

I

An undecided battle

Since the Dutch colonial era came to an end in the '40s of the last century, relatively little attention has been given to the warfare of the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company, henceforth VOC) by Dutch historians. Whereas, during the colonial era, the military history of the Dutch overseas was always a popular source of epic stories about the Dutch, heroically defeating the English and Portuguese, as well as occasionally fighting it out with nuisance local powers on distant shores, this form of history writing became somewhat unfashionable in the postwar years. Historians of Dutch overseas expansion subsequently turned their attention to other aspects of the colonial past, such as its economic system, or the interaction between the Dutch and local cultures. Along with nationalist, congratulatory accounts of the glorious Dutch colonial past, the VOC's military history quietly left through the back door.¹

Whereas historians of the Dutch colonial past grew less interested in the military aspects of their subject, this was, however, certainly not the case for the historical profession as a whole. In the course of the last few decades, the military exploits of Europeans overseas have once again become a hot topic within several realms of history.

One of these realms is the world-historical debate. Seeking to explain why the West became so rich and powerful in relation to the rest of the world, many authors suspect that part of the answers they are looking for are to be found in the military balance between East and West, and by implication, the military aspects of European expansion overseas. These authors, usually specialists in European history, have typically described the military history of European expansion as an exponent of developments that took place in Europe in the course of the early modern period. Advances in military technology, such as the development of good and cheap artillery, developments in fortification, the armed sailing vessel as well as advancements in the realm of strategy, tactics and logistics, are seen as defining for the European military performance abroad. These developments are claimed to also have given the European powers a decisive edge in warfare against non-European powers. It was therefore of great importance in tilting the global balance of power in favour of Europe, and thus both a result of and a factor in the "Rise of the West."

1 An excellent brief introduction into the VOC's historiography is Jur van Goor, 'De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in de historiografie' in: Gerrit Knaap en Ger Teitler eds., *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, verhandelingen KITLV, 197 (Leiden 2002), 9-34.

Although the notion that certain early modern Western military innovations gave Europe an edge from the 16th century onwards goes back a long time,² it has once again become an issue of debate since the appearance of Geoffrey Parker's 1988 work *The Military Revolution: Military innovation and the Rise of the West 1500-1800*. This study claims that the various changes in weapons technology, strategy and logistics that took place in the course of the Early Modern period, amounted to a Military Revolution.³ With the advent of European colonialism, so the argument proceeds, various aspects of this Military Revolution were subsequently exported beyond the boundaries of Europe with the advent of European colonialism, and in various ways aided the Europeans in bringing 35% of the world under their sphere of influence before 1800.

In a similar vein, military historian Jeremy Black states in his introduction of *War in the Early Modern World 1450-1815*, that, regardless of the limited impact of European colonialism up to the 18th century, the most important fact is that Europe was able to project its power, in however modest proportions, onto the rest of the world, and not the other way around. He concludes a paragraph, with the telling title "the Rise of the West", as follows: "The Europeans remoulded the world, creating new political, economic, demographic, religious and cultural spaces and links that still greatly affect the world in which we live."⁴

On the other side of the spectrum, we find various authors from the realm of non-western history and historical anthropology, who look at the history of European colonial war in a wholly different light. These authors seek to create a counterbalance for what in their eyes is a one-sided and overly complacent view on the military encounters between East and West. They credit the various Asian powers with rich military traditions as well as a proficiency in tactics and strategies that, however different from the European ones, often matched the latter.⁵ In the case of South East Asia, authors have emphasized the early date at which various indigenous states got hold of guns and gunmakers, the alacrity with which the local military cultures incorporated the new military gadgets and strategies of their adversaries, the very relative relevance of western military tactics in jungle

2 An early example of the 'world-historical' approach which attributes western success to military innovations is Carlo M. Cipolla, *Guns, Sails and Empire* (New York 1965).

3 The term 'Military Revolution' was originally coined by Michael Roberts in 1955, but Parker took it back out of the drawer and extended its meaning to include developments in logistics, finances, siege warfare and fleets, whereas Roberts had mostly concentrated on tactics, army size and the impact of war on society. Geoffrey Parker *The Military Revolution: Military innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge 2000), 1-3.

