Recent Dutch-language Publications

Harry A. Poeze
KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies
Poeze@kitlv.nl


The Nederlands Instituut voor Militaire Historie, an independent research institute within the Nederlandse Defensie Academie has set itself the ambitious goal of publishing a comprehensive history of Dutch military history in a series of six volumes. The best expertise on the subject has been mobilized and funds have been allocated to ensure a beautiful implementation: lavishly illustrated in full color, with relevant maps and tables, a commensurate apparatus with notes, literature, and index, in a royal format, printed on quality paper, and weighing more than two kilograms. Four volumes deal with the exploits of the Dutch Republic and its succeeding Kingdom. The volume on the Eighty Year’s War against Spain (1568–1648) was published in 2014. Two volumes are devoted to the military deployment overseas, in Asia, the Americas, and Africa. The first on the years 1595–1814 has now been published, which concentrates on the East (founded 1602) and West Indies Company (founded 1621). About 60 % of the book, written by Gerrit Knaap, describes and analyses VOC activities. An introduction and epilogue draw comparisons, while the information in the chapters on the respective companies themselves is clearly and successfully coordinated and made comparable; thus similar patterns are discernable. The VOC, nominally a private enterprise, was vested with sovereign power by the Republic to enforce a trade monopoly in Asia, and thus was inevitably drawn into conflict, at first with the familiar foes of Spain and Portugal, and later Britain and France. It was also, often nolens volens, dragged into conflicts with indigenous rulers, which involved extensive land campaigns against, for instance, the Mataram realm. The result was rewarding, and with the division of Mataram in four principalities the rulers were reduced to vassals of the VOC. In general, the VOC depended on its superior sea power, supported by a network of fortifications.

© HARRY A. POEZE, 2015 | DOI: 10.1163/22134379-17104019
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported (CC-BY-NC 3.0) License.
of all kinds. The Iberian forces were ultimately no match and successively lost their strongholds in the Moluccas, Strait Malaka, India (Goa), and Ceylon. Until far in the eighteenth century British and French forces were unable to infringe on the VOC heartland, the Indies archipelago.

Only after 1780 VOC power crumbled and could not hide any longer that it was a giant on clay feet. It still took a number of years, caused by the European Napoleonic turmoil, before in 1811 the British occupied Batavia, a battle that resulted in 1200 Dutch and 1000 British casualties. Such stunning figures were no exception, and seen in the perspective of the limited total number of VOC military available certainly disquieting. As a consequence, the VOC more and more had to rely on indigenous military. Thus, trade and violence were inextricably linked. Knaap divides VOC history in four periods (and chapters): foundation (1602–1635), establishment (1635–1685), expansion (1685–1780) and downfall (1780–1811). In the process, the merits of ‘empire builders’ like Jan Pieterszoon Coen, Antonio van Diemen, Cornelis Speelman, and Rijcklof van Goens are acknowledged. In these chronological chapters the history of the VOC is related, and followed by a focus on military action. Details are given for these actions on the number of ships and soldiers, the military tactics, and the action itself with the number of casualties of VOC and its enemy. Such a systematic focus has not been applied before. The chronological part of the book is followed by thematic chapters on military and sailors, on the military infrastructure (ships, fortifications, and weaponry) and on the daily life on the ships and in the garrisons. As for the human factor, matters like recruitment, deployment, working conditions, mortality, quality, cost, and the growing dependence on Asian soldiery are discussed.

It is a pity that no attempt has been made to count the numbers of soldiers and sailors killed in action. With a lot of proviso—what to do, for instance, with deaths due to illness?—it might have added to our insight. Another matter that might have been discussed at more length is the logistics, or military commissariat. How, for instance, did the VOC succeed in supplying its inland expeditions on Java, of thousands of soldiers with food, shelter, and ammunition? As for the military part, yearly cost estimations come to 3.5 million guilders, well worth its money, when total VOC income is put at 11.5 million. These chapters are innovative and illuminating, and supported by tables, that summarize scattered findings. Thus we also find exact information on VOC personnel, specified by rank and station, and the ships and fortifications, by type. Also lists of weaponry are included for 1790, with exactly 6484 pieces of artillery and 184,769 rounds of ammunition ... As for the warfare, Knaap also discusses violence and atrocities during and after battle. He, as well as Den Heijer on the West Indies Company, are reluctant to make harsh judgements (also on Coen’s