

II

The wars of the Company

This chapter will analyse some of the VOC's military aspects. It will first sketch some 'structural' traits of the VOC relevant to its warfare, such as its financial system and its political culture as compared to many local societies, and its motives for getting involved in military conflict. It will then go on to make a short inventory of the military resources that the VOC had at its disposal, and briefly touch upon various discussions regarding the use and value of these resources.

Capital

The first thing we might note when looking at the system of the VOC as a state, is the financial structure that lay beneath it. In the previous chapter, we have already quoted Howard, who describes how for the European state, wealth was a means to an end. This end was the upkeep of armies, which grew increasingly large and costly in the course of the seventeenth century. In order to be able to play the vicious game of European politics, the entire state apparatus of the various European powers was bent on keeping these huge armies fed and moving, innovating the tax system and developing new financial institution in order to be able to do so. Around the turn of the 17th century, we might say that the states of Europe had truly turned into war machines, pumping virtually all of their resources into the upkeep of their armies.²⁰ Thus, wealth led to power. For the VOC, however, one might say that it was exactly the other way around: the aim was wealth (through trade), and power was increasingly the means to achieve this.

As noted above, the VOC apparently started off as an enterprise with very limited military ambitions, but the escalating situation with the Portuguese soon changed this. A strategy of confrontation and pushing out was substituted for one of evasion and coexistence: the VOC fleets actively looked for Portuguese fleets on their way to the Indies in order to attack them, the Company tried to oust the Portuguese from various regions, and drew up exclusive contracts with the various local rulers in order to exclude the Portuguese from the trade. This latter practice was very successful and very soon developed into something of a market strategy: as early as 1609, the directors declared the attainment of a complete monopoly in fine spices from the Moluccas to be one of the Company's goals.

This shift in the market strategy only increased in the following years, and can be said to have reached new heights when Jan Pieterszoon Coen became Governor-General in 1619. Coen is the person traditionally credited with transforming the Company into a warmongering trade empire. In his letters to the Netherlands, he indefatigably insisted on the need for more troops, ships and

20 Parker, *The Military Revolution*, 61-74.

cannon for the VOC to hold its own in Asia. In the field, apart from establishing the long-sought *rendezvous* by conquering Jakarta on the prince of Bantam, he made his contribution to the attainment of the spice monopoly by violently enforcing the observation of the various contracts between the Moluccas' local rulers and the Company. In order to get a foothold in the China trade, he attacked Macao, the Portuguese gateway to China, and when that failed, contented himself with blockading it periodically. All in all, violence, in the form of militarily driving out competitors, blockading their harbors, as well as using violence to force monopolies and favourable trading conditions upon local rulers, very soon became accepted instruments to influence the market and enhance profit for the VOC.²¹

As profit was ultimately the Company's yardstick, force had to remain profitable. Particularly the directors in patria were not planning to invest all of the revenue into weapons and soldiers. When they had no choice but to do so, as in the first years of the Company's existence, they immediately ran into trouble, witness the revolt of the Company's stockholders in 1623. In his article on the cost of warfare, Femme Gaastra follows the way in which the directors would have reasoned, by wondering whether the VOC's military expenditures were a *sensible investment*. His estimates of the military expenditure in comparison to the total 'debit' side of the VOC balance sheet, show that for the European side of the Company, military spending came down to about one fifth of total spending, and for the Asian, about one third.²² This stands in stark contrast to the percentages reaching up to 90% that European states spent on their military in early modern times.²³ "Victory, whatever the cost," seemingly the attitude of many European heads of state in these days, was a phrase which would have been cause for either hilarity or nightmares with the directors of the VOC.

Political structure and culture

In his lecture *Tussen geveinsde vrunden en verklaarde vijanden*, Blussé recalls the solemn yet festive occasion that took place on the 24th of September 1691 in Fortress Batavia. On this day Joannes Camphuys, who had been the Governor General of the Company for the past seven-and-a-half years, transferred the keys of the fortress to his successor, Willem van Outhoorn.

The solemn ceremony centered itself around a long table in the main hall of the fortress. Seated at the head of the table were the old Governor General and his successor. On the long sides of the table, the entire civic body of the city of Batavia was present: first the members of the Council of the Indies, then the judges, the police force, harbor masters, tax administrators, and so it went on. The entire upper class of Batavia was present, but those who were no part of the civic institutions

21 Niels Steensgaard, 'The Dutch East India Company as an institutional innovation' in: Maurice Aymar ed., *Dutch capitalism and world capitalism* (Cambridge 1977), 235-258.

22 Femme Gaastra, 'Sware continuerende lasten en groten ommeslagh: kosten van de oorlogvoering van de VOC' in: *Oorlog en diplomatie*, 81-104.

23 Parker, *Military Revolution*, 62.

had to content themselves with a standing place. Speeches full of bad jokes and grave words were held by the old and the new Governor, and finally, Camphuys presented the keys to the city and the castle to his successor.

In addition to the pomp of the city of Batavia, also present was a guest from somewhat further away: an ambassador from the emperor of Ethiopia, who happened to be in Batavia at the time. While the Batavian upper class, standing around him, tried to look as distinguished as possible, the Ethiopian ambassador observed the ceremony taking place at the far end of the table with disbelief. He shook his head and expressed his amazement to the person standing next to him: “In my country, this would not pass so easily, but it would have cost thousands of lives, before someone could have acquired this high position!”²⁴

Our Ethiopian ambassador, so surprised about the peaceful way in which the power over the entire Company was transferred, witnessed the fifteenth ‘changing of the guard’, and the eleventh time that this took place in fortress Batavia. Quite a few things had changed in the political form of the Company since its founding.

Above it was already recalled how the Company developed a ‘political’ body in Asia, as well as its own capital in Asia, in the first few decades of its existence. The development of these institutions in Asia had not been foreseen when the Company was founded; neither can they be said to have come forth from a masterplan made in the Netherlands, either by the Estates-General or by the directors of the VOC. Rather, we see all these institutions developing as a historical result of interactions between the directors, whose first priority was trade and profit, and the people working for the Company in Asia, who looked at the Company through different glasses.

The decision to found a *rendezvous* and send a Governor-General to the East was originally inspired on several reports by Cornelis Matelieff, who, having been the admiral of the third fleet to sail out after the founding of the VOC, returned to Europe frustrated about the fact that every admiral going east was merely responsible for his own fleet, which yielded a very divided and impermanent management of affairs. A plan to send a director of all things related to trade eastward (a Director-General) was deemed unsatisfactory by him: what the Company really needed was someone in charge of the whole Asian venture, right there on the ground in Asia. By making his plans known to various parties, among whom Hugo de Groot (the advocate of the VOC) and Oldenbarneveldt himself, he managed to get the directors to resolve on the first of September 1609, that a Governor-General would be sent East, who would, in cooperation with a Council of the Indies, function as a spider in the web with regard to the Asian side of the VOC. Also part of Matelieff’s suggestions after his return, was the plan for the *rendezvous*. This plan, as has been recalled above, was realised

24 Francois Valentijn, *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën* (Dordrecht 1724-26), vol IVa, 320. Originally found in Leonard Blussé, *Tussen geveinsde vrunden en verklaarde vijanden*, 18.

only in 1619, when Jan Pieterszoon Coen deliberately escalated a conflict with the English and Bantamese in order to conquer Jakarta and found the long-sought *rendezvous*.

What had not been part of anyone's plans back in Europe, however, was the alacrity with which Coen tried to turn this *rendezvous* into a state capital. Coen apparently wanted to transform Batavia into a veritable city republic, as he claimed jurisdiction over the entire area between Cheribon and Bantam, all the way from Batavia (on the north coast) to the south coast, on the basis of 'conquest in a just war'. Coen had effectively carved out a state on Java: a state based on a European political system, which legitimized itself on the basis of European legal notions, but which was situated in Asia, and was ruled from Asia as well.²⁵

Of course, the jurisdiction of the Governor-General and Council did not limit itself to Batavia and surroundings: all matters with regard to the administration of the other Asian possessions of the VOC were communicated to patria through Batavia. Each of the six members of the Council was responsible for the communication with a few of the various *gouvernementen* (governmental districts) and factories.²⁶ This system, which took shape in the first decades of the 17th century, thus constituted a very effective and well-organised government of the VOC's Asian possessions. Whereas clearly based on a European tradition of government, it was adapted to the huge Asian world in which the VOC was active, and formed a 'state' which was to a large degree independent of the directors back in the Netherlands.

This made the VOC's Asian possessions a very interesting phenomenon: we cannot simply regard it as the exponent of a European power. Neither, however, can we see it as an Asian state. The Dutch Republic might not have had much influence on Batavian politics; however, the laws and traditions by which Batavia was ruled, the way in which the administration justified and conducted wars, and the way in which it perceived itself and its neighbours was thoroughly European. It was this European political culture that gave 'the Kingdom of Jakarta', as Batavia was often called, a very unique role in Asian politics, war and diplomacy.

