

# THE GROWTH OF A NATION; THE NETHERLANDS AFTER THE SPANISH ARMADA CAMPAIGN OF 1588

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## Introduction

The Dutch historian Robert Fruin, at the time professor at Leyden University, was one of the first scholars who at the end of the nineteenth century paid special attention to the developments in the Low Countries during the decade 1588-1598. In his publication (*Tien Jaren*), Fruin tries to indicate that the years after 1588 have been of crucial importance to the development of the young Republic of the United Netherlands. His epos is one about "progress and victory" (1). Fruin has not been the only one fascinated by this time frame. Many scholars have followed.

In my lecture I will try to indicate that much of the seed of change during this decade had already been implanted during the summer of 1588, when a mighty Spanish fleet endangered the coasts of England and the Netherlands. The Spanish Armada campaign did not succeed, and Dutch seamen had a — granted relatively modest— share in its failure (2). The way Dutch politicians and mariners responded to the threat of the Spanish Armada, combined with the threat of Alexander Farnese, duke of Parma, with his troops in the northwestern part of Flanders, has been of decisive importance to the way changes in the Republic of the United Netherlands took place. In order to discuss these consequences of the failure of the Spanish Armada campaign in a proper way, I very briefly would like to talk about the Dutch participation in the events that have had such great influence on the way world history took its course.

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(1) R. J. Fruin, *Tien Jaren uit den tachtigjarigen oorlog 1588-1589* (Leiden 1857). The quote comes from J. Presser (ed.), *De Tachtigjarige oorlog* (two volumes; Amsterdam/Brussels 1963). Volume I, 105.

(2) See for a more detailed account of the participation of the Dutch my article in P. Gallagher and D. W. Cruickshank (eds.), *God's Obvious Design. Papers for the Spanish Armada Symposium, Sligo, 1988* (London 1990), 102-111.

## 1. Dutch participation

On September 2, 1587, Justin of Nassau, lieutenant-admiral of the Dutch coastal province of Zeeland, showed up at the meeting of the House of Representatives (the States) of the province of Zeeland. At this occasion, he told the representatives that he had received intelligence about large scale preparations being made by the duke of Parma in the harbours of Antwerp (taken by Spaniards in 1585) and Sluys (seized by Spanish troops in August 1587). With a huge Spanish army so close by, the States of Zeeland feared for an attack on the ill-defended isle of Walcheren (3).

What was the situation in 1587? For many years, starting at the end of the 1560's, the people living in the Northern part of the Low Countries had tried to escape from being subjected to the Spanish king. The provinces of Holland and Zeeland formed the epic centers of this Dutch Revolt. With their struggle to remain independent, the Dutch had been more succesful at sea than on land. Ever since the arrival of the Duke of Parma in the Netherlands in 1579, Spain had made tremendous progress in bringing parts of the Netherlands under its hegemony. At the same time, Don Francisco Verdugo was succesful in conquering parts of the provinces of Groningen and Friesland in the northeastern corner of the Netherlands. Holland was likely to be attacked by his troops via the Zuiderzee.

In the Spring of 1587, Spanish troops had managed to take over from the English commanders the city of Deventer and the fortress near Zutphen. The capture of these two strongholds in the eastern part of the Dutch defence-system meant a great danger to the province of Holland. Parma would be able to deal a severe blow to the "rebels" via the ill-defended provinces of Gelderland and Utrecht. Moreover, as far as the duke was concerned, the important city of Flushing, located on the isle of Walcheren would be his next prey. This city with its large harbour could almost ideally give shelter, or—in case this was needed—could serve as a rendez—vous for the heavy—draughted Armada ships. However, King Philip decided otherwise. In his opinion, Parma should restrain from further adventures in the rebelling Netherlands and concentrate his energy and troops on the invasion of England. In other words: while being so close to the completion of his plan to bring and end to the Dutch Revolt by invading both Holland as well as Zeeland with his troops, Parma was ordered to withdraw and focus on the preparations for the Armada campaign.

