Flanders and Holland in the Eighteenth Century

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Any introduction to the State Papers Foreign for ‘Flanders’ [SP77] and ‘Holland’ [SP84] during the eighteenth century should begin with a word of explanation about the geographical terms by which these papers are known. Strictly speaking, Flanders and Holland were not states at this time, but provinces. Holland was one of the seven northern provinces of the Low Countries - the others were Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Friesland and Groningen - which in the course of the 1580s had emerged from the flames of the Revolt of the Netherlands against Spanish Habsburg rule, to establish themselves as an independent confederation. In formal documents like treaties and in the published writings of diplomats they were known for the next two hundred years as the United Provinces of the Netherlands or the free United Netherlands. But in everyday talk these rather cumbersome titles were replaced by shorter ones. Thus the name Holland, the wealthiest, most populous and most powerful of the provinces, came to stand for the country as a whole. Often the confederation was called simply ‘the States’, after the sovereign assemblies (States of Holland, States of Zeeland and so on) which ruled it, and after the States General, meeting in permanent session at The Hague, to which foreign diplomats were accredited. By the eighteenth century it was beginning also to be called ‘the Republic’ (or, more rarely, ‘the Dutch Republic’, the term most often used by historians today), to distinguish it from the monarchies surrounding it.

Like Holland, Flanders was one of a group of provinces, those of the southern Netherlands where the revolt against Habsburg misrule had started but where it ultimately failed. The reconquest of the south by the Spanish Army of Flanders between 1577 and 1585 led to the re-establishment of royal authority there, and for the next century this part of the Low Countries was known as the Spanish Netherlands. Only with the death of the last Habsburg king of Spain in 1700 and the subsequent War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14) was the Spanish empire partitioned and the bulk of the southern Netherlands passed to the Austrian branch of the Habsburg family. Thus from 1714 until the Belgian Revolution of 1789 it was called the Austrian Netherlands, while the old name of Flanders, once the wealthiest of the southern provinces, continued to be used as a convenient way of referring to the country as a whole. Although the States General had effectively ceased to exist in the southern Netherlands (under the Austrian regime it was convened just once, in 1725), each province retained its own assembly, or States, whose consent was required if new taxes were to be levied or local institutions changed. Sovereignty, however, rested with the Emperor in Vienna and with the regent or governor-general appointed to act locally in the Emperor’s name. It was to the governor’s court at Brussels that foreign diplomats were accredited.

Of the two main diplomatic postings in the Low Countries, Brussels was generally of less importance to the British government than The Hague. It is true that the southern Netherlands was strategically important: indeed the whole of the Low Countries had long been regarded as England’s ‘outworks’, its outer defences. That is why in 1714 Lieutenant-General William Cadogan was sent as envoy extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Flanders (as well as to The Hague and Vienna) to negotiate the third and final Barrier treaty. Signed at Antwerp in November 1715, this confirmed the military role of the southern Netherlands as a buffer state against French aggression, with its
defensive fortresses to be garrisoned by Dutch and Imperial forces. The treaty also confirmed the Emperor’s acceptance of the commercial subordination of the southern provinces to their free northern neighbours, first put in place by the treaty of Münster in 1648. However soon after Cadogan’s return to London a ruling council for the Austrian Netherlands was established in Vienna, depriving Brussels of much of its political and diplomatic importance. For the next four decades Britain was represented in Brussels only by agents or residents, the lowest ranks in the diplomatic service. These minor officials still had duties to perform, of course. In 1723, for example, resident William Leathes was instructed to join the Dutch envoy at Brussels in demanding the abolition of the Imperial East India Company recently established at Ostend, a trading venture which the Dutch and British would continue to oppose for the next eight years until the Emperor eventually agreed to its suppression in 1731. Later in the 1730s British commissioners were sent to Antwerp to negotiate with Dutch and Imperial diplomats over the delineation of the Dutch-Flemish border and to revise the tariff of duties imposed on goods traded between the Austrian Netherlands and its northern neighbours. By 1740 the border questions had been settled, but on the much more contentious trade tariff the talks had reached deadlock, and with the outbreak of the War of the Austrian Succession they were abandoned.