This European political culture gave the VOC characteristics which were relatively uncommon in the Asian world in which it operated. In the first place, as our Ethiopian ambassador noted to his amazement, it was a remarkably stable system, compared to the state systems with which it interacted. In the political system of the Javanese state, Batavia's next door neighbour, as well as most other Southeast Asian polities, the most important characteristic of a leader was his prestige, obtained by, for one, prowess in battle and the number of subjects one had. This latter trait, in which the King's divine right to rule was not a given but had to be obtained by showing one's worth (in battle or otherwise), made the Southeast Asian state form remarkably unstable. Close kin of the ruler would without exception use their prestige to try and conquer the throne for themselves, or

25 Somers, *Volkenrechtelijke actor*, C7.

26 Gaastra, *Dutch East India Company*, 66pp.

start their own *mandala*. Wars of succession were not an exception that only occurred in case of a dynastic crisis: they were an accepted and normal part of the political process.²⁷ The Malabar coast, then, consisted of four kingdoms and many smaller polities ruled by lesser nobles, which were also taken up in unabating rivalry. The four larger kingdoms all pretended to be the true heirs to a legendary kingdom which had once unified all of the Coast, and acted accordingly. Regions changed hands all the time, and dynastic trouble were the rule rather than the exception.²⁸ In the Moghul Empire, the divine right to rule also had to be seized, and the approaching death of any Moghul always hailed a dynastic war between the various members of the royal family that could realistically covet the throne. Durable as the Moghul Empire was, this did not provide for a very continuous administration. In the Moluccas, the political process was defined by rivalling villages and clusters of villages, raiding each other for heads and captives.²⁹ Looking at the world in which the VOC operated from this perspective, the amazement of our Ethiopian ambassador becomes quite understandable. Although certain other state forms in Asia, like the Tokugawa Shogunate, were remarkably stable, continuous and well-organised, the VOC system, in which power was transferred to an appointed candidate after a set term, was unique, and would have been very unusual in Europe too. It made the VOC political system very stable and continuous. This political stability was further reinforced by a factor which is at first sight not political: its political institutions resided in artillery fortresses, which were for all practical purposes unconquerable to any local power, as will be discussed in detail below.³⁰ For these reasons, the VOC had a very long breath in Asian politics. Another characteristic of VOC's orchestration in Asia was the division of competence in its organisation. Valentijn, in the anecdote with which this paragraph started, already noted that the entire upper class of Batavia was present, but that only the people exerting a public function were allowed a seat at the table. The political system which took shape had its various functions, and, at least in the 17th century, these functions were not manned by an elite but by people who had the competence for that particular function.³¹

A final important characteristic of the VOC's Asian institutions was its administration. Very early on in the history of the VOC, a system developed in which practically all information relevant to the functioning of the Company was relayed to Batavia. Whereas the fact that all the outposts were

27 Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian perspectives* (Cornell, rev. ed. Of 1999), C1, C2; Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the age of commerce*, vol. 1., *The lands below the winds*, (Yale 1988), 120pp; Ricklefs, *War culture and the economy*, C1.

28 M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *De vestiging der Nederlanders ter kust Malabar*, Verhandelingen van het KITLV 4 (The Hague 1943), C1, C2. The book appeared under her maiden name, M.A.P. Roelofs.

29 Gerrit Knaap, 'Kora kora en kruitdamp: De VOC in oorlog en vrede in Ambon' in: *Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 257-282.

30 Geoffrey Parker, 'The artillery fortress as an engine of European overseas expansion' in: Parker, *Success is never final: empire war and faith in early modern Europe* (New York 2002), 192-221.; Kees Zandvliet, 'Vestingbouw in de Oost' in: *Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 151-180.

31 Holden Furber, *Rival empires of trade in the Orient, 1600-1800* (Oxford 1976), 308pp.

required to keep Batavia up to date (as well as send all their goods there instead of sending them off to the Dutch Republic directly) of course took up a lot of resources in terms of shipping and manpower, the benefits outweighed the costs by far.³² Back in Batavia, people were opening all these letters that were shipped to them across half the globe. They assessed, plotted and planned, mobilizing Ambonese allies to fight Portuguese enemies half the world away, recalling armies from one place to have them fight elsewhere months later. This enormous administrative system which the VOC developed, in which news, financial transactions, prices, the number of personnel, the political situation and everything was sent to a central ‘information hub’, gave the VOC an extremely well-documented bigger picture of the things going on in Asia, with regard to trade, politics and warfare.

War with whom? And why?

Above it has already been recalled how the VOC started off as a Company with limited military ambitions.³³ It tried to coexist with the Portuguese and avoided them as much as possible. Only when the animosity between the Portuguese and Dutch rapidly escalated within the first years of the Dutch overseas adventure, did the VOC adopt a strategy which was meant to harm the Portuguese colonial enterprise as much as possible. Van Heemskerck’s fleet and subsequent expeditions were given orders to that purpose, and were armed for the occasion. The first battles that the VOC fought in the East were with the Portuguese, and the first successful territorial conquest it made was a Portuguese fortress: fort Victoria on Ambon, in 1605. At the same time, the Spaniards were also creeping into Southeast Asia from the Philippines. The first military activities of the VOC were therefore triggered by rivalry between Europeans, and were directed against Europeans.

This escalation and military build-up, while directed against another European power, of course also had its effects on the interaction between the VOC and local societies, and the VOC’s role in Asian politics. In the course of the 16th century, the Portuguese had bound many Asian societies to them, which were of course immediately implicated in the rivalry. The pretty much open war that developed between the VOC and the *Estado da India*, was from the start also fought by setting people up against the other party, making people promise not to trade with other Europeans, and putting each other in a bad light. In addition, from a very early stage the VOC also tried to keep the Portuguese from buying spices in the Moluccas by simply fortifying the islands, which of course had its implications on the local population. The VOC’s 1608 attempt under Verhoeff to build a fortress in the Banda islands, which led to serious trouble with the local population because it did not wish to be compromised in these European rivalries, is a case in point. This form of violence, which was

32 M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, ‘Hoe rationeel was de VOC?’ in: *Economisch- en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek*, vol. 45 (1982), 182-183.

33 See p. 8.

directed against other European parties, but was also conducted by proxy, could be considered the first form of violence that the Dutch used, and the rivalry with other Europeans would remain the most important motive for resorting to violence throughout the 17th century.

The exclusive contracts that the VOC's minions in the East were already enforcing upon local societies in order to rival the Portuguese, soon awakened the idea that this trade could be even more profitable if the VOC could enforce a complete monopoly. What had in the first instance been an attempt to stay alive and acquire a place in the spice trade, very soon developed into a market strategy. Not only should the enemy Portuguese and Spaniards be forced out of the spice trade in the Moluccas: the Makassarese, Arab and Chinese traders should stay out as well. The aspiration to a complete spice monopoly was official VOC policy from 1609 onwards, as has been described above, and the VOC did not shun violence and territorial conquest in order to achieve this. Coen's 1621 massacre and deportation of the population of Banda and subsequent territorial claim over the islands, which he repopulated with freeburghers and slaves, might be seen in this light, as might the readiness with which Coen escalated a conflict with the Bantamese and the English in order to obtain territory for the long-sought *rendezvous*.³⁴

In this way, violence became a legitimate tool to influence the market. This form of violence did not limit itself to the Spice Islands in the first decades of the 17th century: the VOC learned from the Portuguese and also started using violence on other Asian parties to improve its trading position in other places. This violence, however, was always a means to an end. Whereas in the relatively undeveloped Moluccas, the VOC's leaders knew they could get away with a very violent disposition towards the local population in order to achieve trade goals, it had to behave differently towards other parties. It was hardly a viable option to make the Japanese Shogun, the Chinese Emperor, or the Moghul Emperor all too angry with the VOC. Whereas the various European Companies had a maritime hegemony in the Indian Ocean which, for one, the Moghul Empire did not even bother to compete with,³⁵ the trade interests that the VOC and other Companies had on land, in their undefended factories in the city of Surat, could easily be disrupted by the Moghul authorities, which in case of trouble formed a counterbalance for the European power at sea. In spite of this balance, in some instances the VOC still managed to put its maritime hegemony to good use against the Moghuls as well. After a trade conflict over tin had escalated in Surat, the VOC in 1648 decided to put a blockade before the Moghul port city. This blockade brought all trade grinding to a halt, and ultimately led to a compromise between the VOC and the Moghul authorities.³⁶

34 Somers, *Volkenrechtelijke actor*, C9.

35 This was not in the first instance because it was impossible: the Moghul Empire was an agriculturally based land Empire and could really not be bothered by all these traders at the fringes of the empire; it therefore did not feel any need to fight for a maritime hegemony in the Indian Ocean. Yet another battle that did not take place.

36 Hans van Santen, 'Shah Jahan wore glasses: remarks on the impact of the Dutch East India Company on Northern India and some suggestions for further research' in: Jos Gommans and Om Prakash eds., *Circumambulations in South Asian history: essays in honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff* (Leiden 2003), 47-68, there 49-52.

