Some Dutchmen Desperately Trying to Get to Lille. The Batavian Republic and the 1797 Anglo-French Peace Negotiations

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Introduction

At the end of July 1797 three Dutchmen – Joan Arend de Vos van Steenwijk, Theodore van Marselis and Maarten van der Goes – arrived in Paris, a city longing for a peace to end the great powers war that had sprung from the 1789 and 1792 revolutions. They were the official envoys of the Batavian Republic – as the United Provinces had been rechristened in 1795 after the shift of power to local Patriots enabled by French military support.

De Vos van Steenwijk, Van Marselis and Van der Goes shouldered an enormous burden. Together with Caspar Meyer, the Batavian envoy to the French government, they were to take part in peace negotiations with Britain. British and French delegations had already gathered in Lille. Much was at stake for the Batavian Republic. Besides considerable financial and commercial interests, its position as a colonial power was in jeopardy and its position as an independent power within the European order was likely to be affected. Therefore, the Batavians were adamant about being present at the negotiating tables in Lille. The following months would witness a desperate struggle on their part to obtain access; an aim they would never attain, although negotiations were disrupted before they ceased trying.

Although the Lille peace negotiations only resulted in five more years of war with Britain, they are an interesting event to study since they cast some light on the role and position of minor powers within great powers peace negotiations.

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By the end of the eighteenth century, the northern Netherlands had been clearly relegated to the rank of secondary power. In 1795, the Batavian Republic entered into an alliance with France that was quintessentially asymmetric. The stage it desired to play a part on in 1797 was one where it would be a minor, at best secondary power alongside two great powers. While diplomatic history commonly focuses on relations among great powers, great power-minor power relations strike at the core of the international legal order and the notion of sovereign equality in particular. For that is where the difference between equality and hierarchy is made.

This article discusses Batavian attempts to get involved in the Lille negotiations in order to address issues of hierarchy and equality in the law of treaties. To what extent was the Batavian Republic’s inferior political and military position reflected in (views on) the law of treaties throughout the negotiating process? Before attending to the historical case study the following section will provide some theoretical and general historical observations to be used as a framework for assessing what went on.

1 The Law of Treaties between Equality and Hierarchy

1.1 Egalitarian and Hierarchical International Order

First I will provide a short theoretical framework on equality and hierarchy in international relations to serve as a basis upon which the case study can be analysed.

In the law of nations equality and hierarchy are each other’s counterparts. Equality relates to sovereignty or independence since both imply the absence of a superior authority with the power to command and the corresponding obligation to obey. In an egalitarian international order all states, whether

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2 On asymmetric alliances, see Marco Cesa, Allies Yet Rivals (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), pp. 56–61.