With so many Spanish troops closing in from the north, the east and the south, ready to jump at the throats of the Dutch soldiers in the two coastal provinces, the situation in the Netherlands could be called critical. The admiralties of Rotterdam, Amsterdam and Middelburg, placed under the control of the States of Holland and Zeeland, were poorly equipped with

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(3) Rijksarchief Zeeland Middelburg (RZM), *Resolutiën van de Staten van Zeeland en Gecommitteerde Raden* (Resolutions of the States of Zeeland), 02-09-1587, f. 185.



money and men. Animosity, jealousy, cut-throat competition and very strong tendencies to separatism did not bring unity to naval activities, neither with respect to the defence of the Dutch coastal provinces, nor with respect to meeting the requirements stated in the Treaty of Nonsuch (August 1585) between England and the northern provinces of the Netherlands.

Captain Cornelis Lonck van Roosendael had the command over a Dutch squadron, sent to England in July 1588 as a consequence of articles 25 and 26 of this Treaty. In these articles, the Dutch promised to send an auxiliary naval force to England in times of trouble. These vessels, however, were judged by the English authorities to be in such a bad condition that they sent them back to the Netherlands. Several days later, Lonck van Roosendael joined the Dutch fleet near Flanders with his squadron (4). Ships (not so much men-of-war, but mostly merchantmen, slightly adapted for their new task as fighting vessels) were scattered all over the inland and coastal waters of the provinces of Holland and Zeeland, and near Flanders. Over and over again, the States of Zeeland, realizing that the province was in great danger with Parma so close by, and hoping that their colleagues in Holland would support them in their attempts to continue the revolt against Spain, applied for help. It wasn't until July 1588, when it became known that a huge fleet had left Lisbon heading for the Channel, that the States of Holland ordered the admiralties of Rotterdam and Amsterdam to send auxiliary forces to Zeeland (5).

The Dutch participation in the downfall of the Spanish Armada during the following month has been rather small. Moreover, this participation did not stand by itself, but was part of increasing cooperation between the English and the Dutch. For months, Dutch and English vessels blockaded the coast of Flanders, at first to prevent Parma from receiving reinforcements by ship, later in order to prohibit the duke from communicating with Medina Sidonia. During the actual battles that took place between the Spanish and English fleets, Dutch mariners also managed —though assisted by English ships— to seize two Armada galleons (the “San Felipe” belonging to the Portuguese squadron, under command of Don Francisco de Toledo in the shallow waters between Nieuport and Ostend, and the “San Mateo” under command of Don Diego Pimentel between Ostend and Sluys). Once the Armada had left the Channel heading for open sea, and once it became clear that Parmas army and Medina Sidonias troops would not be able to meet and join, the admiralty of Middelburg started to take ships out of service to save money. This example was soon followed by the admiralties of Rotterdam and Amsterdam.

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(4) S. P. Haak (ed.), *Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Bescheiden betreffende zijn Staatkundig beleid en zijn familie. Eerste deel: 1570-1601*. 's-Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën, grote serie nr. 80 (The Hague 1934), 139-140; J. den Tex, *Oldenbarnevelt. Deel I: Opgang 1574-1588* (Haarlem 1960), 429.

(5) N. Japikse (ed.), *Resolutiën der Staten-Generaal 1588-1589*, 's-Rijks Geschiedkundige Publicatiën, grote serie nr. 51 (The Hague 1922), 25-06-1588, 29-30; *Resolutiën van de Staten van Holland* (Resolutions of the States of Holland), 26-06-1588, fols. 220-221.

## 2.1. Consequences. The admiralties

The way the coastal provinces in the Netherlands had prepared themselves for and had participated in the Armada campaign made it clear to the States of Zeeland, the States of Holland and maybe above all, to the central administration —the States-General in the Hague—, that unity and willingness to cooperate within the maritime organization was lacking. Although Dutch ships blockaded inland and coastal waterways from the middle of the 1580's onwards (the capture of Antwerp by the Spanish in 1585 could be seen as instrumental), it wasn't until July 1588 that Dutch naval forces from other provinces (i.e. Holland) came together in Zeeland. The Armada campaign of 1588 had shown to the central government in the Netherlands that administrative separatism had almost been ruinous and thus should be brought to an end. Attempts were made to unite the admiralties.

