A polar bear taunting lions[1].

Dutch images of Swedish expansionism, 1656-1660

Gijs Rommelse

Its malodorous fur full of lice and nits, its mind set on murder, theft and treachery, the tyrannical, rapacious, Swedish bear had surged across the ice and snowy plains to storm the Danish King's Hall and Court. He had not anticipated, however, that the brave Dane would be aided by his loyal allies. Admiral Michiel de Ruyter had retaken the island of Funen, forcing the bear to retreat in shame and bringing grief upon its verminous passengers. This outcome was only logical, however, since Heaven could not allow such horror and shame to persist. Whether Charles would indeed learn his lesson and control his aggressive instincts was unclear, but De Ruyter could always be counted upon to subjugate him if necessary. The moral of the story was, of course, that the polar bear should never dare to taunt Holland's mastery of the seas. Cheered on by the whole of Christendom, the heroic Dutch lions could always be relied upon to employ their irresistible naval power to drive the aspiring polar bear back into its den.[2]

This allegorical analogy with the animal kingdom is an extract from a lengthy piece of doggerel published on the occasion of the Swedish defeat at the Danish island of Funen in November 1659, the colourful expressions and metaphors being translated from the original Dutch. This source helps to illustrate the existence, in the mid-seventeenth century Dutch Republic, of a distinctly negative stereotype of Swedish expansionism. Dutch interventions before and during 'Karl X Gustavs andra danska krig' (1658-1660), and the subsequent conflict between Sweden and the Dutch Republic, have traditionally been interpreted in terms of cold, calculated interest. The States General in The Hague, it has often been argued, chose to intervene on behalf of their ally for the simple reason that Swedish military dominance over Denmark jeopardized the crucial shipping lane through the Sound. Baltic grain was a key commodity in the hugely profitable staple market, while it also fed the highly urbanized province of Holland. Moreover, the Baltic provided naval stores like hemp, tar, pitch and masts, essential for the functioning of the Republic's maritime economy and war fleet. Maintaining the *status quo* between the two Nordic powers was therefore one of the key principles in Dutch naval strategy, a line of policy urged specifically by the powerful city of Amsterdam.[3] This essay does not dispute this strategic reality – the correspondence of Grand Pensionary John de Witt and the minutes of the States General are only too clear on the motives underlying the large-scale naval operations – but it does argue that there is another dimension to the conflict that has been largely overlooked by historians, namely an ideological one.[4] It builds its argument on the doggerel quoted above, as well as on four allegorical etchings and one magnificent painting, all from the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It is first useful, however, to provide the reader with a brief overview of Dutch naval interventionism in the Baltic.

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The keys of the Sound

The Republic's economic miracle provided the Dutch state with the fiscal means to maintain a powerful war fleet. The five admiralties were able to operate warships to block the Flemish privateering ports, hunt down and combat Flemish privateers at sea, to convoy merchant fleets and guard the herring fleet. When necessary, a large war fleet could be assembled to

challenge a Spanish armada, as had happened, for example, in 1639 during the Battle of the Downs. But this naval capacity could also be used for other strategic goals, such as the defence of the Republic's Baltic commerce. This trade in grain and timber formed a crucial element in the Dutch maritime economy. Its importance is perhaps best understood from the designation *moedernegotie*, 'the mother of all trades'. When, during Torstenson's War of 1643–1645, the Danish king Christian IV unilaterally raised the Sound Toll tariffs, the response of the States General in The Hague was to support Sweden. Stockholm was permitted to charter twenty-one Dutch men of war. Subsequently, the combined Swedish-Dutch naval force inflicted a devastating blow on the Danish fleet during the Battle of Fehmarn on 13 October 1644. A few months earlier, a regular Dutch force of 42 warships commanded by Vice-Admiral Witte de With had led a convoy of about nine hundred merchantmen through the Sound. The Danish king, lacking the means to enforce the higher rate, had to content himself with a return to the lower. In the summer of 1645, Witte de With once again led a huge convoy through the Sound. On this occasion the Dutch fleet remained in Baltic waters to bring pressure to bear on Christian IV to end the war. Partly as a result of this, the Peace of Brömsebro was concluded. This treaty was highly advantageous for Sweden, while Dutch regents were able to congratulate themselves that 'the wooden keys to the Sound were kept in the port of Amsterdam'.[5]

