

The impact of Charles V's wars on society in the Low Countries. A brief exploration of the theme¹

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In the first half of the sixteenth century most inhabitants of the Low Countries must have experienced, in one way or another, the effects of warfare. Charles V, who ruled the Netherlands from 1515 until 1555, was at war during twenty-three years of his reign. In seventeen of these war years, at least part of the military operations took place within the Low Countries or close to its borders². In fact, no natural frontier protected the Netherlands from invasions by Charles's principal adversaries, the french kings Francis I and Henry II. Charles of Egmond, duke of Gelderland, and later William von der Marck, duke of Cleves, Jülich and Berg, whose territories stretched along the valleys of the Lower Rhine and the Maas, constituted until 1543 useful allies of the French. If the two allies co-ordinated their actions, as they did on various occasions, they could strike the Habsburg government of the Netherlands wherever they wanted.

During the reign of Charles V the nature of military operations and the scale on which they took place changed dramatically. Roughly speaking, the size of armies multiplied by five. In 1523 a joint English-Habsburg expeditionary force, under the command of Charles Brandon, duke of Suffolk, marched along the Somme valley towards Paris. This army numbered at the most eleven thousand men³. By the standards of the time, this was thought to be a formidable force. Nearly forty years later, Charles V besieged Metz with fifty five thousand men and one hundred and fifty cannons⁴. Meanwhile,

¹ Professor W. Blockmans (Leiden) and dr. Steven Gunn (Merton College-Oxford) commented on an earlier version of this paper, Greet Hemus corrected my English. To all of them I express my gratitude. Of course, I retain all responsibilities for an eventual lack of clarity or remaining mistakes.

² On Charles V as a warrior see BLOCKMANS, W., *Keizer Karel V. De utopie van het keizerschap. 1500-1558*, Leuven, 2000, pp. 77-112.

³ GUNN, S. J., «The Duke of Suffolk's March on Paris in 1523», in *English Historical Review*, 101 (1986), pp. 596-634.

⁴ ZELLER, G., *Le siège de Metz par Charles Quint*, Nancy, 1943, *passim* and PARKER, G., «De politieke wereld van Karel V», in SOLY, H. (ed.), *Karel V, 1500-1558. De keizer en zijn tijd*, Antwerpen, 1999, pp. 215-217.

both the Habsburg and the Valois princes had each ordered, on their side of the border the construction of a series of fortresses and new Italian-style town-circuits. So, by the time the peace of Cateau-Cambrésis, which was concluded in 1559, put an end to the Habsburg-Valois wars, a total of twelve towns in the Low Countries possessed a completely new circuit, while eighteen more disposed of a partially new circuit⁵. At that point, society in the Netherlands was far more militarised than it had been at the beginning of the century. To mention only one aspect of this increased importance of the military: ever since Charles V had sent four thousand Spanish soldiers to the Netherlands in July 1522, the presence of Iberian troops was considered to be vital for the defence of these lands. They would remain a common feature there for the next two centuries⁶.

To my knowledge, historians have, surprisingly enough, never tried to study in a systematic way the consequences of this growing military activity for society in the Low Countries. A book such as David Potter's masterpiece *War and Government* in which he demonstrates to what extent Picardy's identity was shaped by the Franco-imperial wars has not been written yet for the Habsburg Netherlands⁷. Therefore the main objective of this paper is to offer the readers a first overview of the changes which Charles V's wars might have brought about in the society of the sixteenth century Netherlands. In what follows, I shall argue that the political and commercial elites in the county of Holland were the main beneficiaries of these changes. Their growing political and financial maturity and their newly acquired economic prosperity during the reign of Charles V would enable them later on to successfully sustain the long lasting revolt against Charles's son Philip II.

The growing number of soldiers mustered at the outbreak of every war and the frenetic construction of new defensive bulwarks caused a huge increase in public spending. To face up to its financial difficulties, the government of the Low Countries extracted three sources of income: taxes, loans and transfers of money out from other Habsburg dominions. The emergence of this financial system and its eventual breakdown in the late 1550's is up to now by far the best-studied aspect of the impact of warfare on the population in the Low Countries⁸.