The policy of converting merchantmen into men-of-war at the last minute by arming them with one or two cannons proved to be no policy at all. In 1589, the so called "ordre op de beveilinge der Zee" (order to the protection of the sea) was introduced and accepted by the States-General, the provinces and the admiralties. This marked the beginning of an annual fleet-building program, developed by representatives of all admiralties. Initially, this program was geared to the construction of vessels, performing escorting services (convoys). Later, in 1593, larger ships for the protection of Dutch coastal and inland waters were taken in service (6).

The animosity, latent for many years, between Holland and Zeeland concerning the way taxes (convooigelden) were levied on merchantmen, making use of services provided by the admiralties, reached its climax during the summer of 1588. Convoy-revenues for the admiralty of Zeeland increased tremendously between 1587 and 1589 (almost 75%! ). The admiralty of Rotterdam, however, saw its income from these services decrease by 30%! There is no information about the developments at the Amsterdam admiralty (7). The admiralties in Holland blamed this —in their eyes— unjust and unbalanced situation merely to the fact that many merchantmen came to Zeeland in the wake of the auxiliary squadrons, sent by Holland during the spring and summer of 1588. The majority of these merchantmen continued their trade from Zeeland instead of Holland. Subsequently, the two admiralties in Holland missed out on revenues from these vessels.

In order to create balance between the admiralties of the coastal provinces, a so-called "College van Superintendentie" was installed in 1589. This sort of

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(6) J. E. Elias, *De vlootbouw in Nederland in de eerste helft der 17e eeuw, 1596-1655* (Amsterdam 1933), 5; R. E. J. Weber, "Met smakzeilen en spiegelschepen tegen de Spanjaard; de organisatie van een oorlogsmarine", J. Presser (ed.), *De Tachtigjarige oorlog*. Volume II, 268-269.

(7) H. E. Becht, *Statistische gegevens betreffende den handelsomzet van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden gedurende den 17e eeuw (1579-1715)* (The Hague 1908), tabel I.



Maritime Council of State was in charge of levying taxes and receiving revenues on behalf of all admiralties. The College would hold its seat in Holland, the province of Holland would get a major say in the decision-making, and revenues for the admiralty of Zeeland would decrease: all in all three reasons for the province of Zeeland to object against the establishment of such a central College. Eventually, in 1593, the "College van Superintendentie" was abandoned.

Finally, in 1597, a general instruction was developed. It was decided "[...] tot beter directie en executie van de seacken van de admiralteyt en 't geene daar van dependeert, op te regten vijf collegien, daar van het eene resideeren sal in Zuydt-Hollandt binnen Rotterdam, een in Noordt-Hollandt binnen Amsterdam, een in West-Vrieslandt tot Hoorn of Enckhuysen, een in Zeelandt tot Middelburgh en een in Vrieslandt binnen Dockum" (8). Five admiralties were to be established: in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Hoorn/Enkhuizen (the place where people would meet would be alternated), Middelburg and Dokkum. In later years (1645), the Frisian admiralty moved to Harlingen. All admiralties were placed under direct control of Prince Maurice of Nassau. Centralization of the naval forces had at last been accomplished.

## 2.2. Consequences. The end of Spanish victories

It had become time for the States of Zeeland and Holland, and also for the States-General to face the situation in the Autumn of 1588. The Armada had left, but Parma was still dangerously close to the "soft underbelly" of the rebelling northern provinces. Another consequence of the Armada campaign for the Netherlands — apart from the desire to reorganize its naval affairs — is that right at the time that Parma strategically speaking could break the Dutch Revolt by invading Zeeland from the south and Holland from the east, king Philip decided to force his own strategic military priority (the invasion of England) upon him. The danger of interpreting events with hindsight is omnipresent, but I cannot prevent myself from realizing that if it weren't for the Armada campaign, Parma may very well have succeeded in his plan to incorporate the Netherlands in the Habsburg Empire.