During the second half of the 1650s, Dutch interventions in Baltic waters were even more emphatic and forceful. In 1656 the highly ambitious king Karl X Gustav of Sweden sent his fleet to capture the important Baltic port city of Danzig. This attempt was prevented by a strong Dutch force under Lieutenant Admiral Jacob van Wassenaer Obdam. He deployed his ships to shield the port, causing the Swedish fleet to abandon its mission without risking a confrontation. Two years later, however, hostilities were joined when, after a lightning attack across the frozen Little Belt, the Swedish army occupied most of Denmark and laid siege to Copenhagen. Karl X Gustav's victory over Denmark seemed imminent, which would give him full control over the Sound and enable him to dictate toll tariffs, or even to close the sea strait altogether. The States General decided to respond to a Danish request for help because this disruption of the

status quo constituted an obvious threat to Dutch strategic interests. On November 8, 1658 a large-scale confrontation took place near Copenhagen. The Dutch fleet under the command of Van Wassenaer Obdam inflicted sufficient damage on the Swedish fleet to force king Karl X Gustav to abandon the siege of the Danish capital city. Six months later, Michiel de Ruyter coordinated the amphibious assault which resulted in the Danish-Dutch reconquest of the island of Funen. Eventually, following months of complex negotiations, involving not only the Dutch Republic but also England and France, a peace agreement was finally concluded in May 1660. Karl X Gustav himself was denied knowledge of the Treaty of Copenhagen, however, he having died three months earlier at the age of thirty-seven, possibly from a misdiagnosed pneumonia. For De Witt and the States General the naval intervention and the subsequent peace agreement represented a signal success. The Republic had used its new grand fleet to great effect, withstanding English and French pressure to abstain from active military interference, and restoring the much desired bilateral control over the Sound. His regime had demonstrated the Republic's naval potential and had signaled to other powers its resolve to defend the mother of all its many trades.[6]

War and status quo

The great importance of the Baltic grain trade for the Dutch Republic did not simply furnish material for the correspondence of politicians or the resolutions of the States General. The strategic interests of the Republic formed the subject of permanent public discourse, of pamphlets and also allegorical etchings.[7] This was certainly the case with affairs in the Baltic, as shown in figure 1.

Published anonymously in 1656 but probably the work of Crispijn de Passe, this etching shows Denmark and Sweden avidly engaging in a game of backgammon. It may well have been based on or copied from an etching from the 1640s, given that the 'Danish' player strongly resembles the former king Christian IV, who had died in 1648. His Swedish opponent would then have had to be Axel Oxenstierna.[8] Reissuing the etching

Figure 1. The game of war, 1656. Source: Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), inv. no. RP-P-OB-81.843. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.464384

in 1656, however, only seemed appropriate, given that the strategic interests at stake were essentially the same and the image had lost none of its political relevance. On the table cloth under their playing board we read the motto 'Alea belli', 'the uncertainties of war'. While the outcome of their frivolously undertaken war might be uncertain, as all games are, conflicts have consequences that are beyond luck or chance. On the left several Swedish men are hoarding and packing the plunder the war has brought them. The Swedish player at the table hands the fellow on his left another bag with the latest pickings. In the foreground we see a herd of pigs that, according to the accompanying caption, are about to be sent off to Sweden to be butchered. This element also refers to Sweden's intention of seizing plunder. The Danish gentleman at the table seems hapless – the man on his right is explaining the course of events to him, pointing out how his opponent is winning the game. There is little doubt about who is financing these activities, however. On the right we see Dutch merchants and sailors depositing arms and bags full of treasure into large coffers. One doubtfully scratches his head, while two others seem to discuss the logic, or rather the illogic, of their activity. The money pouring out of the large crack in the coffer in the right bottom corner also expresses this notion of futility. Their interest in the matter is indicated by the background, namely the two shores of the Sound, Kronborg Castle at the extreme right and the town of Helsingborg on the left.

