

The Dutch Republic: a great power?

Modern objectivist perspectives and new contemporary social-constructivist angles.



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¹ Front page image: an engraving named ‘*The European State Jockies Running a Heat for the Ballance of Power*’. The chaotic situation depicted neatly represents the vague, dynamic definition of the balance of power, a contemporary political concept that dominated eighteenth-century political debate in Europe which is highly relevant to this paper. Source: *American Antiquarian Society, European Political prints 1720-65, Folder 1, BM Number BM-2449.*

Introduction

If you were to stop a random Dutch person in the street, and ask him or her about Dutch history, there is a good chance that this person will mention the Dutch Revolt or the following Golden Age (Most of the seventeenth century, begin and end debated.) as some of the most important times in Dutch history. This is unsurprising: at school, the Dutch are taught that during the Golden Age, the Dutch Republic was a major power in Europe, perhaps even the most powerful state in Europe for a few decades. The Republic excelled in various ways, such as in the quality and quantity of her army and navy, her strong economy and her diplomatic abilities.

The idea that the Dutch Republic was a major power during the late seventeenth (and for some also the early eighteenth) century is shared by most academics writing about the Dutch Republic. The power of the Republic was composed of various elements. Of course there were the military or naval aspects. The Republic had earned her credit as a military power by breaking away from the Spanish empire, and would play a big role in many important wars after that. The Eighty Years' war (1568-1648) had forced the Dutch to develop good strategies and ways to fund an army and a navy. Because of this, the Republic was able to field large armies and fleets, even though her territory and population were quite small. Related to this is also the aspect of economic power. Trade all around the world was the most important sector of the Dutch economy. This strong economy allowed the creation of military power, and as a result of that, the Republic also possessed a lot of political and diplomatic power. Important peace negotiations were therefore often held on Dutch territory, such as in Nijmegen (1678), Rijswijk (1697) and Utrecht (1713).

However, clear as it is to most academics that the Dutch Republic in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was a force to be reckoned with, there is a major point of debate surrounding this subject about what seems to be a simple question: when did the Dutch Republic *stop* being a great power in Europe? The rise to power during the Revolt seems quite clear, and so does the zenith of power during the mid- and late seventeenth century. But the question about when exactly (for as far we can see that as a single point in time) the Republic fell from grace as a great power still knows no consensus.

Scholarly opinions on the matter vary wildly. Some say that already in 1672, in Dutch dubbed the Year of Disaster (*Rampjaar*), when England, France and two German states simultaneously invaded, that the Dutch supremacy was over. The Republic managed to

survive, albeit barely.² Others place the beginning of the loss of her prominent position around the end of the century and the beginning of the next, after fighting numerous wars with France and being forced into alliances and war debt in the 1680s and 1690s. A popular moment or period mentioned for the decay of great power status because of these reasons is the Spanish war of Succession or the following Treaty of Utrecht (1713), where the Republic seems to have been mostly overlooked in the negotiations between France and Great Britain.³ Still, some will say that the Republic's status as an important political or economic player dragged on much further, into the 1730s or even through the Austrian War of Succession, after which it truly became clear that the Republic no longer was a crucial player in international politics.⁴ By the time the fourth Anglo-Dutch war broke out (1780), a war in which the Republic suffered greatly, there is nobody left to defend the Republic as a great power. Next to these viewpoints, there are also some academics that claim that the Dutch Republic never even was a great power in Europe, although they seem to be in the minority.⁵

Because the Dutch Republic was seen as a great power in various aspects, the moments or periods when this great power decayed vary when considering these differing aspects. Scholars have sometimes made statements separating these aspects. For instance, Olaf van Nimwegen has argued that the Dutch land armies didn't really lose their significance in the European system until the Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756, while the relevance of the Republic's navy was long gone by then.⁶ These kinds of separations only complicate the debate further and make it even more difficult to point to a single point in time where 'the' great power status was lost, because that power actually consisted of multiple aspects that decayed at different moments in time.

² O. Mörke, 'In het Centrum van Europa: De Republiek tussen de Europese mogendheden' in: K. Davids ea. eds., *De Republiek tussen zee en vasteland* (Apeldoorn 1995) 287-302, see 293.