After the Armada had left the Channel heading north, Parma decided to break up his camps in Newport and Dunkirk and led his army against the Dutch city of Bergen op Zoom, apart from Willemstad the only city in Brabant remaining to the Republic. Opposite lay the island of Tholen, strategically of great importance to the province of Zeeland, and well defended by Count Solms and a garrison of Zeelanders. Parmas attempt to seize the island in order

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(8) Quoted by S.W.P.C. Braunius, "Oorlogsvaart", G. Asaert/Ph. M. Bosscher/J. R. Bruijn / W. J. van Hoboken (eds.), *Maritieme Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* (four volumes; Bussum 1976-1978), Volume II, 317.

to attack Bergen op Zoom from more than one side failed dramatically. Many Spaniards lost their lives. Likewise, attempts to seize the city ran aground. "The hero of a hundred battle-fields", writes the historian J. L. Motley in 1861", the inventive and brilliant conqueror of Antwerp, seemed in the deplorable issue of the English invasion to have lost all his genius, all his fortune. A cloud had fallen upon his fame, and he now saw himself, at the head of the best army in Europe, compelled to retire, defeated and humiliated, from the walls of Bergen [op Zoom]" (9).

In 1589, the city of Geertruidenberg was handed over by English garrisons under command of Sir John Wingfield to the Spaniards. Spanish troops thus gained an entrance to Holland, the very heart of the Dutch Revolt! With the treason committed by York and Stanley in 1587 (handing over Deventer and the fortress near Zutphen to Spanish troops) still in the back of their minds, many Dutchmen questioned the sincerity and trustworthiness of the English commanders and their armies on Dutch soil. During their finest hour, when a mighty Spanish fleet stood on their doorstep to bring an end to Elizabeth's support of the Dutch Revolt, both parties had fought side by side against the mutual enemy. How should this action by Wingfield be interpreted? As Motley states "The criminations and recriminations seemed endless, and it was most fortunate that Spain had been weakened, that Alexander (Farnese, duke of Parma), a prey to melancholy and to lingering disease, had gone to the baths of Spa to recruit his shattered health, and that his attention and the schemes of Philip for the year 1589 and the following period were to be directed towards France" (10).

This event may be seen as the turning point in Parma's quest for control over the rebellious provinces. Geertruidenberg marks the end of a decade of almost continuous Spanish victories and the beginning of Dutch successes. Between 1590 and 1604, prince Maurice of the Netherlands managed to regain most of the territory captured by Parma between 1579 and 1589. Maurice started his successful campaign with the capture of Breda in 1590, followed by Deventer, Zutphen, Nijmegen and many other places. Geertruidenberg fell back into Dutch hands in 1593. Holland was now again protected against an attack from the south. Of great importance to the survival of the young Republic of the United Netherlands were also the victories over the Spanish troops in Ostend and Sluys (1604). Several sea battles preceded the recapture of Sluys, a strategically important city, seized by Parma's troops in 1587 as part of the Armada plan.

It was not only because of the military talents of prince Maurice that the Republic managed to maintain head above water. After the disaster of the Armada campaign, King Philip had ordered the duke of Parma to leave Flanders with a strong army and head south, to France. Here, a civil war

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(9) J. L. Motley, *History of the United Netherlands* (four volumes; New York 1860-1861). Volume II, 543. See for a more extensive account of the siege of the island of Tholen and the city of Bergen op Zoom Motley, *op. cit.*, 437-543.

(10) Motley, *op. cit.*, 548.



between Henry of Navarre, leader of the protestant Huguenots, and Henry, duke of Guise, leader of the Catholic Ligue and supported by Henry III, king of France, had held the country in its grip for years. Needless to point out that Parma was supposed to support the Catholic party in its attempt to gain control over the throne, as a protestant king of France would mean a menace to both Spain as well as to the southern part of the Netherlands. Parmas troops in Flanders would in such case be surrounded from several sides. In December 1588, Henry duke of Guise was assassinated. The same happened to king Henry the following year. Shrewd Henry, Duke of Bourbon and Navarre turned catholic in 1593. Later, in 1598, he was accepted as appropriate candidate to the French throne. Both queen Elizabeth of England as well as the States-General of the Republic of the United Netherlands supported the new king of France with large sums of money and great numbers of soldiers. During these years until his death in 1592, Parma had mostly been separated from his armies in the northern part of the Netherlands.

