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Brief History of Military Inundations During The Dutch Wars of Independence

Robert Tiegs
Sheridan College

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Brief History of Military Inundations during the Dutch Wars of Independence

1. Introduction

Causes of the War

There were many causes for the outbreak of the Dutch Wars of Independence. Fundamentally, however, the conflict centered on local and provincial resistance to Spanish Habsburg policies aimed at centralizing their rule in the Low Countries. Habsburg rulers like Charles V and Philip II saw their territorial possessions as an assortment of disparate provinces and cities, each with a set of unique customs and privileges that the rulers had to be careful not to offend. In response, the Habsburgs attempted to create centralized institutions and policies to mold these possessions into a unified bloc with more uniform laws and customs. The principal arena of dispute settled on the enforcement of religious placards aimed at preserving and supporting Catholicism in response to the spread of Calvinism and other reformed religions into the region.

Repression under Alva

The conflict came to head following the outbreak of iconoclastic riots in 1566 in which reformers destroyed religious symbols and works of art across the Low Countries. Philip II employed several strategies to restore order and maintain his authority, but his appointment of the Duke of Alva, the so-called Iron Duke, only exacerbated the situation. He established the Council of Trouble, also known as the Council of Blood, with the explicit aim of tracking down and punishing those involved in the iconoclast riots. Between 1567 and 1573 the council presided over 12,000 cases, confiscating the property of 9,000 individuals and while issuing death penalties for roughly a 1,000 more. Furthermore, the Duke levied a series of new taxes in order to support a standing army of around 15,000 troops, which during times of crisis, swelled to around 60,000-70,000. On the surface, this hard-line approach maintained the peace, but in actuality, these measures simply drove opposition into hiding and further abroad.

Military Inundations

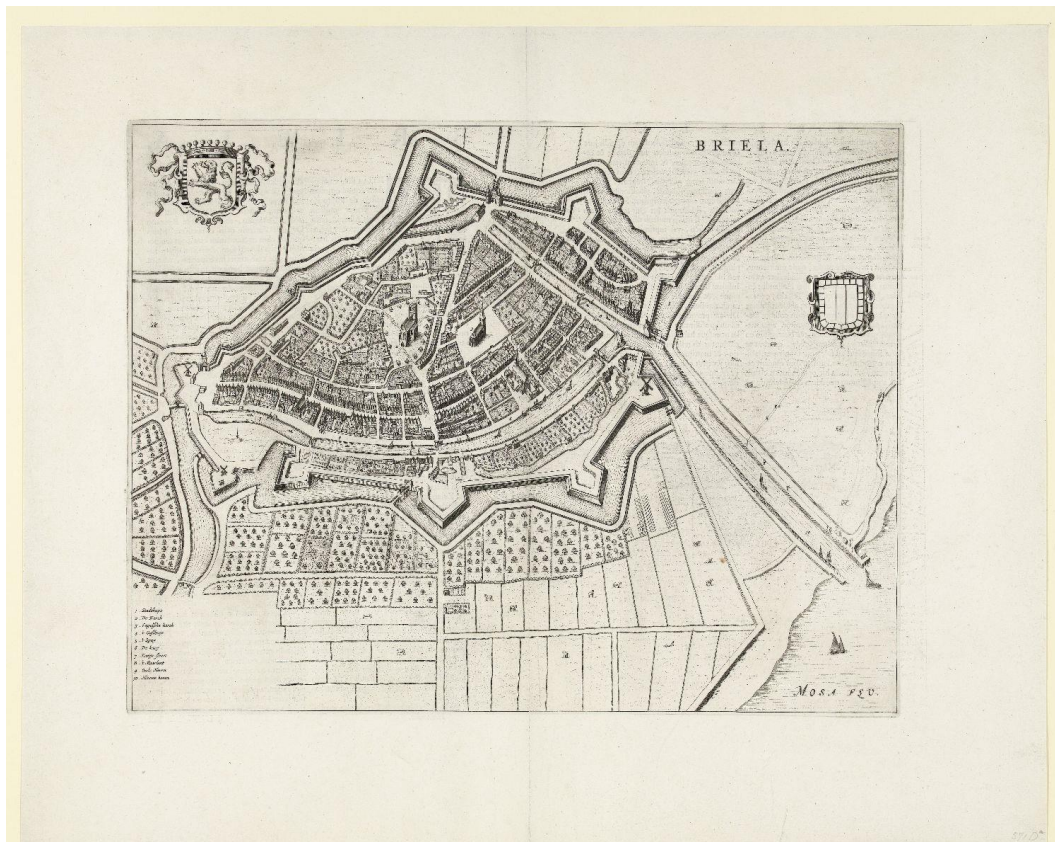
When war finally erupted at Brill on 1 April 1572 the rebels found it difficult to organize and maintain a military capable of matching the numerically superior Spanish forces. They found it difficult to weave the disparate threads of opposition into a coherent tapestry of rebellion. In other words, different groups revolted for different reasons, and the rebel leaders struggled to string together those fraying motivations. Outmatched, the rebels employed guerilla-style tactics, militarizing the landscape (to use the scholarly term). This meant utilizing the landscape to their advantage, and flooding the land in order to achieve their military objectives. Inundating parts of the landscape could be accomplished relatively easily as significant portions of western provinces were situated below sea level. In order to flood the land, the rebels simply had to open up a sluice, cut