Finally, the VOC became involved in local Asian politics and warfare in some of the areas in which it was operating. Whereas it often had, in the first instance, its own motives to get involved in wars between Asian parties, the circumstances often ran away with the VOC, up to the point where it was into Asian politics up to its neck. The clearest example is probably the various wars of succession on Java. There, the VOC got involved in dynastic wars more or less against its will, as it had no interest in conquering Java but was mainly concerned with keeping the island politically and economically stable. The city of Batavia was entirely dependent on rice and lumber from the central regions of Java, and an ongoing war of attrition in these same central regions might have had disastrous effects for Batavia. The VOC's attempts to stabilize the island, by giving military support to what in their eyes was the 'legitimate' candidate, sucked them ever deeper into Javanese politics and gave them control over an ever growing portion of the Javanese coastal areas, which had not at all been their aim in the first place. On the basis of this view of the Javanese wars of succession, F. Gaastra feels it is justified to call the VOC a 'reluctant imperialist', at least for the case of Java.³⁷

Military hardware and personnel

Ships

The VOC, as has been stated above, started off as a commercial and maritime enterprise. The original setup was simple: sail a fleet to Asia, buy spices, sail back, sell spices at the highest possible profit, and equip another fleet to do the same. By implication, VOC warfare started off as being naval.

Although the pre-VOC fleets as well as the first VOC fleet did not have explicit military goals, they certainly did go armed. In Europe, trade was also quite a violent activity in these times. Merchant ships trading within Europe always went armed, as piracy was rife and market competition was practiced by coercion and violence as often as not.³⁸ The Dutch fleets sailing to Asia not only had to be prepared for what might await them on the other side of the Cape: they might run into trouble with Spanish fleets before they had even left European waters.

Once in Asia, their military preparations did not turn out to be wholly unjustified either. In an article on the violent nature of Asian society, Ricklefs turns the usual argumentation around and states that if the VOC wanted to get anything at all done in Asia, it had no choice but to use violence. The Asian societies it encountered were no more peaceful than what it was used to back home.³⁹ The first Dutch fleet rounding the Cape, in 1595 under the leadership of De Houtman, found itself

37 Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company*, 60pp; Ricklefs, *War Culture and the Economy*; H.T. Colenbrander, *Koloniale Geschiedenis*, vol 2. (The Hague 1925).

38 Jan Glete 'Warfare at sea' in: Black, *War in the Early Modern World*, 25-52; Howard, *War in European History*, C4.

39 Merle Ricklefs, 'De VOC en de gewelddadige wereld van het moderne Azië' in: *Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 355-378.

in a naval battle with the Bantamese off the coast of Java, after a trade conflict and mutual suspicions between the Bantamese and De Houtman got out of hand. A naval battle ensued, which the Dutch, by the use of their cannon, managed to win.⁴⁰

In the literature there is some discussion about whether Asian societies were at all interested in naval warfare: we can say that at least some certainly were, witness the maritime power projection of the Makassere and Achinese, or the naval wars between Korea and Japan. However, there does not seem to be any doubt that European warships were superior to anything they encountered in Asia. Two centuries of intense naval warfare on the seas of Europe had led to technological innovations which had no counterpart in other parts of the world. “Sails and guns” had in steps been substituted for “oars and warriors”, dramatically increasing the damage that a given number of sailors could potentially inflict. The East Indiaman, which was a relatively low, long and manoeuvrable gun platform, yet at the same time could do excellent service as a merchant vessel, was an exponent of these developments. In practice, it turned out that Asian war fleets could not match the standard of these European ships. Here, then, was one of the innovations of the Military Revolution that could be exported, and which did give Europeans an edge over Asian adversaries.⁴¹

The centralization of the VOC administration in Asia, as well as the increasing number of ships that the VOC had operating in Asian waters,⁴² led to what many authors describe as a maritime hegemony of the VOC, as early as halfway into the 17th century.⁴³ The VOC ruled supreme at sea, both with respect to other European colonial powers and towards the Asian societies it encountered. The VOC put this maritime military hegemony to good use, for one by blockading Goa from 1636 onwards in order to disrupt the Portuguese enterprise throughout the Indian Ocean, for another by blockading Surat in order to enforce different trade terms, as has been described above. In addition, this maritime hegemony also had its political effects on the VOC’s neighbours, particularly in the island world of the Indonesian Archipelago. The maritime hegemony resulted in the Javanese Mataram state slowly losing control over its overseas areas, and thus interrupted its state formation process. It also gave the VOC the power to keep the Mataram state from hiring mercenaries from overseas. As, in the explosive and dynamic political system of the Mataram state, the *prajurit*, i.e. the professional warriors from the noble classes of Javanese society, were prone to change sides

40 Houtman describes the Bantamese as having some cannon but not using them very convincingly. Cornelis de Houtman, *De Eerste Schipvaart der Hollandsche Natie naar Oost-Indien* etc. (facsimile reprint of 1971), 49.

41 Glete ‘warfare at sea’, in: *War in the early modern world*; Parker, *Military revolution*, C3; Cipolla, *Ships guns and sails*, C2.

42 The ‘lijsten van de navale macht’ which the government in Batavia sent to the directors at least once a year, lists all the VOC’s vessels and their whereabouts, and is thus a pretty good indicator of the development of the VOC’s naval power. To give a very rough impression: the VOC had a total of 62 ships in Asia in 1625. This number had increased to 83 by 1636. Then in 1656 it had increased to 105, and by 1662 it reached 130. VOC 1084, fol. 201-202; VOC 1122, fol. 331; VOC 1221, fol. 85; VOC 1238, fol. 493. By the 1650s, the lists explicitly include the categories ‘ships bound for Patria’ and ‘ships that have been or will be laid off.’ These have not been included in these numbers.

43 Anthony Reid, *Europe and Southeast Asia: the military balance* (North Queensland 1982), 6-7.

and therefore very unreliable, the Javanese leaders always preferred to hire Buginese or Balinese mercenaries. With the advent of Dutch maritime hegemony, however, this supply was at the mercy of the VOC. Thus, the ability of the Susuhunan to wage war was considerably hampered by the fact that the VOC ruled the waves.⁴⁴

Soldiers

The VOC limited itself to ship-based weapons for only a very short while. The third VOC fleet, which left in 1605 under Cornelis Matelieff, brought with it 200 soldiers. As the ships' cannon were operated by sailors, these soldiers were sent along purely for land warfare, i.e. the conquest and occupation of Portuguese forts. In August 1606, the Gentlemen XVII made sending soldiers along the normal policy, by resolving that every large VOC ship should have 50 soldiers on board, and the smaller yachts 10. These troops it used mainly to man the various fortifications it was by now conquering or building in the Moluccas: by 1609, it had a total of 590 soldiers garrisoning a total of 7 fortified positions.⁴⁵

It was directly after the conquest of Jakatra and the founding of the *rendezvous* that Jan Pieterszoon Coen also took the initiative of founding a land army. He requested that 700 soldiers and 300 sailors be sent to Batavia "not just to preserve this place, but to keep safe a good portion of the surrounding land and to keep the neighbouring kingdoms in check."⁴⁶ Coen was apparently taking to heart that Bantam feared "no Portuguese, Spaniards, Dutchmen or Englishmen, but only Mataram. From the latter [...] no-one can flee, but for the others we have the whole mountain range at our disposal: they cannot pursue us there with their ships."⁴⁷

From this time onwards, the number of soldiers the VOC sent east steadily increased. In the years after 1642, when Antonio van Diemen had just made a great number of conquests on the Portuguese which all needed to be guarded, about 1000 soldiers were sent eastwards each year. The total number of soldiers would increase up to what must have approached 10,000 by the end of the 17th century.⁴⁸ Pieter van Dam wrote at the end of the 17th century that 8200 soldiers should suffice for the Company's aims in Asia, in what appears to be a suggestion for cutting back on costs.⁴⁹

44 Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare*, 130.

45 D. de Iongh, *Het Krijgswezen onder de Oostindische Compagnie* (The Hague 1950), 31-37.

46 The 300 sailors, Coen goes on to explain, would be used for forming a small fleet with which to trade locally (the earliest beginnings of the intra-Asian trade network?) and with which to frustrate the trade to Portuguese Malacca. Colenbrander, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen: bescheiden omtrent zijn verblijf in Indie*, I (Den Haag 1919), 580.

47 Colenbrander, *Coen*, I, 119.

48 Van Dam goes on to state that making an accurate calculation is almost impossible, as is actually doing something useful with it, since soldiers are always under way, dying, deserting etc., and information takes such a long time to go to and fro between the various settlements, Batavia and patria. Thus, Van Dam claims, the Directors in the Netherlands can never accurately anticipate the number of soldiers they need to recruit. Pieter Van Dam, F.W. Stapel ed. *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, III (The Hague 1927-1954), 309-319.

49 *Ibid.*, 320.

Whereas the Gentlemen XVII thought these 10.000 soldiers to be a financial burden already, to the modern observer it will seem incredible that the VOC reached its military achievements with such a small number of soldiers, particularly if we take into account that the VOC's military activities were spread out across pretty much half the globe. If the sources tell us that the Susuhunan of the Mataram state brought tens of thousands of people under the walls of Batavia in his 1629 attack on the city, or that the total number of *nayars*, people from the warrior caste on the Malabar coast, was at the time estimated to be one and a half million,⁵⁰ it seems improbable that the VOC, with so limited a number of soldiers, spread out over so enormous an area, would have made any difference at all in Asian warfare. How is this possible? Was the VOC soldier so much better than his Asian counterpart?

