‘Our Valiant Dunkirk Romans’: Glorifying the Habsburg War at Sea, 1622–1629

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There is a natural tendency to think of civilian morale as an issue little influencing policy-makers before the Revolutionary wars of the late eighteenth century. But even in the age of mercenaries and military contractors, governments were well aware that success in war to some extent depended on the willingness of ordinary folk to bear the burdens it entailed. Public opinion might be little considered when deciding whether or not to go to war, but once the decision to fight had been taken every effort was made to convince tax-payers, in particular, that it was in their interest to see it through. This was true as much of monarchical governments now often thought of as ‘absolutist’ as of republican regimes or limited monarchies. Indeed, a work that resolutely disdained the many-headed mob could still insist that the prince or his ministers should “le manier et persuader par belles paroles, le séduire et tromper par les apparences ... ou par le moyen de bonnes plumes, en leur faisant faire des livrets clandestins, des manifestes, apololgies et déclarations artistement composées, pour le mener par le nez” (“manipulate and persuade [the multitude] with fine words, seduce and deceive it with appearances ... or by means of skilled pens, having them write clandestine pamphlets, manifestos, artfully composed apologies and declarations in order to lead it by the nose”).1

In our own dark days of spin and PR it is tempting to consider all communication a species of propaganda, rather than vice versa, just as in the broad sunlit uplands of liberalism there was a tendency to see newspapers somewhat naively as reflections of public opinion.2 When I began my own research on

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the Flemish press during the Eighty Years War, my working assumption was that the press would reveal what those in power wanted the populace to think was happening: that I could provide an account of the government's propaganda war to set beside accounts of policy-making, diplomacy, the army and the fleet. By the time I read in Habermas that before the 1690s public communication was a question of governmental display to the people rather than rational interaction by the people, exposure to sixteenth and seventeenth-century pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, and (above all) state papers had already convinced me that this was much too facile.

The relationship between propaganda and information was far more intricate, and both these sides of news publishing have to be given their due. With these caveats in mind, I would now like to look at a more obviously propagandistic aspect of one early seventeenth-century newspaper, namely the coverage of maritime warfare in Antwerp’s Nieuwe Tijdinghen during the opening decade of the second half of the Eighty Years War. In doing so, it will become apparent that the newspaper did not follow an overall propaganda ‘line’, but provided a forum for two distinct, and not fully compatible, views of the heroism of those Flemings who served the Habsburgs at sea.

The long and inconclusive war between the revolted provinces of the Netherlands and their repudiated sovereign, the king of Spain, was brought to a temporary halt by the Twelve Years Truce of 1609. When the Truce lapsed, at the end of April 1621, the strategic circumstances were quite altered. The biggest difference was that Habsburg forces were already heavily committed in the Thirty Years War, in Bohemia and the Palatinate, while the Dutch were particularly interested in creating a south-eastwards buffer and source of supply in the Rhineland and Westphalia. Although neither side had found acceptable terms on which to prolong the Truce, it was only with misgivings that they armed for war. There was no great desire on either part to go on to the offensive, and secret talks to find an acceptable basis for a new truce continued until

3 Just such an account is now available in Monica Stensland, Habsburg Communication in the Dutch Revolt (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012).