open a dike, or utilize a combination of both. The natural water flows would take care of the rest.

2. Brill

The Sea Beggars

The simmering resentment to Alva's policies erupted into armed conflict at the city of Brill, located on the island of Voorn in southwestern Holland. Here, a band of privateers known as the Sea Beggars captured the city while Alva and the majority of his forces were monitoring events further south along the French border. This group of privateers allied with the leader of the opposition movement, William of Orange. Like their leader, they had been forced out of the Low Countries by Alva, and sought refuge in several ports of northern Europe. Like most privateers, they quickly wore out their welcome. It is for this reason that the Sea Beggars turned their attention to Brill after they were refused entry into English ports by Queen Elizabeth I.



The Military Inundations at Brill

The Sea Beggars found the city poorly defended and were able to batter down the city gates with makeshift battering rams made from ship masts on 1 April 1572. In response, Alva ordered Count Bossu to retake the city with all the available troops which had not

been taken south. As Bossu slowly worked his way towards Brill, the Sea Beggars and rebels in the city had time to organize their defenses. Specifically, the delays allowed the city carpenter, Rochus Meeuwisse to destroy the Nieuwland sluice and set the area around the city temporarily underwater. This maneuver cut off access to the city except along the higher elevated Nieuwland dike, which was more easily defended. In the end Bossu and his troops retreated, leaving the city firmly in rebel hands.

The continued appeal of Military Inundations

The capture of Brill gave the rebels a foothold in Holland and Zeeland. Over the next several months, cities across the two provinces declared allegiance for William of Orange. The exact nature of this allegiance came down to a complex, and often convoluted, set of local politics. By late summer the rebels controlled nearly every major city in Holland and Zeeland, with the exception of Amsterdam and Middelburg, while the Spanish dominated the rural sectors.

Military inundations continued to feature prominently in many of the subsequent encounters for a variety of reasons. First, in the short term they were a lower cost alternative to raising a large army. In the long run, repairing the dikes proved to be an expensive and divisive affair, but the rebels were willing to deal with that externality. Second, the rebels had more individuals with water-management experience in their ranks. Organizations like the Water board of Rijnland, tasked with maintaining the dikes and sluices in the region, had been split in their loyalties. However, those that sided with the Spanish departed to the province of Utrecht to the east, leaving those individuals that supported the rebels free to help carry out the floods. Third, this tactic allowed the rebels to utilize their naval superiority, bringing in ships to help break up sieges, resupply towns, and harass Spanish forces.

3. Alkmaar

The Spanish Response

Following the fall of Brill Alva had to work hard to reinstate Habsburg authority in Holland and Zeeland. The capture of Brill set in motion a chain reaction that brought nearly all the cities in these provinces into rebel hands, with the exception of Amsterdam and Middelburg. In response, Alva set about gaining reentry to Holland from the east, over land. Amsterdam offered a good bridgehead for gains further into the province, but he needed to secure rebel controlled cities outside of Holland to secure his attack and resupply route. Alva's treatment of these captured cities, specifically Naarden and Zutphen, bordered on the criminal. He hoped this brutality would help cow the rebels into submission, helping him reclaim Holland. The plan backfired, as it only served to embolden rebel opposition. They knew that surrender meant death, so for them; armed opposition was really the only choice.



Haarlem

Having gained access to Holland once again, Alva believed that a “divide and conquer” strategy offered the best chance of success. From Amsterdam, Spanish forces worked east along the IJ river towards Haarlem, essentially trying to split Holland in two. By July 1573, Haarlem fell into Spanish hands after enduring a bloody six month siege. During the course of the siege, both sides employed military inundations to both facilitate and hinder troop movements. The two cities were connected via a narrow strip of land running along the IJ dike. This dike separated the IJ river from the Haarlemmermeer, an enormous lake in the center of Holland. As the rebels controlled the waters, they repeatedly cut this dike to facilitate troop movements and resupply Haarlem. It was not until the Spanish gained temporary mastery of the waters that they captured the city. They did this with an unexpected naval victory on the Haarlemmermeer and capturing a fortification near Huis ter Hart, which allowed them to control the waterways.

