

# Introduction

On 13 November 1688, an enormous seaborne invasion force left the Netherlands and headed for the south-west coast of England. The fleet stretched from Dover to Calais, drawing thousands of spectators on both sides of the English Channel and making a deep impression on all who saw it. With over four hundred ships carrying tens of thousands of soldiers, sailors and support troops, it was the largest naval operation ever undertaken, larger by far than the famous Spanish Armada of a century earlier. It was led by William III, prince of Orange and, since 1672, stadholder and supreme military commander of the Dutch Republic. The objective was to remove England's Catholic monarch James II from the throne and so prevent England and France from making common cause against the Republic, as had occurred 1672. William, a Protestant, was married to James II's eldest daughter. Officially, in embarking on the expedition he was acting in a personal capacity, but all the competent Dutch authorities were closely involved. The eventual success of the enterprise – William III replaced James II on the English throne – therefore affected the whole of the Netherlands. The 1688 expedition was the ultimate proof of the Republic's might, mettle and manifold means. That small country on the North Sea was a force to be reckoned with.<sup>1</sup>

Just over 120 years later, little of that reputation remained. Once again there was talk of an invasion, but this time the roles were reversed. The Netherlands, or rather the Kingdom of Holland, as it had now become, was reduced to the status of a French satellite state when a 40,000-strong British expeditionary force landed on the coast of Walcheren on 29 July 1809. Louis Napoleon, who had been made king of Holland by his brother Napoleon Bonaparte in 1806, had only a meagre four to six thousand troops with which to oppose the landing. There was nothing that pitifully small force could do to stop the British from overrunning the entire island in just a few days. It was the same story at sea. The fleet, such as it was, was no match for the might of the Royal Navy. The few (small) ships that were left could only cower in the estuaries. All in all, the British invasion made it painfully clear that the Dutch were

no longer able to defend themselves. It was the French who had to step in and pull the Dutch chestnuts out of the fire. Which in the summer of 1810 gave Bonaparte the perfect pretext for annexing the Kingdom of Holland to the French Empire.<sup>2</sup>

The contrast between the two invasions could hardly be greater. In 1688 the Republic was at the height of its power; 'Walcheren' marked its final demise as an independent nation state. In a sense, therefore, those two amphibious operations sum up the entire military history of the Netherlands on the European continent between 1648 and 1813, from its spectacular rise in the second half of the seventeenth century to its dramatic fall in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The extreme nature of that evolution never ceases to amaze. The success of 1688 makes one wonder how a country like the Dutch Republic, small in extent on land and sea, could become one of Europe's dominant military powers. The failure of 1809 makes one equally curious to know how it lost that leading role and why it was relegated to such a lowly walk-on part on the international stage.

Such questions are not new, of course. Numerous studies have adduced multiple explanations for the rise and fall of the Republic as a great power. Generally, they describe the country's success in economic terms. Thanks to its strong trading position and resulting wealth it could maintain a relatively sizable military force whose actions contributed to its leading international position. But those studies rarely spend much time on how that military force operated,<sup>3</sup> as if a well-run economy is in itself a sufficient explanation for the Republic's military success in the seventeenth century, as if the possession of enough well-motivated, well-trained troops, the quality of ships and weapons, the type of leadership or the way in which soldiers and sailors were deployed and provisioned were not equally important factors.<sup>4</sup> The only authors to explore that side of the equation are pioneers like Jaap Bruijn and Olaf van Nimwegen. Without their detailed studies of the Dutch fleet and Dutch army respectively, this book could not have been written.<sup>5</sup>

In historiography in general, too, explanations for the Republic's decline are usually economic, though not exclusively. There are several reasons why the country lost its leading role: because of the (relative) economic atrophy consequent on the emergence of competitors, the growing burden of debt as a result of decades of war, the extensive centralisation of state power in France, Great Britain and Prussia and the Republic's own inability to carry out institutional reforms, and the halt in the country's population growth and the creation of a closed oligarchy of regents.<sup>6</sup> To a greater or lesser extent all those factors influenced the Republic's lapse into a second- or third-class power, yet when it comes to explaining how they affected the operation of the army and navy and whether that in turn contributed to the country's decline, general historiography is once again more or less silent.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of this book is to give that military dimension a more prominent place in the grand narrative of the Dutch Republic's rise and fall as a great power. Trade and prosperity played a very large role in that record, of course, but economies do not win battles on either land or sea, armies and navies do. The country's dominance, the place it occupied at European negotiating tables, was determined not only by the size of its treasury but also by its military prowess and performance on the battlefield. Both things are inextricably linked, but the one does not automatically follow from the other. Yes, the Republic was rich, but it was rich in the eighteenth century too, when it played a much less influential role. The question then was more a matter of the choices political administrators made, how they employed their financial resources in supporting the armed forces and how they used the army and navy to promote the country's prosperity.