Of course, the VOC, in addition to its European soldiers, had its mercenaries, its locally recruited soldiers and its allies, which will be discussed below. There has, however, certainly been some discussion about the quality and training of the VOC soldier. Various scholars have indeed brought forward that the military tradition from which the VOC 'soldier' sprang, as well as his training, made him into something qualitatively different from the 'warriors' he would be encountering on the field of battle.⁵¹ The VOC soldier was a drilled and disciplined product of the Military Revolution, and the tactics he was taught to use, a product of military innovations made back in Europe, gave him a decisive edge over his Asian counterpart, so the argument goes.

Other authors, however, give a wholly different view of the VOC soldier, and suggest he was of abominable quality. For one, they point to their backgrounds. A decision to go and join the VOC as a soldier was usually a measure of last resort.⁵² Wages in the armies of the VOC and those of the Dutch Republic were comparable.⁵³ As boarding a VOC-vessel as a soldier usually meant that one would not be coming back (only one in three VOC employees made it back to Europe, and for soldiers the chances were even slighter)⁵⁴, we can only conclude that the army of the Republic was the more attractive of the two, and to actually sign up as a VOC soldier one really had to be a desperate soul. Van Gelder wishes to nuance this, by pointing out that in early modern times being a desperado was not at all equivalent with being a good-for-nothing bum. The various wars that raged through Europe (and particularly Germany, where three out of four VOC soldiers came from) in early modern times, as well as various other social and economic developments, made life harsh

50 This according to Van Rheede, in his *Memorie van Overgave*. Meilink-Roelofs, *Vestiging Malabar*, 14.

51 E.g. Willem R Emmelink, 'De worsteling om Java', in: Gerrit Knaap en Ger Teitler, *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie: Tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, verhandelingen KITLV, 197 (Leiden 2002), 337-354, there 338-341.

52 Remco Raben, 'Het Aziatisch legioen: huurlingen, bondgenoten en reservisten in het geweer voor de VOC' in: *De VOC: tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 181-208, there 183.

53 J.R. Bruijn, F. Gaastra and I Schöffer, *Dutch Asiatic Shipping in the 17th and 18th centuries*, I (Den Haag 1987) 149-151.

54 Gaastra, *Dutch East India Company*, 77. However, not all of the people who did not come back were dead. Some decided to stay in the East as freeburghers, or went for a VOC career in the East.

and unpredictable, and the chance of someone ‘dropping out’ was simply very real in the early modern world. In other words: the people signing up for VOC service might have been a bunch of outcasts and beggars, but this did not mean they were criminals and bums. There is, in his eyes, no reason to assume that these people would have made bad soldiers.⁵⁵

Regardless of the quality of the soldiers, all kinds of tropical diseases, as well as the different climate in general, took their toll on the Europeans arriving in Batavia. Van Dam remarks how in 1684, out of the 1500 soldiers residing in Batavia, only one quarter was fit for any kind of combat duty: all the others were laid low by diseases or fatigue due to the climate.⁵⁶

As to discipline and training, very little research has as yet been done, and we still mainly rely on De Iongh’s 1950 booklet, as well as some brief passages in Kuyper’s study on artillery.⁵⁷ If we have to take De Iongh’s word for it, the training of the VOC soldier did not amount to much. Training was limited to a parade that occurred every two weeks. There was no training in jungle warfare whatsoever. As the salary was low, and the VOC managed to make it even lower by all kinds of rules (for one, the soldiers had to buy their clothes and equipment from the VOC), most of the soldiers sustained themselves with all kinds of side-jobs; many soldiers went ahead and worked full time in some non-military function, paid one of their comrades to do their guard duty, and bribed their superiors to look the other way. Guard duty, we get the impression from De Iongh, seems to have been the only work the soldiers really had, anyway.⁵⁸ Nicolauss de Graaff, however, in his *Oost-Indische Spiegel*, tells us that soldiers were already drilled on board the ships every now and again, if circumstances permitted.⁵⁹ On arrival in Batavia, the soldiers would be assigned to one of the four bastions, where they would receive training for two months before being assigned to another post.⁶⁰ What this training looked like seems to be unknown. We may at any rate assume that the soldiers were trained in the use of muskets and arquebuses, as well as the use of the pike, which still had an important role in the battlefield operations of the 17th century. They were also certainly trained in the firing of volleys.

This volley fire in itself is also a point of debate. This European innovation in the use of infantry consisted of having the infantry stand in rows, usually three: the first row would fire a volley, while the other rows would be busy reloading their muskets. After firing, the front row would move to the back, and the other rows would make a step forward. This mechanical ballet of soldiers revolutionized field warfare in Europe, and is seen as one of the spearheads of the innovations of the Military Revolution. Various authors, however, wonder whether this really gave European troops

55 Roelof van Gelder, *Het Oost-Indisch avontuur: Duitsers in dienst van de VOC 1600-1800* (Nijmegen 1997), 57pp.

56 Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, III, 312.

57 De Iongh, *Krijgswezen*, F.W.H. Kuyper, *Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Artillerie, vanaf de vroegste tijden tot op beden* (Nijmegen 1870-1874), vol. III, 238pp.

58 De Iongh, *Krijgswezen*, 79-87.

59 Nicolaus De Graaff, *Oost-Indische Spiegel, behelsende eene beschrijving vande stad Batavia* (Den Haag 1930), 30.

60 Van Gelder, *Oost-Indisch Avontuur*, 179.

a tactical advantage *outside* Europe. Standing in lines and firing volleys might work very well in the open field, but VOC warfare also consisted of penal expeditions in jungles, where volley fire would be wholly useless.⁶¹

Be that as it may: the Javanese, for one, were at least somewhat impressed, as they started copying this tactic. All these European innovations were not so ‘essentially different’ that they could not be copied. Ricklefs shows this for the wars on Java. Here the *prajurit* also came in possession of more and more firearms, both by local production and by way of the lively trade in firearms that had developed throughout Asia. (After all, the Dutch were not the only people with firearms.) They also started training in the firing of volleys, and became increasingly successful by the end of the 17th century.⁶²

In the end, the current knowledge about the quality, equipments and tactics of VOC infantry, as well as the value of these tactics within the circumstances, and against the kind of adversaries that the VOC soldiers had to fight, does not warrant any comprehensive conclusions on the matter. Perhaps the Europeans did manage to keep an advantage over many of their Asian adversaries in terms of discipline, training and equipment. It seems unlikely, however, that this technological and tactical gap, in this pre-Industrial Revolution world, and with such a numerical disadvantage, would ever have been so great as to hold great explanatory value with regard to the VOC’s military success in general.

Local troops

The first non-European troops ever to be incorporated into the VOC forces were 70 Japanese samurai, recruited as early as 1612. The head of the Hirado factory wasn’t the first European to decide to make use of the fighting skills of the Japanese, as the Portuguese and Spaniards had done so before. More Japanese were hired since, until the Tokugawa regime forbade the practice in 1621.⁶³ They were the only ones for a while: in the first decades of the VOC’s activities, mutual trust and understanding between the VOC and various local societies was as yet not of such a nature that it would be conceivable that Asians would fight with or for the Company.⁶⁴

Only after the founding of Batavia did other non-Europeans slowly become involved in the VOC’s military efforts. The first of these groups were the ‘Mardijkers’, which is a derivative of the Malay word ‘merdeka’, meaning free. The Mardijkers, in other words, were ‘the free people.’ It was somewhat of a container term, as people from various backgrounds were considered to be Mardijkers: at first they were mostly prisoners of war of an Asian background, who had been fighting for the Portuguese. As the early VOC conquests of the Portuguese brought ever more of these fighters,

61 E.g. De Iongh, *Krijgswetzen onder VOC*, 114pp.

62 Ricklefs, *War Culture and the economy*, 222pp.

63 De Iongh, *Krijgswetzen*, 61.

64 Ibid., 68-69.

usually Christian converts from the Indian subcontinent, under the control of the VOC, and allowed them to settle in and around Batavia, they started forming a distinct social group there. It was but a small step for the VOC also to include these ex-soldiers in the defence of the city as a separate *schutterij* (civil militia), and as soon as their role of soldiers took shape, they were also hired for military expeditions. The early Mardijkers were thus effectively people who had already served as military personnel for the Portuguese, but had switched employers.

To the Mardijker community were soon added people from other backgrounds as well. It was not uncommon that slaves, who were part of Batavian society, converted to Christianity, and were subsequently manumitted. Many of these decided to stay in or around Batavia, and these were also counted among the Mardijkers, and also contributed to the pool of military labour from which the VOC made use.⁶⁵ Many mestizos were also considered to be Mardijkers. Thus, the term Mardijkers slowly shifted in meaning to become a general name for Christian free non-Europeans living in or around Batavia. The VOC was capable of mobilizing a few hundred soldiers from this pool to supplement its European forces in the first few decades of the 17th century.⁶⁶

The Mardijkers did not long remain the only pool of military labour in the vicinity of Batavia for the VOC to make use of. The city, as a centre of economic activity as well as the base of what was perceived by many to be a powerful state, attracted all kinds of groups who settled in the surrounding area: a development which actually had the active support of the Company, as it wanted the lands around Batavia (referred to as the *Ommelanden*, literally: the surrounding lands) to be cultivated. Some of these groups also consisted of freed slaves but were not considered to be Mardijkers (for one, because they were not Christians); other groups apparently just showed up and settled there. The VOC encouraged the division of all these people into groups, as that provided for more control and insight. These groups, or ‘nations’, as the VOC called them, would also appear on the battle field as such, under the banner of their nation. Whereas the VOC did supply them with weapons in times of war, they did not train these people in European warfare. We should not consider the soldiers from the *Ommelanden* to be preliminary sepoys. Each nation fought in its own way.⁶⁷

This wide array of groups would change all the time, as certain groups came into being, and other groups dissolved or merged. In the period up to 1663, when this system was still somewhat in its infant stages (in fact, the first ‘kampongs’, camps, for these groups were installed by the VOC in 1663), the most significant groups drawn from the *Ommelanden*, beside the Mardijkers, were the Bandanese and Ambonese. Other groups, among whom the Balinese, were certainly already living in the *Ommelanden*, but they are not mentioned in any documents on military matters until the 1660s. It is

65 In fact, this stood in the tradition of the ‘original’ Mardijkers, as many of the Portuguese Asian soldiers were in fact liberated slaves. The VOC thus simply tagged along on a practice which had already been usual in the Portuguese empire. Raben, ‘Het Aziatisch legioen’, 187.