⁵ BRULEZ, W., «Het gewicht van de oorlog in de nieuwe tijden. Enkele aspecten», in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 91 (1978), pp. 394-395; PARKER, G., *The Military Revolution. Military Innovation and the Rise of the West. 1500-1800*, Cambridge, etc., 1996², cap. 1 núm. 17. Towns with a complete new circuit were: Antwerp, Avesnes, Bapaume, Bouchain, Charlemont, Damvillers, Gravelines, Groenlo, Hesdinfort, Mariembourg, Philippeville and Yvois/Carignan. Towns with a partially new circuit were: Aire, Arras, Béthune, Bourbourg, Cambrai, Douai, Groningen, Harlingen, Landrecies, Le Quesnoy, Luxemburg, Mons, Montmédy, Saint-Omer, Thionville, Utrecht, Valenciennes and Zutphen. Furthermore Charles ordered the construction of citadels to control the towns of Cambrai, Ghent and Utrecht. Later Philip II did the same at Antwerp.

⁶ FAGEL, R., *De Hispano-Vlaamse wereld. De contacten tussen Spanjaarden en Nederlanders. 1496-1555*, Brussel and Nijmegen, 1996, pp. 382-407.

⁷ POTTER, D., *War and Government in the French Provinces. Picardy 1470-1560*, Cambridge, etc., 1993.

⁸ BLOCKMANS, W., «The Low Countries in the Middle Ages», in BONNEY, R. (ed.), *The Rise of the Fiscal*

In the sixteenth century Netherlands, the central government could not tax the population at will. In order to obtain fiscal income, government officials had to drive hard bargains with the various regional assemblies, known as *Staten* or States. In all regions the leading members of the States were deputies from the bigger towns. In Holland six towns traditionally sent representatives: Dordrecht, Haarlem, Delft, Leiden, Amsterdam and Gouda. Four towns were represented in the Brabantine States: Brussels, Louvain, Antwerp and's Hertogenbosch. Also in the States of Flanders four members monopolized the decision-making process: Ghent, Bruges, Ypres and the so-called Franc de Bruges. These three regions, Flanders, Brabant and Holland, produced more than three quarters of all the fiscal income of the Prince in the Low Countries.

Although in the end the various States nearly always granted a certain amount of money for a limited period of time, they kept a hold on important levers of financial policy. Thus for example, the assessment and the collection of the agreed sums remained a competence of the States. In fact, the growing demands of the central government throughout Charles's reign even strengthened the States' position in the political field of the Netherlands. In 1557-'58, for instance, the Habsburg government was forced to accept the restrictive conditions upon which the assembly of the joint States, called States-General, made dependent its resolution to provide the necessary funds to continue the war against the French. As a result of this agreement the deputies of the States, and not government officials, would supervise the recruitment of a new army that should consist of thirty thousand infantrymen and eight thousand cavalrymen⁹.

Meanwhile some of the regional States had become serious competitors of the central government on the money market. From the 1550's onwards the States of Holland for example, financed their so-called *beden*, that is to say grants or subsidies, to the central government largely by taking out loans. As a significant proportion of the moneylenders themselves belonged to the economic elite of Holland, the States tended, in clear contrast to the attitude of the government, to redeem contracted liabilities. So the States gradually gained the confidence of an ever-larger portion of the potential investors enabling them to attract more money on better conditions than the central government could¹⁰. Obviously, this practice greatly enhanced the financial and political position of the States of Holland.

In fact the States were mostly rather reluctant to concede the Emperor money to

State in Europe, ca. 1200-1815, Oxford, etc., 1999, pp. 281-308; MADDENS, N., *De beden in het graafschap Vlaanderen tijdens de regering van keizer Karel V, 1515-1550* (Anciens Pays et Assemblées d'Etats 72), Kortrijk-Heule, 1978; TRACY, J. D., «The taxation system of the county of Holland during the reigns of Charles V and Philip II, 1519-1566», in *Economischen Sociaal Historisch Jaarboek*, 48 (1985), pp. 71-117 and TRACY, J. D., *Holland under Habsburg Rule, 1506-1566. The Formation of a Boy Politic*, Berkeley, etc., 1990, *passim*.

⁹ MELINK, P. A. (ed.), «Notulen en Generaal Advies van de Staten-Generaal van 1557-1558», in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap*, 55 (1934), pp. 263-369, and VERHOFSTAD, K. J. W., *De regering der Nederlanden in de jaren 1555-1559*, Nijmegen, 1937, pp. 113-158.