### **2.3. Consequences. The Netherlands-England**

Finally, it should be noted that the failure of the Armada campaign has had important consequences for the relation between the Netherlands and England. Though communication may not have been ideal during the time the Armada was present in the Channel, cooperation between the two nations improved during the summer of 1588. Despite animosity evoked by earlier events in 1587 and 1589 (treason by English commanders), queen Elizabeth I and the States-General decided to equip a combined fleet of some 200 vessels with more than 15.000 men. The fleet left from Plymouth on 18 April, 1589. Goal of the expedition was to create a revolution in Portugal and place the Pretender, Dom Antonio, on the throne.

English and Dutch troops landed at La Coruña, not the most appropriate place to start a revolution in Portugal. Soon after their arrival, the soldiers noticed that support for Dom Antonio was insufficient. They sacked the town of La Coruña, did damage to Portugese and Spanish shipping, marched with 6.000 men to Burgos, fought with Spanish troops, set sail for the south and were joined off Cape Finisterre by the Earl of Essex. Troops landed near Peniche and marched, under command of Sir John Norris, 48 miles to Lisbon, while Francis Drake was to sail up the river Tagus. Bad weather and disastrous mistakes, made during the preparations of the expedition prevented the Dutch and English troops from taking the city. Moreover, a strong army under command of Count Fuentes and Henríquez de Guzmán lay at close distance from Lisbon. The goal of starting a revolution that would bring the Pretender Dom Antonio, supported by England and the Republic, to the throne could not be achieved (11).

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(11) Motley, *op. cit.*, 554-557.

Only a few years later, both nations would join forces again. King Philip, still weakened by the disastrous result of the 1588 campaign, proved a feasible target for a combined Anglo-Dutch naval adventure in 1596. A combined fleet raided the harbour of Cádiz. Dutch ships, used in 1588, had been fairly small and poorly armed. Now, in 1596, the Republic managed to equip a squadron of 24 ships in total, comprising 18 ships of 200-400 tons, armed with 16-24 guns, and manned by crews of 100-150 men. The remaining six vessels were smaller, measuring less than 200 tons, armed with a dozen guns at the most, and carrying 50-100 mariners. Most of these ships, though, had to be hired (12). This adventure could be called succesful. For the time being, England and the Netherlands worked together.

## Conclusión

“For the Protestant United Provinces, at least, the Armada changed nothing: the war continued unabated” (13). In one of the best books ever written about the Spanish Armada of 1588, this statement about the consequences the Armada campaign has had for the Netherlands does not suffice. Above, I have tried to indicate that when one looks at the effect of the Armada campaign for the Netherlands, one may detect a paradox: Philip, while being so desperate to bring an end to the Dutch Revolt, decided to launch an offensive against England first. Parma, while being so close to achieving the king’s goal in the Netherlands, was ordered to focus all energy and attention to the invasion of England, leaving the United Provinces more or less unattended.

The organization and execution of the Spanish Armada campaign has in more ways than one proved to be advantageous to the Republic of the United Netherlands. Immediately after the Armada had left, the States-General took initiatives to improve the organization of the navy. Likewise, political and military cooperation between the Republic and England was intensified. Only a few decades later (especially from 1650 onwards), this cooperation came to an end. Around this time, England took over the position Spain has had for such a long time as being the Netherlands’ first and foremost enemy. This topic, however, will not be discussed at this occasion.

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(12) J. C. de Jonge, *Geschiedenis van het Nederlandsche Zeewezen* (Five volumes; Haarlem 1858-1862; second edition). Volume I, 143.

(13) C. Martin/G. Parker, *The Spanish Armada* (London 1988), 262.