66 Longh, *Krijgswezen*, 62-64.

67 Longh, *Krijgswezen*, 66.

possible that they might have fought for the VOC before those times, but only then did they have a captain assigned to them and only from then onwards are they traceable as separate groups.

As to the Bandanese: these had ended up in the *Ommelanden* after Coen's campaign on the Banda islands. Coen had taken several hundred captives and decided to bring these to Batavia in order to populate the city and surrounding area. Whereas this group was initially in a position approaching slavery, it slowly but steadily emancipated, until in the 1630's it got its own political bodies and captain, and was incorporated into the defence system. They always remained a rather small group and 'merged' with the Butonese in later times.

The Ambonese had come to Batavia in the wake of the Ambonese wars, fought between 1624 and 1658, and briefly touched upon above. In 1656, a group of Ambonese warriors who had been fighting for the VOC, under the leadership of Radja Tahalela, went along to Batavia with a returning VOC fleet, and took up residence in the *Ommelanden*. From that time onwards, they remained an important group in the VOC's wars, both on Java and during expeditions.

The worth and role of these 'indigenous' troops, drawn from the *Ommelanden*, has been seen in various ways. Raben, for one, describes these groups as the VOC's version of the peasant levies with which the Javanese kings reinforced their armies. A Javanese army had a professional core of *prajurit*, supplemented with vast numbers of peasants, and the VOC came to a very similar system, with European troops as the professional core and the various groups from the areas around Batavia as the peasants. It is my impression that this qualification of the VOC's indigenous troops to some degree does injustice to their background and military worth. The peasant levies of the Javanese armies were hardly ever used for actual fighting, as they were considered to be very unreliable, and were mainly present to do things of a logistical nature.⁶⁸ The groups in service of the VOC, however, did actually fight, and did well at it too. As we have seen, both the Ambonese and the *Mardijkers* had actually been soldiers/warriors before taking up residence in the *Ommelanden*, and are therefore not the VOC counterpart of peasants forced to do service in an army. In later times, when Balinese, Butonese, Javanese and other groups had also become part of the pool of military labour from the *Ommelanden*, the Javanese were considered to be the least martial and reliable of all of them. Therefore, I believe that to consider these armies also to consist of a professional core supplemented with 'peasants' is an underestimation of the military value of the 'Asian legion.'⁶⁹

On the other hand, we should not overestimate the importance of the soldiers from the *Ommelanden* during the 17th century. It was only by the end of the century, after the Butonese and Balinese had been incorporated into the system, after Makassar had been defeated, and with the onset of the wars on Java, that the VOC's reliance on this pool of military labour really became important. As, in this later period, the centre of gravity of the VOC's military activities swung back from the

68 Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare*, C9.

69 Remco Raben, 'Het Aziatisch legioen', 181-208.

Indian subcontinent to the Archipelago, the use of these troops became both more logical and more profitable. Up until 1663, the VOC did make use of lots of local troops, but these were usually allies instead of ‘local soldiers.’

A final, rather interesting consideration is what Pieter van Dam writes about the local soldiers that the VOC made use of. In the current literature, the local soldiers are considered to have been essential to VOC military success, as they were cheaper, they did not have to be brought in from the other side of the world, and their proficiency in local forms of warfare was an invaluable asset in the VOC’s military efforts. At the end of the 17th century, however, Van Dam wrote that the *Hooge Regeering* would rather see more European troops! Not only were these more reliable; using Europeans also prevented the diffusion of European tactics to the enemy, and, as Van Dam calculates, would be *cheaper*. I will not reproduce the entire calculation here, but since European soldiers only get paid half the year and have to buy their equipment and clothes from the Company, they are in the end cheaper than local soldiers, even though the latter officially get half the wage of their European colleagues, so Van Dam argues. He therefore recommends hiring a lot more Europeans than the 8200 which, according to his own calculations, were necessary.⁷⁰ This contemporary observation which Van Dam based on the opinions of Governor General and council, and which flies right in the face of the current historical opinion on the value of local troops, leaves the reader puzzled and pondering. After all, who are we to doubt his word in this matter?

Allies

In the period that is under consideration in this thesis, allies were of much greater importance than the VOC’s few hundred local soldiers. In the above paragraphs, we have already come across various examples of how the VOC made allies, and used existing hostilities and antagonisms to achieve its aims. It actively sought local help in conflicts, as in the case of the blockade Goa from 1636 onwards. Governor General Van Diemen had a mind to definitively finish off the Portuguese headquarters in the East, but did not feel like conquering it and having to bother with ruling this very unprofitable city itself. It therefore sent an embassy under Johan van Twist to the court of the Indian state of Bijapur, at the time the most powerful state south of the Moghul Empire. The treaty which was the result of this mission gives a wonderful insight into the way in which the VOC tried to do politics. As the VOC was seeking to consolidate its interests on the Malabar Coast and Ceylon, it wanted to do away with the Portuguese on the west coast of India for good. The articles of the treaty come down to the following: the VOC would block the harbour (using its naval superiority, doing what it was best at), thus disrupting the flow of reinforcements to Goa, and the flow of information throughout the Portuguese empire. At the same time, the raja of Bijapur, who was ill-disposed towards the Portuguese and claimed sovereignty over the area surrounding Goa, would

70 Van Dam, *Beschryvinge*, I, 324-326.

attack the city by land and conquer it. The VOC would back up this attack by landing an army. All the while, the blockading fleet would be supplied from Wingurla, a Bijapur port town. In the end, the raja would be handed the sovereignty over the city.⁷¹ Thus the VOC had made a deal which would work to the benefit of both the Company and the Bijapur Empire. The Company did not have to bother to provide a land army strong enough to conquer Goa, neither did it have to bother to conquer and occupy the town.⁷²

In other cases, allies were practically handed to the Company on a platter, before the VOC even knew it needed them. A case in point is the call for help that the VOC received from the Raja Singha, the raja of Kandy, the mid-Ceylonese kingdom, in 1637. Here, the exact opposite of the situation with regard to Goa seems to have developed. The VOC had just started an extensive military campaign against the Portuguese strongholds along the west coast of the Indian subcontinent, but it would appear that Ceylon as yet had no place in these plans. An invitation to drive out the Portuguese from the Raja Singha, who was increasingly isolated by Portuguese strongholds along the coast, and felt increasingly frustrated with this fact, seems to have changed the VOC's mind.

Another famous case of an ally simply presenting himself is the story of Arung Palakka, the Buginese leader who, after a failed rebellion against his Makassarese overlords, simply appeared in Batavia and offered his services. As the Makassarese state was at that time the last remaining rivaling sea power in the Archipelago, with which the VOC had already been at war in 1660, this was once again a case in which both parties apparently saw their mutual benefit. After his failed rebellion, and aware of the struggle between the VOC and the Makassarese state, Arung Palakka saw a perfect party in the VOC to help him regain his lost honour and position. After the VOC had made use of Arung Palakka and his warriors on several other expeditions, these finally got their revenge in 1666, when the VOC once again went to war with the Makassarese. The VOC merely provided ship transport for the various Buginese and Butonese groups joining the Company's war against Makassar. After one of the most intense wars the VOC fought in the 17th century, the Makassarese state was defeated, the VOC was rid of its competitor, various Bugi and Butonese groups were rid of an unwanted overlord, and Arung Palakka had his honour back.

Whereas the number of troops that the VOC could attract from the *Ommelanden* in these times was limited to several hundreds, the above alliances usually involved much larger armies. The Bijapurian state, like the Moghul Empire, was a thoroughly military organisation, and in the seventeenth cen-

71 J.E. Heeres ed., *Corpus Diplomaticum Neederlando-Indicum: verzameling van politieke contracten en verdere verdragen door de Nederlanders in het Oosten gesloten, van privilegiebrieven aan hen verleend enz.*, II (The Hague, 1931), CXXII, Kust van Malabaar [sic], maart 1637, 294-297.

