why Philip II and his successors did not succeed in defeating the Dutch insurgents in what was the longest war of independence ever fought in Europe.⁵ His perspective on the conflict still largely dominates research into the military aspects of the Dutch Revolt and the regular war that followed. Alongside the irreconcilable views on the two cardinal issues of religion and privileges referred to above, Parker quite rightly focused attention on the fact that although Philip II’s military and financial resources were much larger than those of the Dutch insurgents, he was compelled by the sheer size of his empire to deploy them on several fronts. Nor was he able to move them quickly and easily from one part of his realm to another. Because Philip II and subsequent Spanish kings governed a vast empire, they had enemies on all sides. As King of Spain, the sovereign ruler of the Low Countries was engaged in wars against France, England, the Ottoman Empire and Portugal. He was thus repeatedly faced by the question of which opponent he should confront to serve the best interests of the Spanish Habsburg empire.⁶ In Parker’s opinion, logistical factors and the international political context ultimately determined the failure of the legitimate authorities to defeat the Dutch insurgents.⁷

Aim and structure of the study

The war to achieve independence from the sovereign ruler of the Low Countries occupies a central place in Dutch history. A large number of studies deal with its political, religious and economic dimensions. Though several monographs examine aspects of the military dimension, there is no analytical study of the entire course of the Eighty Years War, on land and at sea. The relationship between maritime and land-based operations and developments in the

fields of weapons technology, tactics and organisation has not been studied for the entire period from 1568 to 1648. This book is intended to fill the gap. The aim is to produce a broad but at the same time meticulous military history of the Eighty Years War. To this end, we first provide a cohesive analysis of the progress of the conflict on land and at sea. This creates an understanding of the underlying forces that determined military action: weapons

and materiel, traditional views and conventions regarding land and maritime warfare, old and new tactical and operational insights, logistical limitations, the scope for — and the constraints on — organising and financing an army or a navy, and the motivation and justification for military activity. Further study of these driving forces can deepen our knowledge of the progress of the conflict. The subsidiary questions we seek to answer include the following. What tactical and operational developments in warfare occurred in the period covered by the Eighty Years War? To what extent and in which areas did a military revolution take place in land warfare, an issue that has been debated for more than fifty years?⁸ And did a revolution also take place in maritime warfare?⁹ What changes were there in terms of the arming of troops and ships, the construction of fortifications, and shipbuilding; how are these related to changes in the way military operations were conducted? How did the organisation and financing of naval and land-based forces influence the progress of the conflict and operational scope in the war on land and at sea? How did a federation of sovereign provinces manage to organise an army on a solid financial basis, while large, centrally governed sovereign states were less successful in this respect? To what extent did the decentralised organisation of the navy, with its five admiralties, impede or encourage the development of a standing navy in the Republic? How did the causes of the Revolt — religion and privileges — affect the nature of the conflict? To what extent was armed violence limited and regulated?

Together, all these aspects of the military confrontation between the insurgents and their sovereign lord shed light on the factors that determined the

course of the Eighty Years War. Insight into the ‘military dimension’ can ultimately provide an explanation for its unexpected outcome: the division of the Low Countries and the creation of an independent state in the north.

In light of the questions that directed our research, it made sense to divide the book into two parts: part I covers the period of the Revolt, from 1566 to 1588, part II the period between 1588 and 1648, when the conflict became a regular war between states. Chapter 1 first deals with the integration process that took place in the Low Countries under their Burgundian and Habsburg rulers, before turning to the Revolt itself. In 1543, when the Duchy of Gelderland was added to the domains of the House of Habsburg, the ‘completion’ of the Low Countries was a fact, and all the provinces were subject to the same ruler. Parts I and II each consist of a chronological chapter and two thematic chapters. The chronological chapters — 2 and 5 — describe military operations, and the military, strategic and political choices that confronted the insurgents and their sovereign lord. The arms and tactics of the insurgents’ army and navy are the focus of chapter 3, while chapter 4 deals with the formation, organisation and financing of their armed forces.

In the second part of the book, chapter 6 is devoted to the tactics and weaponry of the Dutch army and navy while chapter 7 examines their organisation and financing. Finally, chapter 8 discusses the nature and military ethics of the eighty years of conflict and examines them in the light of the contemporary practice of war. This provides insights into how violence during the Dutch Revolt and the regular war that followed was legitimised and limited.