4 Jeremy Black, 'introduction' in: Black ed., *War in the early modern world, 1450-1815* (London 1999), 4.

5 Among these are Kolff and Gommans, who, writing about the Indian subcontinent, note that the developments in cavalry in the northern plains were of such a nature that a Military Revolution, with its emphasis on gunpowder and infantry, is an irrelevant concept that perhaps holds explanatory value for Europe, but is simply not applicable to, for one, India. This means that one cannot state that India had somehow 'missed out' on a development; it was merely doing something else, which, however, worked just as well. Gommans, Jos and Dirk H.A. Kolff, 'introduction' in: Gommans and Kolff eds., *Warfare and weaponry in South Asia 1000-1800*, Oxford in India Readings (Oxford/New Delhi 2001).

warfare, and the fact that the Dutch copied military innovations from the various Asian states just as well as the other way around. In this way, they attempt to give Asia its own autonomous military history, which in their eyes has long been ignored or misinterpreted.⁶

Whereas some authors simply make clear that the Asian side of the story is too often overlooked,⁷ others are bent on proving that the West's complacent view on its own military prowess is wholly unjustified. Thus we find Ricklefs and Charney, who counter arguments such as those of Cipolla and Parker by claiming that Javanese cannon and fortresses were of the same standard as European ones, and that the slight advantages that the Europeans had were always rapidly copied by the various local powers.⁸ Some authors go quite far in their claims: Sudjoko, for example, first points out that Southeast Asian shipbuilding traditions were both older and richer than European ones, and accounts for the development of a technological gap as follows (and please note that he is talking about the 17th century): “[T]here then, was how the technological gap opened between Holland and Indonesia. By forcibly thwarting the attempts of the militarily weaker party to advance, by destroying its political and economic power, and by stultifying its status into that of servitude, the gap was immeasurably widened.”⁹

All in all, the military side of European overseas expansion, in which the VOC figured as the most aggressive player of the 17th century, stirs the emotions within the historical profession. It is therefore all the more surprising that the subject has remained thoroughly understudied, and all but ignored by historians of the Dutch colonial past. Only recently has this started to change: it was only in 1999 that, in his inaugural lecture as special professor in the history of Asian-European relations, Leonard Blussé made a case for reinstating the VOC as a diplomatic and political actor.¹⁰ A few years later, in 2002, an edited volume about the VOC's role in war and diplomacy appeared.¹¹ While still far from formulating a new coherent vision on VOC warfare, this book brought the military side of the VOC under the attention in its own right once again.

6 Michael W. Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare, 1300-1900* (Leiden 2004); M.C. Ricklefs, *War, Culture and the Economy in Java, 1677-1726* (Sydney 1993); Anthony Reid, *Europe and Southeast Asia: the military balance* (Townsville 1982); Sudjoko, *Ancient Indonesian technology: Ship building and fire arms production around the sixteenth century*, Aspects of Indonesian archaeology 7 (1981).

7 Gommans and Kolff, op. cit; Anthony Reid, *The Military balance*; most of Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare*.

8 Ricklefs, *War, Culture and the Economy*, 129pp, 223pp; Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, C4.

9 Sudjoko, *Ancient Indonesian Technology*, 11. The book as a whole, however, is somewhat confusing, as Sudjoko also remarks that looking at the Dutch-Indonesian encounter as some sort of arms race is completely unfruitful. Comp. *ibid.*, 14, 25.

10 Leonard Blussé, *Tussen geveinsde vrunden en verklaarde vijanden*, lecture presented at Leiden University, 8 januari 1999 (Amsterdam 1999).

11 Gerrit Knaap en Ger Teitler eds., *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, verhandelingen KITLV, 197 (Leiden 2002).

The problems of the current discourse

This renewed interest in the political and military aspects of VOC history from a VOC perspective is a refreshing development. Not only do the bold claims made by various scholars on the matter also deserve serious scholarly attention from VOC specialists; also, the perspectives that many of the scholars treated above take on the matter are far from unproblematic, and do no justice to the complicated nature that the wars waged by the VOC had.

The main problem of many works on the subject is that they disregard the very specific character of the VOC's possessions in Asia. Both fall into the trap of incorporating the VOC into a discourse which pretty much describes the world as a sort of total war between "the West" and "the rest." World historians often name the military exploits of the VOC in one breath with the conquest of the Americas and the defence of Europe against the Ottomans, as if the breaking of the siege of Vienna and the expeditions in the Moluccas were part of the same development. The tone of the debate, which takes military developments as a starting point and subsequent conflict as a given, inevitably creates the suggestion that colonialism was an ongoing European military campaign against all other people of the world, which, when the smoke cleared after some 250 years, turned out to have been successful. Even when the authors explicitly state that this was not what was afoot (as both Parker and Black do), the questions they ask and their mode of analysis forces their arguments into that direction.