Despite their strategic importance, the Barrier fortresses were ill-equipped for war and soon proved useless as a means of halting the advance north-eastwards of French forces, which by the summer of 1745 had occupied most of the Austrian Netherlands. For the next seven years Britain had no diplomatic representative in Brussels, and the post was suppressed for a second time when relations with the Emperor were broken off with the onset of the Seven Years War (1756-63). At the same time, the European realignments associated with the ‘diplomatic revolution’ which immediately preceded that war - in particular the Franco-Austrian treaty of Versailles of 1 May 1756 and the Dutch declaration of neutrality of 14 June - had the effect of removing the shadow of invasion which had hung over the southern Netherlands for so long. For a generation, under the energetic governorship of Charles-Alexandre of Lorraine (brother-in-law of the Empress Maria Theresa), Flanders, Brabant and the Walloon provinces to the south experienced stability and remarkable commercial and industrial growth. From 1763, moreover, when diplomatic relations between Britain and Austria were resumed, a series of able and relatively high-ranking ministers plenipotentiary were sent to the court of Brussels. Sir James Porter, the first of these, brought with him not only twenty-three years of diplomatic experience at Vienna and Constantinople but also ‘old acquaintance’ with the Austrian governor, Prince Charles-Alexander. It was partly this acquaintance, according to his own account, which led him to accept ‘the easy office of minister at Brussels’.

Yet neither his papers from 1763-65 nor those of his successors at Brussels - William Gordon’s for 1765-77 and Alleyne Fitzherbert’s for 1777-83 - have been explored by historians for the light they shed on this fundamental but still neglected period of modern Belgian history. They surely deserve to be.

If the office of a diplomat at Brussels was said to be ‘easy’, that of his colleague at The Hague was the opposite: burdensome, complicated and demanding. In
part this was because of the complicated federal structure of Dutch government. As the much-travelled Onslow Burrish remarked in 1728, the sheer ‘diversity of domestic interests in the United Provinces’ made ‘negotiations with the States General ... perhaps more difficult ... than in any other court of Europe’. The demands of the post also reflected the high value which successive British administrations placed upon cultivating the Dutch alliance. In an often repeated parliamentary phrase of the time, the provinces of the free Netherlands were ‘our ancient and natural allies’. Britain had fought alongside them against Spain in the late sixteenth century, against France after 1689, and in the eighteenth century their alliance continued to be thought essential for Britain’s security and that of the Protestant succession. It was essential for the security of commerce too, for if Britain went to war while ‘Holland remained neutral’, this would ‘indisputably throw the trade of all Europe into the hands of Holland’. As if all this were not burden enough, moreover, the demands of the Dutch embassy extended beyond the United Provinces to the wider international scene. For The Hague was at the crossroads of European diplomacy, a centre through which envoys and couriers were constantly passing, and hence a source of information to be sifted and where necessary passed on to the Secretaries of State in London. No wonder, then, that appointments to the embassy in Holland were generally made at the high rank of ambassador or minister plenipotentiary, nor that those appointed were among the ablest diplomats of the time. They included the younger brother of Sir Robert Walpole, Horatio (at The Hague in 1715-16, 1722 and 1733-39), the fourth earl of Chesterfield (1728-32, 1745), Robert Trevor (1736-47) and, more noted for length than distinction of service, Sir Joseph Yorke (1751-80).

The story told by the papers of British diplomats at The Hague is in general one of an alliance on the wane. Yet this was not a continuous or even perhaps an inevitable process. It is true that the wars of the early eighteenth century - the Great Northern War (1700-21) as well as the War of the Spanish Succession - put Anglo-Dutch friendship under strain, as did the peace-making which followed those wars. The separate peace with France made by Britain’s Tory government in 1711-12 was seen as a betrayal of the United Provinces and resented there for years afterwards. The States resented too the bullying style of diplomacy adopted by Cadogan and others to coerce the Republic into the Quadruple Alliance (1718), the ‘treaty of collective security’ designed by Britain, France and Austria to complete the work of the peace of Utrecht. ‘Quadruple’ proved a misnomer because, for their own commercial reasons, the State General refused to join it. In the 1720s, however, relations between London and The Hague improved, helped by the appointment as secretary of state of Charles Townshend, himself a former ambassador to Holland and one whose ‘predominant passion was love of the Dutch’. In 1725 the threat posed to Europe by the Austro-Spanish treaty of Vienna - a revival, it was feared, of the sixteenth-century empire of Charles V - prompted Britain and France to broker a counter-alliance at Hanover, to which the United Provinces acceded in 1726. While the prospect of war between the two power blocs loomed, the Republic joined Britain in increasing its military establishment and planning a war strategy. And under the energetic leadership of Simon van Slingelandt, pensionary of Holland, it took a prominent
part in the intricate diplomacy which led the powers back to a more familiar alignment, secured by the second treaty of Vienna (1731-32) between Austria, Britain and the Republic. All this was reassuring. The Anglo-Dutch alliance had been reaffirmed and the Republic seemed once again to be acting as an important power in European affairs. But the impression was deceptive. It disguised the crippling size of the States’ public debt, incurred during the long wars against Louis XIV and a growing burden ever since. When, instead of the ‘cold war’ of the later 1720s, a real conflict broke out - the War of the Polish Succession (1733-35) between France and Austria - the Republic retreated into formal neutrality ‘without communicating anything to us’, as ministers in London complained. This did not destroy the Anglo-Dutch alliance, as some contemporaries believed; but it certainly undermined it, as also did Holland’s refusal in 1739 to support Britain’s trade war with Spain. However the Republic was still capable of military action and of meeting its treaty obligations. During the early years of the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48) it subsidized allied forces in the southern Netherlands, where for a while Dutch troops outnumbered both British and Austrian. But this latest war put immense strain on the United Provinces, sapping the authority of their rulers and, after France invaded Dutch territory in 1747, triggering the political revolution which raised William IV of Orange-Nassau to the office of stadholder [the princely element in the Republic’s constitution] in all seven of the provinces.