72 In the end, the Raja did not live up to his end of the bargain. An attack from the Moghul Empire was expected, while at the same time the Portuguese pressured the raja of Bijapur to end his relations with the Dutch (for one, by seizing some merchant vessels). The land attack therefore never came. The VOC then contented itself with structurally blocking the Goa harbour, until it reached a peace agreement with the Portuguese in 1644. D.C. Varma, *History of Bijapur* (New Delhi 1974), 59-60.

ture, high nobles commonly had standing armies of 5000 horsemen alone, which in times of war could be supplemented by considerable infantry peasant levies.⁷³ This gives us some impression of the kind of army that would have appeared before the walls of Goa, had the attack actually taken place. The various Buginese and Butonese groups which had joined Speelman's fleet in the course of his campaign against Makassar, at a certain moment numbered 10.000 warriors, whereas disease left only 250 European soldiers able to fight at the time.⁷⁴ The fact that the Company, through its political role and diplomatic efforts, got these kinds of armies to fight for its causes, illustrates the fact that in many cases, politics might have been far more instrumental for the VOC winning its wars, than military superiority.

Fortresses

As we have seen, many of the innovations of the Military Revolution could not be exported, or looked completely different outside Europe. However, some specifically European military innovations, like the warship, did *not* lose relevance in Asia. Another one of these was European fortress design.

Back in Europe, as a response to the advent of artillery, the design of fortresses had evolved from the form which we would associate with a medieval castle, to an almost scientific design by the end of the 16th century. High, massive stone walls, an easy and grateful target for artillery, were gradually replaced with lower, sloping earthen walls covered with a layer of stone, which absorbed the shock of an impact and would not collapse. The simple rectangular castle designs with round corner pavilions of the early renaissance were gradually replaced by ever more complicated geometrical designs, which did not leave a single angle where the defending artillery could not reach. Whereas at the end of the 15th century, no city wall or fort could withstand the onslaught of the artillery trains brought along by the armies of those European states that could afford them, the 16th century saw the evolution of a defensive answer to the development of artillery. By the dawn of the 17th century, these defensive innovations had advanced to such a point that taking a city or a fortress could no longer be achieved by artillery bombardment, but (once again) involved laying siege to a city, starving it rather than taking it by force.⁷⁵

At the beginning of this 17th century, the Netherlands were the *avant-garde* of artillery fortress design. The wars with Spain had given the Dutch quite some experience with these fortresses, and had also moved the rulers of the newborn Dutch Republic to invest in training and study of fortress building at Dutch universities. The Dutch Republic had become a centre of expertise on

73 D.C. Varma, *History of Bijapur*, 236pp.

74 De Iongh, 108.

75 Parker, 'Artillery fortress', 196pp.

the matter. Designers like Simon Stevin became the European authority on fortress design, and engineers came to the Dutch Republic from across Europe to learn the secrets of the trade.⁷⁶

As European rivalry in the Asian waters started, an arms race with regard to fortifications immediately took off. The greatest threat for European settlements in Asia, invariably placed along the coast or a river mouth, was artillery bombardment from other Europeans' sailing vessels. The appearance of Dutch and English ships in Asian waters was therefore a good incentive for the Iberian powers to seriously review the defences of their settlements. Until then, their defences would mainly have had to protect their settlements from land attacks by Asian powers, and were therefore of cheaper designs, with vertical walls and often round corner pavilions. The prospect of European ships, armed with several dozens of cannon each, appearing before the walls of these fortresses on the seaside, made the Portuguese and Spaniards invest in updating their fortifications and founding more cannon.⁷⁷

The Company, meanwhile, also built its settlements with an eye on possible attack by other European parties. The fortress that the Europeans built on Banda, as discussed above, was the first fortress actually built instead of conquered by the VOC, and its aim of defending the islands against other European parties is clear in its design, which, although humble in setup, follows the European state of the art with regard to fortress building. Batavia, initially defended with some cannon on the two reinforced warehouses that were there before Coen conquered the area for the Company, was defended with a provisional system of moles and bastions, until a huge and costly fortress was built in the years between 1631 and 1639, designed to withstand any European attack. As, in the years following 1636, the Company conquered various Portuguese fortresses, it usually deemed the existing defences insufficient. It would make the fortresses smaller so that it needed fewer soldiers to defend them, and also updated the defences to the European standard of the time. While in Europe, fortress building had become a highly scientific and specialized profession, the VOC did not hire such specialists for its fortresses: the designs were made by the city architects of larger VOC settlements such as Cape Town, Batavia or Colombo. These made use of the methods and handbooks that had been developed by Simon Stevin and his contemporaries, which provided standardized plans for fortresses. These merely needed to be adapted to local circumstances.⁷⁸

These fortresses, while designed for European forms of warfare, also proved highly effective against local powers. In the entire history of the VOC, only two fortresses were ever conquered by a non-European party: Fort Zeelandia on Formosa, facing a professional Chinese army, 25.000 strong, had the flaw of having a hill overlooking the fortress, defended by only a small redoubt. After a siege of nine months, this small redoubt was taken, bringing the inner fortress both in

76 Zandvliet, 'fortenbouw', 155.

77 Parker, 'Artillery fortress', 203pp.

78 Zandvliet, 'fortenbouw', 156-157.

tresses did not only protect a settlement or city, but could also control a sea-lane or serve as a base of operation for fleets. In the course of the early seventeenth century, we see that the VOC grew interested in certain geostrategical goals. We see this exemplified in the fact that one of the main reasons for conquering the Malabar coast was to make sure that no other European power would use it as a base of operations from where to conquer Ceylon.⁸⁰ Another example is the protracted siege of *A Famosa*, the huge Portuguese fortress in Malakka, from 1636 to 1641. The VOC dedicated an enormous amount of resources to the siege of this fortress, not just to get hold of the trade there, but because *A Famosa* controlled the Malakka Strait. As fortress Batavia already controlled the Java Strait, this was essentially an attempt to monopolize access to the South Chinese Sea from the west.⁸¹ In this manner, seaboard European artillery fortresses combined with superior warships, gave the VOC its maritime hegemony over local powers, and increasingly over other European parties as well.

There has been ample discussion on the quality of European fortresses compared to local fortresses, and how the latter changed in the light of the arrival of Europeans. Particularly for the case of Southeast Asia, opinions on the matter vary enormously, as some hold it that fortress-building was virtually non-existent in Southeast Asia, where notions of territory were of less importance, and only made its first hesitating steps in response to European methods of war.⁸² Other authors, however, do not only claim that there was in fact a tradition of fortress building in Southeast Asia, but that these fortresses were in no way inferior to European ones.⁸³ The latter statement is absolutely not borne out by the facts, as the evidence of these same authors brings to the fore that Southeast Asian fortresses were usually square buildings, more often made out of wood than out of stone. We also need to consider the fact that whereas Rembang was the only fortress the VOC ever lost to a Southeast Asian party, the Javanese Wars saw the conquest of dozens of Javanese fortresses by VOC troops. The fact that the authors making these claims never make any argued comparison and only talk about Southeast Asian forts, suggests that their idea of European fortress building is somewhat underinformed.

Be all of this as it may: there is no doubt that the arrival of Europeans was indeed answered by Asian initiatives in the field of fortifications. The most famous case of how Asian fortifications were influenced by innovations from Europe, is to be found in the Japanese civil wars. Here, various European innovations in the field of warfare were copied and even surpassed, among which fortress building. When cannon, both imported and locally produced, started playing an increasingly important role in these wars around 1580, this soon triggered a response in fortress build-

80 K.M. Panikkar, *Malabar and the Dutch* (Bombay 1931), 3.

81 George Winus, 'Luso-Nederlandse rivaliteit in Azië' in: *De VOC: tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 105-130, there 118-119.

82 Reid, *Military balance*, 1; Parker, 'Artillery fortress', 213.

83 Ricklefs, *War culture and the Economy*, 129pp; Charney, *Southeast Asian Warfare*, C4.

ing, just as it had done in Europe. The resulting fortresses, such as Kumamoto and Osaka castle, showed a striking resemblance with European artillery fortresses: they had sloping walls, and the outlay of the walls was designed to leave no dead angles and provide flanking fire. Nonetheless it is uncertain whether these innovations were directly copied from European examples: it is as likely that the Japanese, confronted with the same problems posed by the rise of artillery (which the Japanese *did* copy from the Portuguese)⁸⁴ came up with very similar solutions.⁸⁵

In other cases, European influence on the defences of Asian powers was a lot more direct, the most telling case probably being the defences of Makassar. Being the capital and harbour of Gowa, the main rivalling sea power as well as biggest trade competitor to the VOC in the Archipelago, Makassar housed various trade diasporas from all over Asia, as well as English, Danes and a large number of Portuguese. Europeans were involved in aiding and advising the king with regard to his defences: a Dutch travel account of 1632 tells us how the king's ordnance was managed by an Englishman who had converted to Islam.⁸⁶ Apparently already expecting trouble with the VOC, the resident Portuguese and the king thought it in their mutual benefit to aid each other in building up the city's defences. In the 1630s, a European-style fortress called Sombaopu was erected at the capital, which in the following decades was supplemented with a system of redoubts, and eventually the city's entire coastline was sealed off by a brick wall, eleven kilometres long. When it finally came to blows with the VOC in the 1660s, a good portion of the artillery that defended the city was operated by Portuguese, as Wouter Schouten informs us in his account of the events.⁸⁷

These Makassarese defences, born out of the cooperation of various parties which saw a common enemy in the Dutch, was one of the greatest military challenges that the VOC ever faced. When in 1666 the VOC decided to launch another expedition against the kingdom, the commander Cornelis Speelman was specifically instructed to limit the use of European soldiers and have the allies do all the fighting, as well as not to directly attack the capital but to limit himself to raiding the coast in several locations.⁸⁸ The Company was apparently afraid to directly confront the Makassarese defences. When the ranks of Speelman's allies grew and he decided to go against the capital on his own initiative in the beginning of 1667, the fleet wasted all its ammunition upon the defences without any result. A long siege ensued, which ultimately lasted for a good 2½ years. Only through sapping did Speelman's troops eventually breach the walls of the fortress.⁸⁹

84 Paul Varley, 'Warfare in Japan' in: Black, *War in the early modern world*, 66-67.

85 Parker, 'Artillery fortress', 216.

86 Travel account of Seyger van Rechteren, quoted in Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. van Kley, *Asia in the making of Europe*, III, *a century of advance* (Chicago 1993), 1444.