The 'Asian apologists', on the other hand, do more or less the same, albeit in a 'mirrored' fashion. They seek to counter the bold claims of the above-mentioned authors by entering the same mental framework. When the eurocentric school claims that the Europeans were more successful because they had better cannon, fortresses, ships and tactics, these authors feel it their duty to point out that various Asian states had gunpowder and good ships too, as well as to claim that Southeast Asian fortress building was in no way inferior to European fortifications and that the armies of the various local powers learned to fire volleys with surprising speed. In this way the notion of a sort of arms race between the West and the East is merely confirmed. The titles of some of these works, like Reid's *Europe and Southeast Asia: the military balance*, make all the more clear that this is indeed the way in which the conflicts between the European Companies and various local powers were perceived.

This East-West dichotomy which pervades this debate has in the past few decades been interpreted by various scholars as being a legacy of the colonialist, 'eurocentric' worldview which developed in the nineteenth century. The ideological construct developing at that time combined perceived western economic success, nationalist ideas, (pseudo)scientific notions of race and inequality between races, as well as an evolutionary, progress-oriented worldview, to form a body of ideas in which the European nations were destined and obliged to help and guide the rest of the world on their path. These ideas have been projected back by historians, onto a time when the various axioms of this worldview simply did not apply yet. Thus, European exceptionalism, "the Rise of

the West”, imperialism, and the whole East-West dichotomy itself, which did not become manifest until the nineteenth century, are now by many scholars considered to have had their origin in early modern times, according to these authors. This mode of analysis certainly also to be seems to be applicable to the military debate here under consideration.¹²

In only a slightly different form, this same process of ‘projecting back’ can be discerned in the arguments of some of the ‘Asian apologists.’ Here it is not the general notion of western (military) superiority that is projected back, but imperialism’s negative aspects: the conquest, economic abuse and degradation of the colonized peoples of the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which are often uncomplicatedly extended back all the way to Coen’s days. It is this aspect of the perception of colonialism that we perceive when we hear Sudjoko complain that early modern European military superiority was only possible because of a conspiracy, in which the European powers purposefully and structurally withheld knowledge from the Southeast Asian states.

The VOC: a European organisation?

The aim of this thesis is to try and formulate a view of VOC warfare that is ‘internal’ to the VOC. Whereas the world-historical and the historical-anthropological approaches sketched above have led to interesting results, I believe that the general approach they take to early modern colonial warfare does no justice to its complexities. The VOC simply cannot be described as a mere exponent of developments in Europe, nor can it be interpreted in the same terms as the colonialism of the 19th century. After all, when the first Dutch ships rounded the cape in search of spices, the scramble for Africa, the Maxim gun, Social Darwinism, Rudyard Kipling and the Opium Wars all still lay a good 250 years into the future. As to the goals and institutions of the VOC: these are also in no way comparable to the later colonial empires. Nor could they be: the organizational form of the later European empires was deeply rooted in institutions of the modern nation state, which simply did not exist yet. The VOC was not even a state institution. It was a commercial enterprise, which was granted a state Charter, yet was an entirely separate organizational body.

To make clear the implications of this point, we might borrow a small thought experiment from Black, who states that in a way the most important battles were those that didn’t take place.¹³ Black himself gives the example of the complete absence of naval battles between the various Asian land empires and the Portuguese fleets, because the land empires were simply thoroughly uninterested in sea power. In the same vein, we might here state that there was never an open war between any Asian party and the Dutch Republic until 1780.¹⁴ Whereas in the nineteenth century, the Parlia-

12 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978, many reprints); James Blaut, *The Colonizer’s model of the world: geographical diffusionism and eurocentric history* (New York 1993).

13 Jeremy Black, ‘introduction’ in: Black ed., *War in the early modern world*, 6-7.

14 In this year the Dutch navy came to the aid of the VOC against the Buginese to prevent the Company’s demise, and even in this case it is doubtful whether we can see this as a war between the Buginese and the Dutch Re-

ments in Europe had a direct influence over, say, the Aceh War, British war efforts in North Africa, or French campaigns in Indochina, the influence that the governmental bodies of the Dutch Republic had in Asia had to go through the VOC and was therefore by definition extremely limited. This VOC was an entirely separate organisation, which, during the first few decades of its existence, developed into an institution of which a good part of the venture wholly took place in Asia, and which was moved by different considerations. Seen in this light, the fact that the VOC was always nominally acting as a representative of the Estates-General, became increasingly hollow in the course of the 17th century. There therefore *were no wars between the Dutch Republic and any Asian power in early modern times*. There certainly were Europeans fighting in the east in VOC service, but the decisions as to where and whom they were going to fight were usually made in Batavia, by officials that served causes completely different from those of the rulers of the Dutch Republic.