³ D. Onnekink, 'Een generale, goede en duysame vrede': het Utrechtse vredescongres (1713) vanuit Staats perspectief', in: S. Groenveld, M. Ebben and R. Fagel eds., *Tussen Münster & Aken: De Nederlandse Republiek als grote mogendheid (1648-1748)* (Maastricht 2005) 49-66, see 65. ; V. Enthoven, 'De ondergang van de Nederlandse handelssuprematie. Fiscale maatregelen en maritieme machtsmiddelen in de zeventiende eeuw': in: K. Davids ea. eds., *De Republiek tussen zee en vasteland* (Apeldoorn 1995) 249-272, see 263.

⁴ J.I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its rise, greatness, and fall 1477-1806* (4th edition; Oxford 1998) 985-986. ; W. Doyle, *The old European order* (Oxford 1978) 275. ; O. van Nimwegen, 'De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden in oorlog met Frankrijk (1650-1750)', in: J.R. Bruijn and C.B. Wels eds., *Met man en macht: de militaire geschiedenis van Nederland 1550-2000* (Amsterdam 2003) 65-104, see 82-83.

⁵ P. Rietbergen, 'Persuasie en mediatie: de Republiek en de Vrede van Nijmegen (1678)' in: S. Groenveld, M. Ebben and R. Fagel eds., *Tussen Münster & Aken: De Nederlandse Republiek als grote mogendheid (1648-1748)* (Maastricht 2005) 21-30, see 22. ; H. Gabel, 'Zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit. Wilhelm III, die Niederländische Republik und der Friede von Rijswijk (1697)', in: S. Groenveld, M. Ebben and R. Fagel eds., *Tussen Münster & Aken: De Nederlandse Republiek als grote mogendheid (1648-1748)* (Maastricht 2005) 31-48, see 33-35.

⁶ Nimwegen, 'De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden in oorlog met Frankrijk', 82-83.

Because of the extremely broad debate one gets the impression that something is lacking in our knowledge about the great power status of the Republic. Perhaps a shortcoming can be found in the contemporary opinion on the matter. Just like today, people back then were very much aware that the Republic was, at some point, an important power or a great power in Europe. Similarly, they were also aware that that status had vanished later in time. One only needs to look at the Patriot movement of the 1780s to confirm this, as one of the biggest resentments against the ruling class was that they allowed the country to slip into obscurity.⁷ On an international level these kinds of considerations about states and their power also existed. In fact, a very influential political concept concerning this kind of thing was present in eighteenth-century Europe: the balance of power.

This concept, as will be explained later, was quite vague and undefined but still dominated many political debates. The concept first emerged in the mid-16th century, but its popularity was highest during the eighteenth century. There are many aspects to this concept, but perhaps the most important is also the best known: that the balance of power served to prevent any European power from growing too powerful, in consequence rendering it capable of conquering or dominating the rest of Europe.⁸ Powerful aggressors were to be stopped by coalitions of lesser states, and two of the most important wars of the century, the Wars of the Spanish and Austrian Successions (1701-1713 and 1740-1748) were fought for the exact reason of preserving the balance of power.⁹

Of course, because the Dutch Republic was an important power during the same time frame, it is to be expected that she can be found somewhere in the discussions about the balance of power and European politics. Equally importantly, when the Republic started losing her significance, she must have disappeared from the considerations about European political affairs as time went on. Ida Nijenhuis has already found some evidence for something similar happening in contemporary writings about the Dutch Republic as a commercial power.¹⁰ Therefore, the sources left behind by these discussions could be very helpful in making a contribution to the historiographical debate described above. The contemporary perception is very important. We can ask ourselves what matters: does only the modern academic opinion on the power of the Republic matter, or should the perception of

⁷ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 1100.

⁸ M.S. Anderson, *The rise of Modern Diplomacy 1450-1919* (New York 1993) 183.

⁹ Doyle, *The old European Order*, 272 ; 282-283.