¹⁰ TRACY, J. D., «The taxation system...», *op. cit.*, *Economisch en Sociaal-Historisch Jaarboek*, 48 (1985), pp. 91-97.

conduct his wars. They definitely did not share Charles's idea of glory¹¹. In their opinion wars only hampered the trade upon which the prosperity of the Low Countries depended. In particular the so-called fifth and sixth Valois-Habsburg wars that raged respectively between 1552 and 1556 and between 1557 and 1559 seriously damaged trade. In 1552 and 1553 for instance, the quantity of French wine available on the Antwerp market only amounted to one third of the volume that was traded in 1550¹².

Grain prices also rose sharply in 1552 and 1553¹³. This phenomenon, just as the decline in the import of French wines, was at least partially due to the Habsburg-Valois wars. Some important military campaigns of these years took place in the fertile regions of Picardy and Artois. Armies of both parties plundered villages and devastated crops in the area, as they had done on previous occasions¹⁴. Apparently, this time the damage inflicted was so serious that local farmers and traders did not recover their export markets in the Low Countries. Meanwhile, Dutch merchants had turned to the Baltic region to provide the Netherlands with grain. The town of Amsterdam in Holland, through which this Baltic grain was imported, owed its quick economic development in the sixteenth century largely to the stormy growth of this so-called *moedernegotie* or mother-trade¹⁵.

Not all the grain that was imported through Amsterdam reached ordinary consumers. In wartime the government's first priority was clearly to provision the troops. To supply them, government officials regularly tapped large quantities of food from the market. In this way they created artificial shortages and these boosted the prices. To give but one example: in spring 1557 large quantities of Baltic rye that were shipped via Amsterdam and Antwerp had as final destination the garrisons at the southern border of the Netherlands. While these commodities were not offered on the market, the price of rye in Antwerp doubled between april and june 1557¹⁶. Obviously such situations created serious social tensions.

¹¹ BLOCKMANS, W., «De onderdanen van de keizer», in SOLY, H. (ed.), *Karel V...*, *op. cit.*, Antwerpen, 1999, p. 258.

¹² CRAEYBECKX, J., *Un grand commerce d'importation: les vins de France aux anciens Pays-Bas (XIII^e-XVII^e siècles)*, Paris, 1958, pp. 226-227.

¹³ SOLY, H., «Economische vernieuwing en sociale weerstand. De betekenis en aspiraties der Antwerpse middenklasse in de 16^{de} eeuw», in *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis*, 83 (1970), p. 522, and TIELHOF, M. van, *De Hollandse graanhandel, 1470-1570. Koren op de Amsterdamse molen* (Hollandse Historische Reeks 23), Den Haag, 1995, p. 247.

¹⁴ POTTER, D., *War and Government...*, *op. cit.*, Cambridge, etc., 1993, pp. 215-221, and TIELHOF, M. van, *De Hollandse graanhandel...*, *op. cit.*, Den Haag, 1995,

¹⁵ In fact, during the Franco-Burgundian wars and the civil wars of the last quarter of the fifteenth century, Baltic grain conquered for the first time a substantial share of the food market in the Low Countries; see UYTVEN, R. Van, «Sociaal-economische evoluties in de Nederlanden vóór de Revoluties (veertiende Bzestiende eeuw)», in *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 87 (1972), pp. 65-67.

¹⁶ SOLY, H., «Een Antwerpse Compagnie voor de levensmiddelenbevoorrading van het leger in het Nederlanden in de zestiende eeuw», in *Bijdragen en Medelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 86 (1971), pp. 350-362. The example is taken from pp. 360-361.

The Valois-Habsburg wars were also at least partially responsible for the changes the fishing fleet of the Low Countries underwent in the sixteenth century. It is quite possible that due to ecological transformations, herrings moved en masse from fishing grounds on the English south shore to the central North Sea, and that therefore fishermen from Holland gained a competitive advantage. But this supposition cannot entirely explain the quick expansion of the herring industry of Holland at the expense of the Flemish and the Zeeland industries. By 1550 the Holland herring fleet had definitely outgrown the fleets of the two other regions. The ever-bolder activities of French privateers must have played a role in this process. The shores of Holland were simply further away from the bases of these privateers. Moreover, they did not dare to risk themselves into the Zuider Zee. So a place such as Enkhuizen that specialized in the fishing and trade of herrings was safe from their attacks¹⁷.

