

## Review

Marc van Alphen, Jan Hoffenaar, Alan Lemmers and  
Christiaan van der Spek:

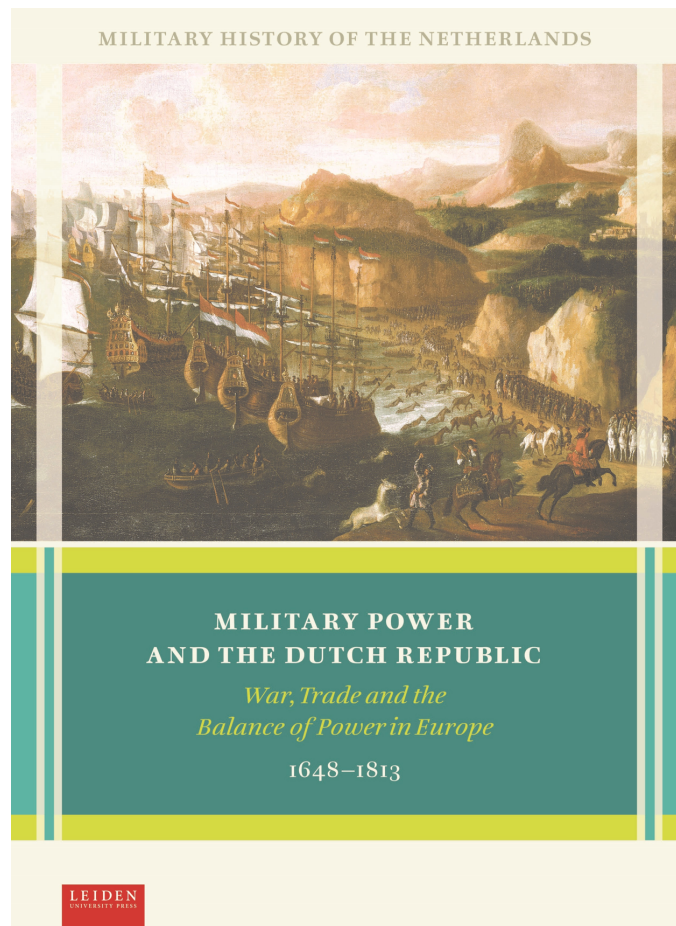
***Military power and the Dutch Republic: War, trade and the  
balance of power in Europe 1648-1813***

Paul Arblaster and Lee Preedy (trans.)

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*Reviewed by Jonathan Israel*



This is not just a very useful, but an important volume with a distinctly original approach to its subject and, what is more, is beautifully produced, its 549 pages being unusually well laid out with a luxuriously large number of well-chosen illustrations (many of them in colour) and numerous excellent graphs, maps, diagrams, and tables. Since very few books of this kind of military history, that is military history thoroughly and illuminatingly integrated into general political and social history of the country concerned, get written, it is definitely something of a landmark in both general and Low Countries historiography. As the tendency in Dutch historiography has often been to separate the 17<sup>th</sup> from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the timeframe adopted adjoining the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 18<sup>th</sup> also often gives rise to surprising and illuminating perspectives.

Many historians have waxed lyrical about the cultural and economic achievements and the social distinctiveness of the Dutch Republic, one of Europe's smallest but most important states in early modern times, and all of them have noted in passing, that rarely has such a small and affluent but highly vulnerable country had to struggle so frequently and exhaustively to protect itself and maintain its independence from larger, more populous, and basically more powerful neighbours. But hardly any historians have taken the trouble systematically to focus on the Republic's structures of military and naval power and examine how these relate to the other dimensions of its history. The Introduction rightly mentions Jaap Bruijn, on the naval side, and Olaf van Nimwegen, regarding the army, as among the very few substantial precursors. I myself am rightly criticized for giving attention, in my general history of the Republic, to the major battles and wars but for barely touching "on how the army and navy operated or which developments impacted the armed forces" (465).