Published in 1658 or 1659, probably also by Crispijn de Passe, figure 2 depicts the Danish-Swedish conflict in its international context. The Swedish bear seems to have overpowered the Danish elephant, but the Dutch lion intervenes on its behalf. The lion wears the key of the Sound on a ribbon around its neck. The Danish elephant is also being harassed by some great cat, which according to the text is a tiger but seems to bear more resemblance to a leopard. It is not clear which country is represented by this tiger. The Prussian, Polish and Imperial eagles are also highly interested in the affair. Oliver Cromwell encourages the fight, wielding a spear to stir up anger and anxiety. The First Anglo-Dutch War of 1652–1654 had made the English Lord Protector somewhat of a bogeyman in Dutch eyes. He was seen as the figurehead of an uncompromisingly radical regime responsible for the regicide of king Charles I, while his hostility towards Dutch

Figure 2. 'The lion, bear, elephant, tiger and eagles fighting', 1658. Source: Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), inv. no. RP-P-OB-81.842. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.464378

mercantile interests and his strong navy made him a formidable opponent. The presence of his dogs in the etching may refer to an old Dutch insult for the English as the 'horrible tailed men'. The etymology and connotation of this slur is not quite certain, but the tail was distinctly negative. Cromwell was the archetypical tailed man, there are various etchings of him with a large tail attached to his back.[9] In the bottom right-hand corner we see a naval fight in progress near Kronborg Castle. This, of course, was the core of the matter, the strategically crucial shipping lane through the Sound.

Glory and collective self-image

The naval exploits of Van Wassenaer Obdam, De With and especially De Ruyter against the Swedish fleet were celebrated in many songs, pamphlets, etchings and paintings. Figure 3 is an allegorical etching produced in 1658 by Salomon Savery. It shows Van Wassenaer Obdam seated in a triumphal chariot drawn by sea horses. He has their reigns in his right hand and Neptune's trident in his left, signifying that his wise and confident leadership has given the Dutch fleet full control of the seas. His chariot is accompanied by a host of celebrating tritons and fishes; in the right hand corner, Fame is seen, exultantly announcing the news of his grand victory. According to the verse beneath, Van Wassenaer Obdam was 'a hero sent by Heaven' and 'Bravery was at the wheel of the Ship of State'. It was, moreover, 'Holland's victory', fought by 'the keels from which fruit the State had sprung'.

Savery's allegorical etching formed part of an overarching meta-narrative about 'Dutchness'. The first decades of the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish Habsburgs had witnessed the emergence of a new Northern Netherlandish identity. Prince William of Orange and his followers had appealed to patriotic interests, and to notions of a common fatherland and character, to justify their rebellion against Philip II of Spain. The subsequent birth of the new Dutch state during the 1580s and 1590s had caused this discourse about Dutchness to evolve from a top-down process to an inclusive dialogue between citizens from all social classes, provinces

Figure 3. Allegory on the Battle of the Sound, 1658. Source: Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), inv. no. RP-P-OB-81.859. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.464410

and towns. This is not to say that all were equally vocal with regard to their ideas about what the Dutch state and its nation might entail, but their appreciation of new myths, national heroes and symbols, through their purchases and discussion of songs, poems, pamphlets and etchings speaks volumes. Of crucial importance in the Dutch meta-narrative was the heroic struggle against and ultimate liberation from foreign oppression. The Dutch fight against foreign 'tyranny' was righteous and, given the leading presence of hero-figures, also sanctioned by Heaven.[10] Artists like De Passe and Savery had a perfect grasp of the commercial potential of this patriotism, with its metaphors, symbols and myths. People desired to feel involved with the fatherland and its strategic interests, and were gladly

prepared to pay in order to satisfy this appetite. Artists, of whom many were themselves undoubtedly sincere patriots therefore placed new events and developments within the cultural framework they knew to hold relevance for their clientele.[11]