As its title suggests, *Military Power and the Dutch Republic. War, Trade and the Balance of Power in Europe, 1648–1813* in essence revolves around the continuous interaction between political and economic objectives on the one hand and financial and military (im)possibilities on the other. It complements the many socio-economic, political and cultural publications about the Dutch Republic that have already been written by examining the action, organization and operation of the armed forces as well as the doings of the ordinary soldiers and sailors and their relationship to the civilian population. How did the Republic use its armed forces to protect its own trade and prosperity, territorial integrity, and the balance of power in Europe? Which were the factors that motivated military action and prompted preparations for war? And what ultimately deter-

mined success and failure in battle? In answering those questions, *Military Power and the Dutch Republic* will hopefully add a martial dimension to the already existing explanations for the flourishing and fading of the Republic.

The fact that general histories of the Dutch Republic rarely go too deeply into the operation of the armed forces does not mean that the army and navy have never been studied. On the contrary, as the bibliography at the end of this book shows, countless works of varying length have been published over the years besides those by Jaap Bruijn and Olaf van Nimwegen. Most of them are highly descriptive in character, however, or deal solely with a specific aspect or a shorter period (a single war or a single battle). In many of the books written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, moreover, the strongly nationalistic tone that was common in the historiography of the time can be heard. That became far less prevalent following the Second World War as attention shifted from generals and admirals to the ordinary troops and from the actual fighting to matters such as logistics, culture, recruitment, financing and gender.<sup>8</sup> The field also began to be dominated by a number of critical debates, most significantly in relation to military revolution, the fiscal-military state, and total war. Yet there was still no sign of an in-depth survey in which the actions and operation of the Dutch armed forces were considered in a broader political, economic, social and societal context.

What *Military Power and the Dutch Republic* hopes to add to the existing literature is in the first place a recognition of the coherence between the deployment and actions of the army and navy. Describing the two branches of the armed forces conjointly, comparing them, and submitting them, as and when possible, to a common analysis – something that has not been done before – provides an insight into the many assessments, calculations and considerations involved in the creation of the Republic's security policy in the period dealt with here and puts military success and failure in a broader perspective. The book's second distinguishing feature is the time span it examines. It covers the entire period from 1648 to 1813, allowing continuities and discontinuities to be better differentiated and thus the great changes that took place after the fall of the Republic in 1795 to be more clearly highlighted. Thirdly, in the following pages a point is made of giving more space to the common soldier and sailor and to the ordinary citizen's involvement with the military, things that have often gone unmentioned in the past. Finally, by taking an approach that incorporates all of those



**Model of a 72-gun Dutch warship, the ‘William Rex’.** In the eighteenth century 68 to 74 guns became the most common class for the Dutch navy’s ships of the line. The model was built to decorate the Admiralty Chamber in Middelburg, 1698.

elements it is hoped that *Military Power and the Dutch Republic* will contribute to the broader historical debate and so interest a wider audience in the military factor in the Republic’s rise and fall.

That the invasions of 1688 and 1809 were far from being isolated events is evident from the bare statistics of this period. For more than 80 of the 165 years covered by this book, the Dutch Republic (or one of its subsequent manifestations) was at war. Before one conflict ended the next had already begun. It would be all too easy to lose one’s way in that

military maelstrom, so to avoid that *Military Power and the Dutch Republic* has been split into two complementary parts. Part I, which contains four chapters, provides a chronological survey of the major developments in and characteristics of military operations in their international, (domestic) political, economic and (partly) social context. It covers all the wars in which the Republic was involved and introduces the men who played leading parts in them. It focuses particularly on the objectives of the operation, on what military power was used for (the

'why' of a military operation) and the extent to which those objectives were or were not achieved (the 'how'). In other words, these chapters deal mainly with the politically and militarily strategic level of military action. The way the chapters are divided — at the breaking points of 1689, 1748 and 1795 — corresponds to the Republic's changing role from independent state to alliance partner, to neutral power and finally to dependent satellite.

The second part of this study comprises four thematic chapters, each providing a more detailed basis for the 'why' and 'how' of the Dutch Republic's military action. Comparisons between the army and navy are made whenever possible. Chapter 5 explains the expansion and contraction of military capabilities, as set out in the first four chapters, by analysing the development of the direction, organisation and financing of the armed forces, and of personnel policy (and the availability of personnel). Chapter 6 examines how the armed forces actually operated within the frameworks outlined in Chapters 1 to 5, considering such things as tactics, materiel, leadership and proficiency, and the question of what made for victory in one battle and defeat in another.

Chapter 7 looks at what all that (the defence policy, the style of leadership, organisation and financing and the form of military action) meant for the individual soldiers and sailors who ultimately had to carry out the battle plans. Finally, Chapter 8 examines how, and how tightly, society and the armed forces were interwoven and what that tells us about support for the armed forces among the population.

That approach and division notwithstanding, *Military Power and the Dutch Republic* is far from being a complete history of military events occurring within a given time frame. With a subject as broad and diverse as the armed forces and a period of more than a century and a half, that would hardly be possible. Choices have had to be made, with the result that not every battle is discussed in the same detail and not every technological development receives the same amount of attention. Extra care has been taken with the maps and illustrations. They not only add colour to the text but also clarify and supplement it. Together, the text, maps and images tell the story of the Dutch Republic, and that is very much a military story too.