Marc van Alphen, who is responsible for three of the eight main sections, entitles the first chapter, dealing with the Anglo-Dutch Wars and the 1688-89 Glorious Revolution, "Looking seaward (1648-1689)." He skillfully places the remarkable developments in the navy characteristic of this period against the broader background. Johan de Witt emerges as the statesman who contributed most to the *professionalization* of the Dutch navy and privileging the navy over the army, but at the same time left the Republic more exposed on the landward side than ever. It is striking, too, that the army, besides being downgraded from 1648 to 1672, largely ceased, despite a few technical improvements, to reflect that innovative, creative tendency which was such striking a feature of the Eighty Years' War period. The second chapter, also by Van Alphen, "Facing territorial threats (1689-1748)," convincingly shows how, as a result of William III's policies, the navy was effectively subordinated to the British navy, from 1689, while the army now became the major tool of the Republic's defense and international role. But the death of William, in 1702, also had the effect of subordinating the Dutch

army to Britain's growing primacy in the coalition opposing Louis XIV, leading to a marked decline in its capabilities after the Peace of Utrecht (1713), while the navy by the 1740s, despite the absence of a Stadholder and reduced Orangist influence during the so-called Second Stadholderless period (1702-47), and supposed increased emphasis on the Republic's maritime interests, had become a mere shadow of what it had been in 1700 (let alone 1688). This was true both in terms of a much-reduced number of warships and their dwindling size and relative firepower.

In the third chapter, "The Republic as a second-class power (1748-1795)," Max Lemmers vividly demonstrates how the dwindling and loss of capability of both the army and navy negatively affected the role and status of the Republic as a European power, a condition to which it seemed condemned for the long-term by a mix of financial pressures and the loss of the old Barrier, the string of fortifications and fortified towns skirting the southern Netherlands manned by the Dutch alongside Britain and Austria. On the positive side, the resulting pursuit of neutral status did keep the United Provinces out of wars for more than thirty years (1748-80). But this in turn contributed to the growing and soon disastrous vulnerability of the Republic in the 1780s and 1790s. In the fourth chapter, "The gradual loss of independence (1793-1813)," Christiaan van der Spek discusses the further decline in status which led to the Dutch forces becoming little more than a minor adjunct to French power and the ambitions of Napoleon.

But it is in Part Two of the book, "Organisation, finances, tactics, personnel and society 1648-1813," that the real importance of this volume lies. The mass of detail gathered about the actual functioning of the armed forces and their social context is truly innovative, far-reaching in implication and impressive. The fact that it was the ability of the Republic to raise higher levels of taxation than neighbouring countries that chiefly explains its high status as a military power down to 1713 is heavily emphasized and closely analyzed. Chapter Five, again by Van der Spek, on organization and finances, reveals, among other things, an officer corps in the post-1713 Dutch army, bloated in size, especially in the upper ranks, in relation to the overall size of the army due to it becoming a key source of patronage and support for the House of Orange. It was the resulting favouritism, corruption, and declining quality of the officers, and their often being either too young or too old for their positions, rather than foreign origin or restricted (mostly noble) class background, which chiefly contributed to the decline in the Republic's military effectiveness. Another key factor was intensifying divisions, especially after 1780, between Orangists and anti-Orangists on whether to give priority in spending to the army or navy.

In the sixth chapter, "Military Action," Jan Hoffenaar innovatively compares Dutch technology and tactics at sea with their tactics and technology on

land. In both cases loss of combat experience, declining quality of officers, lapsing of training schedules, and failure to keep up with all the latest developments in technique, especially in the field of gunnery, massively contributed to the steady decline in capability and effectiveness. Chapter Seven, again by Van Alphen, looks, as far as the available sources allow, at the sociology of the Republic's soldiers and sailors, providing fascinating details about enlistment, pay, lodgings, training or lack of it, and so forth. Soldiers were paid less than sailors and were among the lowest-paid employees in the country. At times, the number of foreigners in the army reached 60%. Though most army recruits were older, boys as young as sixteen could sign on with the consent of their parents. The final chapter, "Civilians and the military," again by Van der Spek, makes a fitting conclusion to an excellent volume. The section with final observations rightly stresses one unique and highly distinctive feature of the Dutch Republic, distinguishing it from the rest of Europe but creating insuperable difficulties that no other nation faced: the United Provinces *had* to assign a major proportion of its resources to both its sea and land forces and, due to its republican consultative character, found itself unable ever to give clear priority to one or the other over the long term but continually wavered divisively between the two.

### **About the reviewer**

Jonathan Israel graduated from Queens' College, University of Cambridge, in 1967 and wrote his Ph.D. dissertation based at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and the Colegio de México, Mexico City, under the direction of Hugh Trevor-Roper. He taught early modern, and in particular Dutch, history at British universities from 1970 to 2000, at Newcastle, Hull and from 1974 at University College London. Among his works are *Dutch primacy in world trade, 1585-1740* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and *The Dutch Republic: Its rise, greatness, and fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1995). Since 2000 he has been a research professor at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton (New Jersey, US), and has published a series of works on the Enlightenment.