Alkmaar

The Spanish turned north after they captured Haarlem in an attempt to secure the Northern Quarter of Holland. This region of Holland gave the rebels the opportunity to both to isolate and terrorize Amsterdam. Quickly after the fall of Haarlem the Spanish commander Fadrique de Toledo marched his army north towards Alkmaar, which was seen as the key to controlling the Northern Quarter. It proved to be an ill-fated endeavor from a Spanish perspective. The watery landscape was not only well-suited for military inundations, but also forced the forced the Spanish onto narrow channels which

significantly impaired their movement. This delay allowed Diederik Sonoy, the rebel commander of the Northern Quarter, to create an impassable water barrier. As the Spanish approached the city, Sonoy ordered the sluices along the North Sea open. Despite local attempts to prevent the floods in order to protect harvests, the rebel forces eventually flooded a stretch of land across the Northern Quarter. There were already a number of sizeable lakes in the center of the region, so the rebels simply needed to flood the land between these bodies of water to create a water barrier. The waterline extended from the Zjipe polder, along the Zaan and Rekere rivers, and through the Schermer, Wormer, and Purmer lakes. In the end, they created a swathe of water from the North Sea in the west to the Zuider Zee in the east.



4. Leiden

Leiden – Context and Preparations

The siege and relief of Leiden is undoubtedly the most well-known example of a military inundation. Leiden is situated in the center of Holland and offered easy access to other

rebel controlled cities. In many ways it was the pivotal moment of the entire conflict. If the strategically vital city fell to the Spanish, it could have quite possibly undermined the rebel's position in Holland. The city withstood a siege for roughly a year, with the encounter taking on an apocalyptic feel. It was during the siege of Leiden that the rebel's developed the credo, "better broken land than lost land." The rebels nearly got their wish.

The Spanish did well isolating Leiden. In the early stages of the siege they secured the surrounding villages and built as many as sixty temporary sconces. By July 1574 the Spanish stranglehold of the city was so effective that Orange could only communicate with the people of Leiden via carrier pigeon. He pleaded with them to hold out as long as they could, but the food supplies in the city quickly began to dwindle. In this dire situation William of Orange and the rebel leaders decided the best chance of success involved a massive military inundation. They intended to flood roughly half of the province of Holland so they could reach the beleaguered city by sailing it to it with their ships. Essentially, they planned on turning a tremendous portion of southern Holland into a sea, at least temporarily.

The military inundations during the relief of Leiden were a massive undertaking, requiring a great deal of audacity, conviction, and logistical coordination. In early August 1574 the rebels sent out placards to the residents of the water boards of Rijnland, Delfland, and Schieland instructing them to travel to the nearest city because they were going to flood the area.

Leiden – The flooding begins

The initial military inundations went more or less according to plan. The first dike breaches occurred on 3 August 1574 at Capelle to the east of Rotterdam. Orange personally attended this event which coincided with fifteen other dike cuts, and the opening of sluices. These actions brought water from the IJssel and Maas rivers pouring into central Holland. There were minor acts of opposition as local farmers attempted to close the sluices, but with little effect. Officials from the various water boards carefully monitored the dike cuts to ensure the breaches did not compromise the integrity of the dikes while troops guarded the sluices to keep them open. Over the next month the rebels proceeded to make dike cuts further inland to keep the water flowing north toward Leiden.

By the middle of September rebel progress stalled and then nearly came to a halt. The main hindrance came in the form of the landscheiding dike which separated the water boards of Rijnland, Delfland, and Schieland. The Spanish forces did well defending this all important dike, repelling an attack by the Delft Militia on 4 September. The following night a surprise attack by the rebels opened up a partial breach in the dike, but not large enough to bring in enough water to flood the land behind it. A week later the rebels launched another surprise attack on the landscheiding dike, but in the darkness of the night they got disorientated, and ended up cutting the groenweg dike instead. By this

point, it looked like the worst case scenario for the rebels; the land would be broken and lost.

Leiden – The relief of the city

In the end the rebels succeeded because of two fortuitous events. First, while the second attack on the landscheiding was a botched operation, it was enough to scare the Spanish into retreat. Shortly after the failed venture the Spanish forces withdrew towards Leiden abandoning all the vital dikes, embankments, and outermost fortifications to the rebels. In spite of this turn of good luck, the rebels still could not reach the city because the water levels from the flooding remained too low. Even with all the open sluices and broken dikes in their wake, the rebel's path remained blocked. At this point, the rebels received their second stroke of good fortune in the form of rain and a change in the direction of the wind. This seemingly providential alteration in the weather provided the last drops of flood water needed for the rebel fleet to sail to Leiden and relief the distressed burghers.