All this made the VOC into a unique institution. It had its own nature, which was defined by the world in which it operated, the organisational form that it had, the goals that it set for itself, and the people that were involved in it. The East-West dichotomy, insofar as it is valid in the early modern period, is in this respect not always a useful analytical tool with regard to it. The VOC cannot be interpreted as a purely European party, and therefore to a large degree eludes notions of a European-Asian military balance, or an exported European military revolution. In order to do justice to the complex body that the VOC was and the forms of warfare in which it was involved, we will have to throw all these notions overboard and look at it in all its specifics.

Towards a new coherent picture of VOC warfare

In 1979, Michael Howard published a small booklet called *War in European History*. However humble in volume, this book did something very interesting: it simply made an inventory of the different kinds of warfare that had existed in the course of the history of Europe, from medieval times all the way up to the Cold War, and described them in their relation to the society that ‘made’ these kinds of war, in terms of economy, culture, politics and technology. While never explicitly stating so, Howard attempted to show how all these forms of warfare were actually a product or an inalienable part of the society from which they came. By implication, the form of a society led to its own specific kind of warfare.

Howard himself dedicates one chapter to what he calls the ‘Wars of the Traders’¹⁵, working from the perspective of the European states in early modern times. In this chapter, he describes the early European trade colonialism as being part of a set of developments which also includes piracy in the Atlantic and the European seas, and the often violent mercantilist attempts to get a “bigger part of the pie” in Europe itself. Trade leads to wealth, wealth leads to military strength, and mili-

public.

15 Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford 1979), C3.

tary strength leads to state power, so the various European states reasoned according to Howard. Whether this wealth came from Baltic grain, fine spices from the Indies or silver from South America was of secondary importance.

Looking from the perspective of the Dutch Republic, this interpretation certainly seems to hold for with regard to the colonial venture. Our VOC, after all, was originally a state initiative: although various smaller Dutch companies had already sailed to the Indies, it was on the initiative of *landsadvocaat* Oldenbarneveldt that these smaller companies were united into the Dutch East India Company. It was on his initiative that this united Company was given a monopoly in all trade east of the Cape, in order to create *masse de manoeuvre* against other European parties, hopefully getting hold of part of the pie, particularly at the cost of the Spanish and Portuguese with whom the Dutch Republic was at war. If this damage against the Iberian powers happened to become military as well as economical, this was of course all the better in the eyes of the rulers of the United Provinces. Furthermore, in the first twenty-five years of the VOC's existence, piracy and trade were really part of the same continuum for it in quite a direct manner: the tremendous investments it made in the East were largely covered by privateering against other European powers, and its military actions were sponsored by the state, in the form of money, cannon and even a number of ships.¹⁶

Written from the perspective of the European states, Howard's interpretation therefore makes perfect sense. However, there is also another side to the story. For, whereas the VOC was a state initiative, it was certainly not a state institution, and Oldenbarneveldt's motives for the founding of the VOC did not necessarily correspond with the commercial aims of the people calling the shots within this new organisation. The VOC, after all, was a trading company, ruled by a board of directors, and owned by stockholders. Its primary aim, therefore, was profit, not military conquest or power, and it needs no further argumentation that war is usually a very expensive undertaking. With this in mind, the VOC and the smaller companies that were its predecessors (the *voorcompagnieën*) first sought a state of coexistence with the Portuguese in the Indies. The *voorcompagnieën* had tried out all kinds of alternate routes to the Indies so as not to cross the monopoly that the Portuguese claimed for themselves all too openly. The VOC continued this policy, for one by sending out Henry Hudson to find a northwest passage to the Indies in 1609. The Dutch had actually not expected the Portuguese to adopt so aggressive a stance towards them. They had come to the Indies looking for spices to buy, not for Portuguese to smoke out.¹⁷

In the course of the first decades of its existence, however, we see the nature of the VOC change quite rapidly. As the Portuguese greeted the intruders upon their self-proclaimed monopoly with an evident lack of enthusiasm, it soon came to armed conflict between the two. Whereas the first VOC

16 Victor Enthoven, 'Van steunpilaar tot blok aan het been: De VOC en de Unie' in: Knaap en Teitler eds., *Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 35-58.