87 Wouter Schouten (Michael Breet and Marijke Barent van Haefen eds.), *De Oostindische voyage van Wouter Schouten* (Zutphen 2003, originally published in 1676), 87.

88 Leonard Andaya, 'De militaire alliantie tussen de VOC en de Buginezen' in: *De VOC: tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, 283-308, there 286.

89 *Ibid.*, 303-304.

Artillery and artillerists

As the first VOC fleets entered the Asian waters, back in Europe people were still in the process of perfecting the various uses that artillery could have. Whereas, in the sixteenth century, it had proven its worth in tearing down or defending fortifications, as well as war at sea, the effective use of field artillery in an open battle was only developed in the first decades of the 17th century. At the time, artillerists as yet had no place in European military traditions and hierarchy, and therefore had a somewhat eccentric place in the military chain of command. They were not considered soldiers, but rather, as Howard puts it, ‘witchdoctors’, exercising their voodoo with their strange machines. It was only in the 1650s that the French army made the first attempt to really incorporate artillerists in the military structures.⁹⁰

This state of the art with regard to artillery in Europe is reflected in the ways in which the VOC used it. As we have already seen, much of the military strength of the VOC came from its ability to deploy artillery from ships, and defend its fortifications with it. In a trade empire which was mainly oriented upon the sea, these two uses of artillery were of even greater importance than in Europe. Also, like in Europe, deploying artillery was a profession which had nothing to do with soldiering. Shipboard artillery was not operated by the VOC’s soldiers but by the sailors, some of whom were specialized *boschschieters* (bus firers), under the command of a constable-major. The land-based artillerists defending the various fortresses were recruited from among these sailors: whereas a soldier signed up as such back in the Republic, artillerists only became artillerists once in the East, and from the point of view of the soldiers were ‘witchdoctors’ as much as their colleagues back in Europe. The quality of VOC soldiers, as has been discussed above, is subject to some discussion, but it would at any rate seem that these VOC artillerists stood in very high esteem. Because of their high quality, they were very much sought after by other companies, and for that reason they deserted quite often.⁹¹

While extremely useful against fortifications as well as for defence, the use of artillery in open battles and skirmishes seems to have been very limited in this period. Even in Europe, the use of field artillery as had as yet to be perfected. The kinds of wars the VOC waged in the period under study rarely involved sending expeditions inland at any rate, and insofar as they did, these were usually small-scale penal or scouting expeditions against relatively weak or unorganised adversaries: kinds of war which brought with them their own problems, but which hardly involved trains of field artillery.⁹² Cannon were often brought along, but their military value seems to have consisted mainly of the shock effect that their noise and indiscriminate destruction brought about against adversar-

90 Parker, *Military Revolution*, 23-24; Howard, *War in European History*, C4.

91 Kuypers, III, 237-239.

92 For examples of these kinds of expeditions, see De Iongh, 114pp, and Albrecht Herport (S.P. L’Honoré Naber, ed.), *Reise nach Java, Formosa, Vorder-Indien und Ceylon* (Den Haag 1930, originally published 1669).

ies who had little or no experience with firearms.⁹³ Their worth, in that respect, was psychological rather than tactical. Nonetheless we find instances in which cannon were effectively used in open battles. In most of these instances they were loaded with scrap, which was very effective against adversaries not wearing any kind of body armour.

Cannon, however, were far from rare in the Indian Ocean world. Gun founding might have been an art at which some societies were better than others, but it certainly was not an art which only the Europeans had mastered, or kept secret for that matter. Some Asian rulers would seem to have obtained guns by way of Arab traders early in the 16th century, the Moghul armies were famous for their artillery, cannon founders from the Ottoman Empire were in service of the Achinese sultan in the 1560s and Chinese and Japanese residents in various places also seem to have produced cannon locally in the 16th century. Subsequently, European competition in 17th century Asia caused rapid proliferation of both the possession of cannon and the art of making them: the English, finding that European firearms were rather in demand in Asia, saw no problem in selling them there, particularly in areas where the Dutch were active. The Makassarese locally produced their own cannon by the first decade of the 17th century, in all probability learning from the Portuguese. Mataram, the Javanese state, was making its first attempts at gunfounding in the 1650s.⁹⁴

Having a lot of guns is one thing; putting them to good use is quite another. Although these guns were in some cases also deployed for the defence of fortifications (as in the case of Makassar), the eagerness with which particularly Southeast Asian rulers tried to obtain firearms also seems to have had a more psychological motive. In Southeast Asian cultures, weapons in general were considered to have a supernatural aspect (that which O.W. Wolters called *soul stuff*), contributing to victory not only in the practical sense of the word, but also making victory more likely by bringing their supernatural power to the field of battle. Cannon were perceived as having a great amount of this supernatural power, and for this reason it was important to have as many guns as possible, and the larger the better. For this reason, Southeast Asian rulers were particularly keen on founding large guns, and tried to lay their hands on as many pieces as possible, even if these weapons were not really useable in practice or when they did not have the appropriate ammunition for them.⁹⁵ Today the huge 'holy cannon' in Banten (Bantam) and Jakarta still bear witness to this fondness of large guns. An inventory of the various guns present at the *kraton* of Surakarta also shows this, as well as the complete lack of uniformity of the guns with which the Javanese court was defended: the cannon can be identified as being of Dutch, Javanese, English and Portuguese origin, and hardly two pieces are the same. In addition, the remarks in Dutch sources on the ill use of cannon (such as overload-

93 Reid, *Military balance*, 4-5; Charney, *Southeast Asian warfare*, C4 For a telling example of the unpractical nature yet huge psychological effect of cannon in these kinds of wars, once again see Herport, *Reise*, 44pp.

94 Reid, *Military balance*, 3-4.

95 Charney, 63.

ing and bad aiming) are too numerous to attribute merely to a general disdain of the enemy.⁹⁶ It therefore seems plausible that, although many Southeast Asian states built up impressive arsenals of artillery in the 16th and 17th centuries, the types of warfare in which these states were involved, as well as the perceived role of artillery in warfare, did not really give it a clear practical application in Southeast Asian warfare, which in turn did not facilitate the development of standardization and professionalism in its use. The same, however, might to a lesser degree be said of the VOC for this period: where artillery was used from fortresses and ships, its use was clear, but out in the field, its role was often no more than psychological.

Gunpowder

The extensive reliance on artillery and firearms made gunpowder the lifeblood of the Company's defences. Each Company ship leaving from the Dutch Republic was equipped with up to 10.000 pounds of it.⁹⁷ This was not just meant for the defence of the ship: the demand for gunpowder in Asia was also supplied from the reserves that the fleets took with them: when the ship arrived in Batavia, the authorities there simply redistributed the gunpowder in the way they saw fit.

This practice explains why gunpowder is so notably lacking from the *Generale Eis*,⁹⁸ the 'shopping list' of goods that were needed in Asia, sent along with the fleets returning to Europe. Whereas in these requests from Asia, page after page is filled with weapons and ammunition (pistols, balls of various sizes, sword blades), gunpowder is nowhere to be found. While undoubtedly a much simpler system for the Company, it is a pity for the researcher nowadays, as it makes it very hard to reconstruct how much gunpowder was actually 'consumed.'

Another thing, however, is quite clear: as soon as the Company got a foothold in Asia, it did not feel like being wholly dependent on the supply lines from Europe. As early as October 1615, Governor General Reynst requested "a good quantity of gunpowder for the fortresses, and people who can make powder themselves."⁹⁹ Only a few years later, Coen urged the Gentlemen XVII to do the same: "Please don't fail to also send some powder makers, as we hope to obtain plenty of saltpetre from the [Coromandel] coast; neither fail to send us powder until Your Honours are certain that we will be able to get by out here."¹⁰⁰ At the time that Coen wrote these words to the Gentlemen XVII, two powder mills were already active on Ambon, and Coen was already building a third one

96 K.C. Crucq, 'De kanonnen in den Kraton te Soerakarta' in: TBG 77, 93-110.

97 C.O. van der Meij, 'De VOC onder de wapenen' in: J.P. Puype and Marco van der Hoeven, *Het arsenaal van de wereld: Nederlandse wapenhandel in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 1993), 50. According to Pieter van Dam, I, 643, it was, as of 1656, procedure to equip the large galleons with 7.000 pounds, and smaller vessels with 3.000.