Leiden – The Alblasserwaard

The rebel advance toward Leiden occupied the greater part of both rebel and Spanish forces, but another encounter in the Alblasserwaard also bore witness to military inundations, and with perhaps longer lasting effects. This region, being situated between several rivers and waterways, was already prone to flooding. It had suffered considerable devastation during the All Saints Day flood in 1570 before the Wars of Independence in Holland began. During the siege of Leiden, the rebels received word that Spanish troops were amassing there in order to launch an attack. With the rebels unable, or unwilling, to divert troops to the Alblasserwaard they sent in another round of strategic floods in their place. This round of flooding proved to be particularly damaging. As one historian stated, the region probably stood under water for the better part of seven years as a result of the natural and man-made flooding.

5. Antwerp

The Pacification of Ghent

Shortly after the Spanish suffered a defeat at Leiden their entire military campaign temporarily collapsed. Throughout 1576 the Spanish monarchy had difficulty finding the necessary funds to continue paying their soldiers. As a result, a series of mutinies erupted across the Low Countries, culminating in the Spanish Fury where unpaid soldiers looted and raped the inhabitants of Antwerp, leaving the city in flames. This atrocity served as a rallying cry for the various provinces. Where before, the fighting and opposition had centered on Holland and Zeeland, now all of the provinces united together to expel the mutinous Spanish soldiers.

Spanish Reconquista

The Pacification of Ghent proved to be a fragile truce, ultimately unraveled by the same social and religious divisions which prevented unification before the mutinies. Disputes over religious freedoms, the rights of Catholics to worship, and a litany of other divisive issues drove irreconcilable wedges between the different parties. The Spanish, for their part, expertly exploited these disputes to quickly rebuild their presence in the Low Countries. The new general, Alexander Farnese the Duke of Parma, played a vital role in this recovery as he could bankroll a major portion of the campaigns. Beginning in the south, he quickly reclaimed a number of important cities with a mix of diplomacy, intimidation, outright assault. Part of his success lay in his systematic and methodical approach to siege warfare. By 1584, he set his sights on Antwerp, one of the last cities in the southern provinces which still opposed the Spanish and remained loyal to William of Orange.

The Siege of Antwerp

When Parma arrived at Antwerp he found the area around the city had already been flooded on the orders of the Prince. It was hoped that this inundation would prevent Parma from encircling the city and starving into submission, but the attempt proved fruitless. With the help of an incredible bridge made of ships and barges, he was able to close off the Scheldt river and surround the city. Despite this setback, the rebels remained steadfast in their conviction that military inundations were the best means of saving the city. Even before the siege of Antwerp began, the rebels had carried out inundations all along the northern coast of Flanders, directed at villages which had reconciled with Parma. One of these villages, Terneuzen, which the rebels had actually reconquered, became a veritable island, and as such, served as a base of operations for attacks directed towards Antwerp. In the end, the Duke of Parma recaptured Antwerp, but not before another round of unsuccessful military inundations by the rebels. While these floods had not saved the city, the ones along the northern coast had at least created a military buffer between the Spanish forces in the south, and the rebellious provinces further north.

The Abandoned Military Inundation of Ghent

At the same time as the siege of Antwerp, Parma carried out another siege against the nearby city of Ghent. In order to save Ghent, the rebels planned for another military inundation comparable with that of Leiden. The idea called for a series of dike breaches all along the North Sea, in conjunction with numerous dike cuts to the smaller interior dikes, after which a fleet of ships could sail to the beleaguered city and rescue it from the Spanish siege. The plans were in place, but disputes over the possibility of French support and how the repair work would be carried out, delayed the floods until they became a moot point with the surrender of the city.

6. Conclusion

It would be too easy to say that military inundations decided the initial phases of the Dutch Wars of Independence, yet there is no denying their significance. It is said that victory began at Alkmaar, an encounter which witnessed the creation of a massive water barrier stretching across the Northern Quarter. If victory began at Alkmaar, it survived at Leiden, the site of another massive strategic flood. If it survived at Leiden, then it stalled at Antwerp. Nevertheless, by this time the rebels had gained some much needed breathing space, developed an alliance system codified in the Union of Utrecht (1579), and established a financial system that allowed them to outfit a military better equipped to deal with the Spanish. The end result of these initiatives is that the rebels could afford to be more selective with their military inundations, and attempt to limit their destruction when they occurred on their soil.