In fact, it was only in 1543, after the definitive conquest of Gelderland, that the Zuider Zee became a safe, interior sea for the inhabitants of Holland and their Habsburg masters. Until that year Gelderland privateers had regularly taken vessels whose destination was one of the ports of Holland on the southern or western shore of the Zuider Zee, such as Amsterdam, Hoorn or Enkhuizen, to name only the most important ones. These towns had a clear interest in the Habsburg conquest of Gelderland. No wonder that at least since the beginning of the sixteenth century they had lobbied upon Philip the Fair and his son and successor Charles V to secure the final conquest of Gelderland. In their struggle against the duke of Gelderland the Holland towns of the Zuider Zee did not have to rely completely on the Habsburg princes. In 1517 for instance, they themselves had equipped a fleet that destroyed the vessels of several Frisian and Gelderland privateers¹⁸.

The conquest of Gelderland was not only in the interest of towns along the coast of the Zuider Zee. Southern and eastern towns along the land and river border with Gelderland such as Dordrecht, Gouda, Schoonhoven and IJsselstein had all faced at some point attacks, or even worse, plundering by troops of the duke of Gelderland or his allies. In March 1528 even The Hague, the administrative capital of the county, had been occupied for a while by Gelderland troops under command of the all too famous Maarten van Rossum. To end this nuisance the States of Holland in the 1520's took an active part in the debates on the conduct of the Guelders wars and they granted unprecedentedly large subsidies. Although it would still take fifteen years after the devastating raid of Maarten van Rossum through the south of Holland, before Gelderland

¹⁷ SICKING, L., *Zemacht en onmacht. Maritieme politiek in de Nederlanden, 1488-1558* (Bijdragen tot de Nederlandse marinegeschiedenis 7), Amsterdam, 1998, pp. 104-105; *Idem*, «De Zuiderzee en de territoriale afronding van de Nederlanden onder Karel V», in *Holland*, XXX, Haarlem, 1998, p. 138, and TRACY, J. D., «Herring wars: The Habsburg Netherlands and the struggle for control of the North Sea, ca. 1520-1560», in *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 24 (1993), pp. 249-272.

¹⁸ SICKING, L., «De Zuiderzee...», *op. cit.*, in *Holland*, XXX, Haarlem, 1998, pp. 127-141.

was annexed to the Habsburg Netherlands, the States of Holland would not lose again the political influence they had gained during the years of intensive warfare¹⁹.

All this does not mean that the inhabitants of Holland were not involved in the other wars of the Emperor, and in particular in the Valois-Habsburg conflict. On the contrary, the States of Holland continued to grant their subsidies in order to pay for the imperial armies. But the political elites of the country took only actively part in the conflicts they themselves had a keen interest. So during the 1520's the States consistently refused the government's plan to create a permanent Dutch militia. The States disliked the idea not only because such a force could curb in the end their influence, but also because its realisation would be a very costly matter. In these years a mason in Haarlem or Leiden earned twice as much as a hired Swiss or German infantryman²⁰. On the other hand, when Holland's interest were really at stake, the States were prepared to intervene. So in the autumn of 1533 they payed for a fleet that was sent out against Lübeck. In this case the Dutch and the Habsburg interests were identical²¹.

As we have seen, the growing political influence of Holland coincided largely with the outset of an economic boom in that country. To some extent this economic boom came about as a side effect of the wars that raged on the southern borders of the Low Countries²². From this first overview, which should be completed by more research, it seems as if the country of Holland was in many respects the main beneficiary of Charles V's wars. On the one hand, the political and economic elites of the country had a keen interest in the conquest of Gelderland; on the other hand they did not suffer the negative effects of the Valois-Habsburg wars that the inhabitants of the big Flemish and Brabantine cities felt. On the contrary, Dutch merchants seized the opportunities the wars offered them.

¹⁹ On the growing political influence of the States of Holland, see TRACY, J. D., *Holland under Habsburg Rule...*, *op. cit.*, Berkeley, etc., 1990, pp. 65-89.

²⁰ TRACY, J. D., *Holland under Habsburg Rule...*, *op. cit.*, Berkeley, etc., p. 76, and NOORDEGRAAF, L., *Hollands welvaren? Levensstandaard in Holland, 1450-1650*, Bergen, 1985, pp. 69-70.

²¹ SICKING, L., *Zeemacht en omacht...*, *op. cit.*, Amsterdam, 1998, pp. 115-117.

²² On the underlying origins of Holland's economic sustained growth see BLOCKMANS, W., «The economic expansion of Holland and Zeeland in the fourteenth-sixteenth centuries», in AERTS E. A. (eds.), *Studia Historica Oeconomica. Liber Amicorum Herman Van Der Wee*, Leuven, 1993, pp. 41-58.