"Dutchness" became the framework within which all politics had to be conducted. Provinces, towns and individuals all felt the need to present their favoured policies as essential to, or at least compatible with, the collective identity. Failure to do so could result in outright rejection by rivals on grounds of patriotic ideology. This also meant that it was important to hold a credible claim to membership of the body politic. In other words, political success was impossible without some plausible link to the Republic's historical roots and to the supposed character traits of the Dutch nation. The decentralized structure of the Dutch political system and the inherent competition for political leverage meant that towns, provinces and governmental bodies had to prove their connection to the common cause, as did individual politicians and also ambitious naval officers. For this purpose, visual propaganda was an obvious tool. Produced in the 1670s, Peter van de Velde's rendering of the Battle of the Sound of 8 November 1658 (Figure 4) is an excellent case in point. Governmental bodies, such as the admiralties, paid reputable artists for spectacular dramatizations of military glory. In Van de Velde's canvas we see Dutch and Swedish men-of-war exchanging broadsides. Castle Kronborg is depicted on the right. Those fortunate enough to see the painting would have instantly recognized the ideological message: the Dutch navy heroically and successfully fought the Republic's enemies to uphold the nation's essential strategic interests. By his purchase of the painting he demonstrated his understanding of this political maxim. As with the etchings of De Passe and Savery, Van de Velde's cherished painting represented an affirmation of the meta-narrative of Dutchness. The sinking of a single Dutch ship on the right-hand side emphasizes the sacrifices made, while any educated visitor would have known or understood that the ultimate outcome of the battle against the 'foreign aggressor' was a victory for the Dutch fleet.[12]

Figure 4. The Battle of the Sound of 1658, by Peter van de Velde. Source: Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), inv. no. SK-A-3271. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.9621

Figure 5. The wheel of fortune and Karl X Gustav on his deathbed, 1660. Source: Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), inv. no. RP-P-OB-81.882A. http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.464502

Constructing a negative mirror-image

One of the most powerful mechanisms in processes of identity formation is 'othering', or 'mirror-imaging'. Groups of people are often inclined to describe their 'imagined community' through comparison with other political collectives. This may be done in either of two ways: by emphasizing positive similarities or by contrasting the positive auto-image with the negative hetero-image.[13] The Dutch stereotyping of Sweden's expansionism is an obvious example of the latter. Sweden was alleged to be aggressive, intent on plunder, haughty and treacherous. The Dutch Republic, by contrast, merely intervened in the Baltic in order to restore the international balance of power, a strategic purpose which was claimed to be both reasonable and just. Commanded by Van Wassenaer Obdam, De With and De Ruyter, the Dutch fleet fought both effectively and valiantly. Its naval successes provided a clear manifestation of the Republic's rectitude. The brave lion, it was implied, was the moral opposite of the louse-ridden polar bear.

Figure 5 shows another aspect of this negative mirror-image, one that ties in with the naval ideology of the radically republican 'True Freedom' regime of John de Witt that governed the Republic between 1650 and 1672. Published in Amsterdam in 1660, this allegorical etching depicts the wheel of fortune and king Karl X Gustav on his deathbed. With him are his wife and young son, and the grandees of the realm. The eight figures surrounding the wheel represent the rise and waning of man. The princes

of Europe to the left and right bear witness to the Swedish king's demise. The verses below contain a sharp condemnation of the late monarch, implying that his sudden death is God's punishment for a lifetime of aggression. The fifth, concluding stanza comprises a dire warning for absolutist monarchs:

> By cruel war and bloodbaths stained,
> God's punishment is revealed.
> The flame of the torch has been lit,
> War and vengeance shall spare no-one,
> Until poor man lies low in the earth.
> Warfare, as the proverb dictates, destroys all.