¹⁰ I.J.A. Nijenhuis, 'Shining Comet, Falling meteor: Contemporary Reflections on the Dutch Republic as a commercial power during the Second stadtholderless Era' in: J.A.F. de Jongste and A.J. Veenendaal Jr. eds., *Anthonie Heinsius and the Dutch Republic 1688-1720: Politics, war and finance* (The Hague 2002) 115-132, see 125.

the Republic herself and other European states back then also be taken into account? After all, the *perception* of the power of the Dutch Republic would also help determine her place in the balance of power and the European political system, not just how much military or economic power she could exert.

This tension between perception and “reality” can be linked to a contradiction between *objectivism* and *social-constructivism*. Duco Hellema describes these terms as follows. Objectivism is a way of thought about power that considers power to be measurable. Indicators of power are things that can have numbers attached to them. Simple examples are the size of a state’s army, its economic profits, the military spending, or the extent of the state’s territory and the size of the population. These kinds of arguments we frequently see in the modern academic debate, as we will see in chapter one of this paper. Besides these obvious measurements of power, there are also other perceptions of power that are not based on numbers, but are instead *constructed* by others. In this so-called *social-constructivism* many other things are considered that can make a state (seem) powerful as well. Examples are prestige from past achievements, a state’s geographical situation, the political culture and structure, or the role played in the balance of power.¹¹ Historians are not completely unaware of this social-constructivism. Paul Kennedy states that the Republic’s geographical position played an important role in both her rise to and fall from great power status.¹² Matthew Anderson describes how all objectivist calculations of power must have had some kind of subjective element, and he quotes the contemporary writer Charles Davenant, who said: ‘Opinion is the principal support of power’.¹³ However, Anderson states that social-constructivist ideas like these didn’t gain as much traction as the objectivist ideas did.¹⁴ Still, something similar to these examples could be true for the Dutch Republic. Perhaps her prestigious past kept her perceived as a powerful state in Europe for much longer than objectivist reasoning would have. We already have some evidence of this. Great Britain frequently attempted to get the Republic involved in various conflicts in the 1720s and 1730s, considering her to be a force that could make a difference, while the Republic was highly

¹¹ D. Hellema, ‘Internationale betrekkingen in historisch perspectief’, in: J. Pekelder, R. Raben and M. Segers eds., *De wereld volgens Nederland: Nederlandse buitenlandse politiek in historisch perspectief* (Amsterdam 2015) 11-24, see 14-20.

¹² P. Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the Great Powers* (New York 1987) 86.

¹³ M.S. Anderson, ‘Eighteenth-Century theories on the Balance of Power:’ in: R. Hatton and M.S. Anderson eds., *Studies in Diplomatic history: Essays in memory of David Bayne Horn* (London 1970) 183-198, see 186.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

reluctant to do so because of her poor economic situation and self-perceived weakness.¹⁵ This may show that Great Britain thought of the Republic as capable of more than she truly was, thus judging her to be more powerful than the Dutch thought she was.

So, we might be able to make a crucial addition to the debate if we consider the contemporary perspective on the matter of the Dutch Republic as a great power, especially if we look into the underrepresented social-constructivism described above. The discussions about the balance of power are useful sources to analyze this. Jeremy Black has described a variety of media the balance of power was discussed in. Already well known, according to him, are various kinds of treatises and essays written about the balance of power during this time period. Also important yet forgotten, he notes, are the personal communication and writings of diplomats. Logically of course, these people were actively engaged in the discussions, determining and rebalancing the balance of power every time they were called to action. What is very interesting is that Black also notes newspapers as a valid source, especially if these were under governmental control or supervision. This would mean that many common people of the eighteenth century could have been aware of this concept of the balance of power and of the discussions surrounding it. This suggests that the discussion about the balance of power was well known to many people all over Europe. Therefore, there could have been a broad debate about it with many well-informed people partaking, making all these sources more meaningful and representative of a general opinion. Consequentially, there could also have been a broad awareness of the Dutch position within this balance of power, and also of when that position was lost.¹⁶

Many options for sources are available, but for this paper we will mostly be sticking to the first category of sources. Still, this paper uses quite a diverse selection of sources: it is a mix of treatises, essays, books and published communications between various people from roughly 1700 to 1780. A crucial aspect is that these sources were publicly accessible. Most of the sources were for sale in (book)stores, according to their front pages. Although diverse, these sources all have something in common, namely that they in some way discuss the balance of power in Europe or the many things related to this such as wars, alliances, political interests of states and more (See figure 1, p9 for examples). The Dutch Republic and her role in these European affairs are often mentioned, which for us is a great way to find out how

¹⁵ J. Aalbers, 'Het machtsverval van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden 1713-1741' in: J. Aalbers and A.P. van Goudoever eds., *Machtsverval in de internationale context* (Groningen 1986) 7-36, see 29-32.