98 VOC-Archives, 13427 and further.

99 W.Ph. Coolhaas ed., *Generale Missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en raden aan Heren XVII der VOC*, I (Den Haag 1960), 56. This is a quote from what is considered to be a forerunner of the *Generale Eis*, and is, as far as I have been able to determine, the only time that it contained a request for powder.

100 Quoted from Kuypers, *Geschiedenis der artillerie*, III, 207pp.

in Batavia. It would seem that these powder mills, however, fell into disuse in the following decades. For the time being, the VOC remained dependent on the supply of gunpowder from Europe. Renewed attempts to start up serious gunpowder production in Asia only took place from 1655 onwards. The first mill, opened in that year and powered by buffaloes, was apparently meant as a way to have prisoners of war do something useful. Only one year later, the mill was upgraded to be water-powered. The resulting mill was capable of producing 12.000 pounds of powder per month. It was structurally enlarged and enhanced, until a series of accidents led to the decision of splitting the mill into two smaller mills. In the end, the gunpowder making efforts led to a monthly production capacity of 30.000 pounds per month in Batavia alone by 1662. Added up to the mills in Pulicat, Colombo and on the Coromandel coast (the latter of which was good for 10.000 pounds per month), this made the VOC self-sufficient in its demand for gunpowder.¹⁰¹

The decision to make gunpowder locally instead of shipping all of it over from the Dutch Republic was so logical that it is surprising that large-scale production only got going in the 1650s. The three ingredients of gunpowder, which consists of 10% charcoal, 75% saltpetre and 15% sulphur, were not exactly hard to come by in Asia. Charcoal, obviously, was not a problem anywhere. Sulphur was found in some amounts in the Archipelago, for one in the Banda islands.¹⁰² Saltpetre, a crystalline substance which is the product of fermentation processes (in a nutshell, it was made from leaving manure or bird's excrement ferment for a while), could be made pretty much anywhere; warmer climates actually made saltpetre production easier, and led to a product of higher quality than the saltpetre produced in Europe.¹⁰³

This latter fact led to one interesting development: whereas in almost all respects, the Company in Asia was heavily dependent on military supplies from the Republic, for the case of gunpowder the tables were reversed in the course of the 17th century. In the first decades of the century, the Dutch demand for saltpetre was almost wholly supplied from the Baltic States. When, however, these regions were hit by the onslaught of the Thirty Years war from 1627 onwards, this source of saltpetre dried up. At the same time, the Company was building up its contacts along the East Coast of India: first it invested in the Coromandel Coast, and then it opened its first permanent factory in Bengal in 1634.¹⁰⁴ This was the region where the English EIC bought its saltpetre, and the VOC also started buying impressive amounts there, not only for its own gunpowder production,

101 Kuypers, *Geschiedenis der artillerie*, III, 207; *Generale Missiven*, I, 139pp, 358pp, 471.

102 VOC-Archives, 1246, fol 904-905.

103 In the process of making saltpetre, all kinds of nitrates form in the substance. Some of these are highly hygroscopic, which would cause the eventual gunpowder to go damp much easier. (One percent of water is enough to make gunpowder utterly useless.) Calcium nitrate is the most hygroscopic and therefore most undesirable of these; saltpetereers would rather see potassium nitrate in their saltpetre, and in the course of the 16th century various purifying methods were developed. Saltpetre produced in warm regions was much richer in potassium nitrate and contained less calcium nitrate. Bert S. Hall, *Weapons and Warfare in Renaissance Europe: Gunpowder, technology and tactics* (Baltimore, MA, 1997), 77-79.

104 For the ins and outs of the saltpetre trade in Bengal: see Pieter Van Dam, book 2, vol. II, 13.

but mainly for export to the Dutch Republic. In the years 1658-1660, for example, a total of four fleets brought 2.2 million pounds of saltpetre to the Dutch Republic: amounts of the same order of magnitude as the imports from the Baltic some fifty years earlier.¹⁰⁵ As in the same years, the Company was slowly becoming self-reliant with respect to gunpowder, it was in this case the Dutch Republic which was militarily dependent on the Company instead of the other way around.

The art of making gunpowder, like the art of making guns, was hardly a secret in Asia. Neither could it have been: after all, gunpowder was originally a Chinese invention. However, as in the case of guns, this didn't mean it was easy, and some mastered it better than others. The basic recipe for gunpowder is simple enough: grind 5 cups of saltpetre, 1 cup of sulphur and 2/3s of a cup of charcoal into powder, put in a big bowl and stir for a long time. Nonetheless, there was a lot of room for improvement within this rather simple basic principle. The importance of the quality of the saltpetre has been briefly discussed above, and even the higher quality saltpetre obtained in Asia needed to be purified for the best result.¹⁰⁶ In addition, the grain of the powder made a lot of difference. In the 16th century, the development of the practice of making the powder wet and then having it dry in corns had meant a vast improvement: the resulting 'corned powder' burned more regularly, predictably and fiercely, and was significantly less hygroscopic than the original uncorned variety which, being a powder as fine as flower, had a much larger surface area. Lumps of charcoal in gunpowder could make it highly unpredictable, suddenly burning much faster or slower, which made aiming almost impossible and brought with it the risk of the gun blowing up. Having regularly ground basic ingredients and grains of a particular size was therefore of great importance for having good gunpowder.¹⁰⁷ It was for a good reason that Coen and Reynst asked for specialists to be sent over.

Although it is impossible to reconstruct what virtues and flaws the various kinds of gunpowder produced by local societies had (whereas metal guns survive the centuries and might be subjected to research nowadays, gunpowder does not), the sources do tell us that European gunpowder was considered to be of a particularly high quality, and, although gunpowder had been around for the entire 16th century, various local societies sought to copy the European ways of producing it. In

105 N.A. 1.04.02, 1221, fol 84; 1225, fol. 136; 1229, fol. 136; 1230, fol. 65, being the 'summaries of loaded goods' of each of the fleets. Respective amounts of saltpeter: 625.275 pounds, 388.688 pounds, 908.973 pounds and 257.850 pounds. In many cases the amount of saltpeter being shipped comes second only to the amount of pepper. In one case it is even larger. As saltpetre does not seem to play a very large role in current discourse on the VOC, this might be one of the most underexposed goods the VOC shipped to Europe. Information and statistics on the saltpetre from the Baltic states comes from: Michiel de Jong, *Staat van Oorlog: wapenbedrijf en militaire hervorming in de republiek der verenigde nederlanden, 1585-1621* (Hilversum 2005), 206pp. Amounts of saltpetre shipped to Europe from the Baltic states varied between nothing and some 1.5 million pounds per year, with the notable exception of 1620-1621, when the war with Spain was about to resume and the Republic imported a good 9 million pounds within two years.

106 Van der Meij, 'De VOC onder de wapenen', 50.

107 Hall, *Weapons and Warfare*, C3; Jack Kelly, *Gunpowder: a history of the explosive that changed the world* (London 2004), C4. Although the latter book is popular history, it is good fun, well-researched and actually the most insightful book on the subject I've read.

1662, the *Hooge Regeering* informed the directors back home of the fact that, only two years after their water-powered mill had been completed, a mill built along exactly the same lines had been erected in Makassar. Someone had apparently been paying close attention to the VOC's gunpowder making efforts.¹⁰⁸ The Mataram state had learned the art of making gunpowder from the Malakka Portuguese in 1624.¹⁰⁹ However, they were evidently unhappy with the product of their efforts, as until the beginning of the 18th century, Batavia kept on getting requests from the court for some professional advice on gunpowder production. The *Hoge Regeering*, of course, knew better than to honour these requests.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to make an inventory of various aspects of the VOC relevant to the way in which it waged war. It has done so in the hope that these aspects would combine to form a certain system which could function as a framework to the case-study still to follow.

Looking at the purely military aspects of this system, we might distinguish between two particular 'realms' of VOC warfare: a maritime realm and a land-based realm. To the maritime realm we may count naval warfare, but also the various fortified VOC settlements, which were invariably built along the coast. The synergy of superior warships and the use of artillery fortresses gave the VOC a certain military superiority in this maritime realm, both *vis-à-vis* other Europeans and local societies. Although non-military factors are certainly important in this maritime superiority as well, it cannot be considered separately from European military innovation. The galleon and the artillery fortress were indeed exponents of European military developments, transposed to an Asian context, which irrefutably contributed to the VOC's success. For the land-based realm, on the other hand, notions of military superiority hold far smaller explanatory value. The limited resources with which the VOC had to make do in its vast area of operation, as well as the very relative relevance of European innovations with regard to infantry and land warfare in its Asian context, pretty much limited the VOC's military superiority to one cannon shot inland.

In addition, and perhaps more importantly, this chapter has aimed to show how the influence of factors which are not in the first instance military were at least as important to the VOC's military success as military factors in the strict sense of the word. The wider context of the VOC's military actions, consisting of its goals, its political culture, its perceived role in Asia and its organisation, were strongly defining for the conflicts in which the VOC got itself involved, and the way in which it handled these. The latter of these, the organization, will be the topic of the following chapters.

108 *Generale Missiven*, I, 397.

109 Crucq, 'Soerakarta', 95.

110 Charney, *South East Asian warfare*, 58-60.