17 Leonard Blussé and George Winius, 'The origin and rhythm of Dutch aggression against the Estado da India, 1601-1661' in: T.R. de Souza ed., *Indo-Portuguese History: old issues, new questions* (Delhi 1984), 73-83.

fleet and the earlier pre-VOC fleets had been lightly armed, various incidents made the Company change its attitude rapidly. When the news of a serious incident between a Dutch fleet under Van Heemskerck and the Portuguese reached the Netherlands, the Gentlemen XVII apparently decided to let go of their evasive strategy. The second fleet left the Netherlands heavily armed and with orders to attack the Portuguese wherever they could.¹⁸ Apparently, the incident with Van Heemskerck fleet had been the last straw. Although an explicitly aggressive strategy had certainly not been the initial idea, the VOC saw no option but to resort to it, only 1½ years after its founding.

This shift of strategy can be seen as being the first of a whole range of changes in the nature of the Company that occurred over the first few decades of its existence. The war against the Portuguese led to the conquest of territory, which subsequently had to be defended, if only to keep the Portuguese from moving back in. As the company and its possessions grew rapidly, its orchestration from Amsterdam grew more and more problematic, until in 1609 it was deemed expedient to send a Governor-General to Asia. In 1619, the plan to create a permanent *rendezvous* in Asia was carried out with the founding of Batavia. Initially no more than a couple of warehouses, Batavia soon grew into a veritable capital in the East, a centre of power ruled by a Governor-General and his Council.¹⁹

The development of this new political centre in the East obviously had its repercussions on how the Company was run. Whereas the Gentlemen XVII, the board of directors back in the Netherlands, were still nominally in charge of the whole venture (surprisingly enough, the renewed Charter of 1623 was not updated to reflect any of the changes in the structure and situation of the Company at all), in practice we see more of a negotiation model between the Governor-General and Council (*de Hooge Regering*) and the directors. In many cases the tail ended up wagging the dog: strong Governors-General like Jan Pieterszoon Coen or Antonio van Diemen were typically able to largely impose their vision on the Directors, and were therefore far more determining in plotting the Company's policies in Asia than they were. In addition, the goals and policies of the *Hooge Regering* did not necessarily coincide with those of the Dutch Republic. A particularly clear example of the latter is the period 1640-1644, when the VOC attempted to continue its war against the Portuguese at all costs, in spite of a peace treaty between Portugal (now no longer part of the Spanish Empire) and the Dutch Republic. Whereas the Dutch Republic badly needed an ally against the Spanish, the VOC was concerned that peace with the Portuguese would ruin its market strategy, and continued its wars with the Portuguese empire for another four years, in spite of repeated attempts by the Republic to make it stop.

18 J.A. Somers, *De VOC als volkenrechtelijke actor* (Rotterdam 2001), 54pp.

19 Somers, *De VOC als volkenrechtelijke actor*; Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: expansion and decline* (Zutphen 2003), C2.

In this manner, the VOC had become a very strange organisation: whereas back in the Netherlands it was a trading company, on the Asian side it increasingly had the nature of an autonomous political entity. It had its own government in Batavia, its own body of diplomats, its own allies, its own military means: a state of sorts. It was, however, a political entity which looked nothing like any other state form.

Synopsis

A master's thesis is obviously not the place to try and come to a comprehensive vision of the character of the wars waged by the Chartered Companies or the VOC. This thesis will therefore limit itself to one aspect of the Company which, in my eyes, did give the VOC an edge over both its European and Asian adversaries: its logistical and informational network and command structure. A lot of attention has gone out to this network in terms of trade and marketing strategies in the past few decades: this thesis will look at the same network in terms of politics and military strategies.

In order to make an analysis of this network more meaningful, the thesis will start off by giving a general picture of the political functioning of the Company, the way in which its functioning had developed in the first few decades of its existence, as well as the various military means it had at its disposal and their significance. It will mostly do this on the basis of the discourse so far, and on some topics will also try and give some insight into the debate on these matters.

This general introduction will be followed by a chapter watching the logistical and informational network in action for the years 1655-1663, which saw some of the most intense campaigns the VOC ever fought. After an introduction of the general logistical and political network of the VOC, we will follow both material, soldiers, strategies and decisions travelling all the way up and down this network, from the meeting of the directors in the Republic to the battlefields in Asia and vice versa.

A thesis on warfare, however, wouldn't be complete without also getting to the actual battlefield, and the final chapter will therefore fill in the blanks left by the preceding part by not merely looking at the networks which facilitated the VOC's warfare, but descending to the actual battlefields. In six case studies, the warfare to which this entire network eventually led will be looked upon from up close.