Those who, like Karl X Gustav, pursue war to increase their dominions, to strengthen their dynastic interest, acquire personal glory or simply to satisfy a whim, bring death and destruction to their subjects as well as to the world, and ultimately ruin themselves. Republics, the implicit message seemed to be, only fought when war was forced upon them, or to mount a defence of their strategic raison d'être. The Dutch fleet, in its struggle with the Swedish, was looked on as an instrument of peace and stability, restoring the liberty of the seas against a tyrannically expansionist monarch. This was how De Witt's republican regime viewed itself and its naval project. Republicanism was the superior form of government and the Dutch state's dominant guiding principle was the defense of its extensive maritime economy. The Dutch fleet represented a true manifestation of republican values, as well as of Dutch identity, while the country's naval ideology formed one of the pillars of the True Freedom.[14] Like most cultural constructs, this Dutch navy was best understood in contradistinction to its ideological opposite, in this case the Swedish. Karl X Gustav's war fleet being framed as a tool of blatant aggression, its Dutch counterpart could only be an instrument of righteousness. The invoking by the Dutch of the 'liberty of seas' was a clear referral to the well-known theories of Hugo Grotius, but this should be interpreted as a pragmatic claim to the moral high-ground rather than some sincere attempt to serve a legal principle. Artists like De Passe, Savery and Van de Velde might not have conceptualized the cultural mechanism of negative mirror-imaging, but their instinctive appreciation of it was a necessary prerequisite to enabling them to make their living from it.

For the Dutch, Sweden and Karl X Gustav, in the 1650s, were not uniquely 'the other', but shared this distinction with two others, Cromwell's England and Mazarin's France forming the other components of the negative trinity. In a number of Dutch sources, written as well as visual, the three function together as opponents of the Republic. They seemed to be interchangeable from the point of view of the contrast between the Republic and 'the other', but were also complementary in this respect. The Swedish polar bear was only one of the several stereotypes that helped to define the Dutch lion's own auto-image. Whether the anti-Swedish stereotype of the 1650s was based on some pre-existing allegorical or heraldic image, or whether it was newly constructed remains to be researched. It may well be the latter, given that the Dutch Republic initially supported Stockholm against Copenhagen, before changing its allegiance in the 1650s. The same holds true for the subsequent viability of the concept.

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Noter

[1] I would like to thank Roger Downing, Lars Ericson Wolke and Leos Müller for commenting on previous drafts of this essay. Any shortcomings are of course entirely my own.
[2] 'Gekraakte neeten, gevonden in de vaght vanden uytgebannen ys-beer uyt Fuynen', Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam), RP-P-OB-81.880. (During the Little Ice Age the polar bear's range would have extended farther south than is at present the case.)
[3] Landberg 1952; Fries, 1883; Gihl, 1913; Tjaden 1994, p. 61–136; Kernkamp 1890;; Noordam 1940; Doedens 2008, p. 63–67 and 103–109; Rowen 1978, p. 303–333; Van Tielhof 2002, p. 99–100.
[4] The notable exception is: Sandstedt 1984-1986, p. 73–111.
[5] Kernkamp 1890.
[6] Noordam 1940; Downing and Rommelse 2011, p. 60–68.
[7] Sandstedt 1984-1986.
[8] I owe this observation to Lars Ericson Wolke.
[9] Rommelse 2016, p. 199–216.
[10] Pollmann 2010, p. 241–261.
[11] Rommelse and Downing 2017, p. 166–172.
[12] Rommelse 2019, p. 33–52.
[13] Rommelse 2016, p. 199–216.
[14] Rommelse and Downing 2015, p. 387–410.