The British government did not ‘bring about’ the Orangist revolution of 1747, as some contemporaries believed and as later historians have sometimes argued. But it certainly welcomed it. And for the next three decades - the years when Sir Joseph Yorke was minister plenipotentiary and then, from 1761, ambassador at The Hague - British policy there shifted priority from upholding the alliance with the United Provinces to the narrower aim of upholding the Orangist regime. The rule of William IV and his successors was weak, unable or unwilling to introduce the political and economic reforms which the country so badly needed. Yet it was this regime which Yorke regarded as the potential saviour of the declining Dutch state and of British influence over it. What is more, the ambassador came to believe - and persuaded his superiors in London to believe - that only war could bolster the stadholder’s regime, as it had done a century earlier when in 1672 a war launched against the United Provinces by France and England had brought William III to power. On the basis of this dubious historical precedent, and against the background of the War of American Independence [1775-83] and of growing friction over Dutch ‘neutral’ trade with Britain’s French and rebel American enemies, the government in London declared war on the Republic late in 1780. Yet the consequences of this Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-84) were the reverse of what Yorke and his superiors intended, drastically reducing Dutch naval and commercial strength, in the colonial world as well as in Europe, and further eroding the authority of the stadholder, William V. By 1784 what little was left of the Republic’s capacity to play an active role in international affairs had been destroyed - and at the hand of its oldest ally.
NOTES

Dates are generally given in the ‘new style’ or Gregorian calendar, in use in the Low Countries throughout this period and in Britain after 1752. Any dates designated OS are in the ‘old style’ or Julian calendar, used in Britain before this date.

[1] For Cadogan’s final negotiations before concluding the treaty, see his letters to Secretary of State Townshend, 18, 26 Oct. 1715, SP 77/64.


[5] Commissioner Martin Bladen, ‘A short recapitulation of the matters which gave rise to the conferences at Antwerp ... in the years 1737, 1738 and 1739’, SP77/86.


[8] Quoted in Horn, British diplomatic service, p. 98.

[9] Porter’s dispatches begin in Oct. 1763, Gordon’s in Dec. 1765, both SP 77/102; Fitzherbert’s begin in May 1777, SP 77/109. On the Austrian Netherlands at this time, besides Israel’s account cited in n. 7 above, see E. H. Kossmann, The Low Countries 1780-1940 (Oxford, 1978), pp. 21-6, 47-64.


[12] For Dutch support of the Protestant succession at the time of the Atterbury plot in 1722, see Horatio Walpole to Townshend, 18-19 May, 2, 5 June 1722, SP 84/278.


[15] H. Walpole to Harrington, 15, 26 April 1735 (most secret), SP 84/342.


[21] For van Slingelandt’s role in negotiating the second treaty of Vienna, see ambassador Chesterfield to Harrington, 5 Sept. 1730 (very secret), SP 84/308.

[22] Harrington to Finch, 29 June 1733 OS, SP 84/324. A neutrality convention between France and the United Provinces was concluded at The Hague in November 1733.


[24] After the death of William III in 1702 the office of stadholder, or lieutenant governor, had been left vacant in five of the seven provinces. In Friesland and Groningen it continued to be held by a member of the related Nassau-Dietz family, from which William IV was descended. His father was John William Friso, the adopted heir of William III, and his father-in-law (from 1734) was King George II. For the revolution of 1747 and its background, see H. Dunthorne, ‘Prince and republic: the house of Orange in Dutch and Anglo-Dutch politics during the first half of the eighteenth century’. Studies in History and Politics 4 (1985), pp. 19-34; and N. A. M. Rodger, ‘Instigators or spectators? The British government and the

**FURTHER READING**


P. Geyl, ‘Holland and England during the War of the Austrian Succession’, *History* 10 (1925–26), pp. 46–51


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CITATION


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