CHAPTER 6

The Tactical Military Revolution and Dutch Army Operations during the Era of the Twelve Years Truce (1592–1618)

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Introduction

In the summer of 1610, the States General of the Dutch Republic ordered an army of 136 infantry companies and 36 cavalry companies,1 amounting to some 10,000 to 11,000 effective fighting men,2 to the Holy Roman Empire to besiege the town of Jülich occupied by Imperial-Habsburg troops a few months after the death (March 1609) of the last Duke of Jülich, John William. From the start Maurice, Count of Nassau and Commander-in-Chief of the Dutch army3 since 1590, made use of this opportunity to display to the world Dutch military might. Besides being accompanied by a powerful siege train of fifteen guns, Maurice moved ostentatiously along the River Rhine toward the Spanish held fortress of Rheinberg. Near Xanten, the Dutch force was drawn up in battle-array, and, fitting to the close proximity of castra Vetera, the ancient Roman army camp, Maurice aligned the infantry battalions and cavalry squadrons in three successive lines following the chessboard pattern of the Roman legions. Perhaps even more impressive to contemporaries was the novel way in which the foot-soldiers were organised. Traditionally, they fought in bodies composed


2 On paper this army numbered more than 15,000 men, but due to fighting, illness, desertion and fraud the real or effective strength of Dutch companies was always a third to a quarter less than prescribed. See Olaf van Nimwegen, ‘Deser landen criichsvolck’. Het Staatsche leger en de militaire revoluties (1588–1688) (Amsterdam, 2006), 52–54. An English translation by Andrew May of this study is forthcoming.

3 Throughout this paper the army of the States General of the Republic of the United Netherlands will be called the Dutch army, notwithstanding it was composed of many ‘nations’: Dutch, German, Walloon, French, English, Scots, Swiss. All European armies of the Early Modern Age were recruited on an international military labour market. The Spanish army consisted of Spaniards, Italians, Wallons, Burgundians, Germans, Irish, and English.
of a core of pikemen with on either side a ‘sleeve’ of soldiers with firearms. In 1610, the Dutch no longer followed this practice. They had separated the pike from the shot. In this way the soldiers with firearms could form a continuous firing-line resulting in volley fire dominating the battlefield rather than the push of pike.\footnote{Royal Archives The Hague (KHA) Archief van Frederik Hendrik A14-IX-2, ‘Première forme d’ordre de battaille dressée l’an 1610 en marchant depuis Vorstenborch [Fürstenberg]; National Library The Hague (KB) special collections (BC) Ms. Simon Stevin 128-A-19, ‘Tweede slachoirden alsoo se daernae verstelt wiert in ’t marcheren van Voorstenberch naer de stad Gulik op den 22en augustus in ’t jaer 1610.’}

The main purpose of Maurice's demonstration of Dutch military power was to impress upon the Spanish General Ambrogio Spinola (1569–1630) that, notwithstanding the conclusion of the Twelve Years Truce in 1609, the army of the States General was ready to continue the fight. In fact, Maurice hoped that Spinola would take up the challenge, because he believed that a long suspension of hostilities would only benefit Spain. In 1605 and 1606, Spinola had made territorial gains in the eastern provinces of Gelderland and Overijssel, providing him with a basis for continuing his assault on the Republic. In view of this, Maurice was of the opinion that a truce would lull the Dutch regents into a false feeling of security, lessening their resolve to maintain a strong army. However, the Archdukes in Brussels had no intention of endangering the truce. For the time being Albert (1559–1621) and his wife Isabella (1566–1633), joint sovereigns of the Spanish Netherlands, considered the Jülich-crisis an Imperial affair; the ships with the Dutch siege artillery and ammunition sailed past Rheinberg without meeting any difficulty from the Spanish governor. In 1614, the Archdukes changed their stance, but they instructed Spinola not to engage Maurice. Since suffering defeat at the Battle of Nieuwpoort (1600), Brussels would not permit its generals to fight another pitched battle with the Dutch. In the 1570s and 1580s, the Spaniards had confidently faced the Dutch rebels wherever they encountered them, and with good reason: of the nine battles waged in these years, the Spaniards had won eight (see Appendix I).\footnote{The only battle the rebels won was Heiligerlee in 1568.} Nieuwpoort was the turning-point. The discipline, training and tactical skill of the Dutch troops became the benchmark for Europe's armies. To understand this remarkable reversal it is necessary to study the theoretical framework of the Dutch military innovations and their subsequent practical implementation. Rome's military legacy had inspired military thinkers for centuries, but the credit for turning the military teachings of the Ancient Greeks and Romans into tools relevant for early modern warfare is traditionally, and deservedly so,