¹⁶ J. Black, 'The theory of the balance of power in the first half of the eighteenth century: a note on sources', *Review of International Studies* 9 (1983) 55-61, see 55-56.

much influence and power she had or was deemed to have by all these writers and thinkers. The sources originate from various countries and were retrieved from three online databases (see footnote for more details).¹⁷ Of course, for considering Dutch opinion on their power, we will use Dutch sources. For foreign or ‘European’ sources we have English, French and German sources. The English sources make up the biggest part of the European corps, as they seem to busy themselves most with the discussions about balance of power, European politics and Dutch power. This is unsurprising, as Great Britain was of course allied to the Dutch Republic and actively engaged in maintaining the balance of power. French sources are fewer in number and focus a bit more on general European politics than on ongoing current affairs such as the Austrian War of Succession. Still, these hold valuable information about their perceptions of power of the Dutch Republic and what role she could play in the broader European system. German sources are few in number for this paper, only translated ones are used. The reason for this relatively small amount is the simple fact that otherwise this paper would likely exceed its envisioned scope. Still, some sources of German origin were included to rule out any extreme differences between those and the other sources. Interesting to note is that plenty of sources are translated from other languages, and that they also refer to other sources for claims they make. Some sources were written in response to other writings about similar subjects. This again implies that these sources were a part of broader discussions within Europe about the balance of power and its many related subjects.

All the considerations above already spell out the question this thesis will discuss. When did the Dutch Republic lose its status as a great power in Europe, if we take both the modern academic and contemporary opinions into account? This question entails a few different parts. First of all, the broad academic discussion that exists so far must be elaborated further and analyzed so that we can see what the modern debate consists of. What are the authors’ arguments and points or periods in time considered for the loss of great power status for the Republic? Related to this, we need to find out what exactly ‘makes’ a great power, or what gives a state power to begin with according to the modern academics in this debate. The concept of the balance of power will also be considered, because it is at the core of eighteenth-century political thought and many of the sources we will be analyzing.

Secondly, this question requires analysis of our sources, where we will try to answer similar questions. What made the Dutch Republic powerful or weak in contemporary eyes?

¹⁷ The databases in question are: *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, *Gallica*, and *Google Books*. See the list of sources at the end of this paper to see which source comes from which database, and how to find them. This information has been omitted from the footnotes for the purpose of tidiness.

What kinds of things granted a state power back then? Would contemporary authors agree with our modern debate? As we will see later, the Dutch opinion and opinion of other Europeans on these matters were very different, which is why these will be considered separately. We will see at what moments these Dutch and foreign writers consider the Republic's great power status to be at an end, and why.

To finalize, in the conclusion, there will be an attempt to achieve synthesis between the modern and contemporary debates. As will be shown below, there are significant differences between these debates. Why these exist will be discussed, followed by a conclusive answer about where contemporary authors placed the loss of great power status of the Dutch Republic. Following this will be some suggestions to solve the discrepancies that have been shown to exist between the modern and contemporary debates, which will hopefully help to conclude the debate about the Dutch Republic as a great power, and the definitions of power and great power in general.

THE
CONDUCT of the ALLIES
AND THE
Management of the War
IMPARTIALLY EXAMINED.
IN WHICH

The Reasoning of the Author of *Faction Detected*,
as to FOREIGN AFFAIRS, is Considered and
Refuted.

By the AUTHOR of *Desertion Discussed*.

*Hinc usura vorax, avidumque in femore tempus,
Et concussa fides, & multis utile Bellum.*

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VI. examinés sur les principes de la na-
ture, à l'égard de la Societé & de ses
devoirs.



*Adimplere volumus, non mordere :
prodesse, non ledere. Erasim.*

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'T VERLANGEN
V A N
E U R O P A ;
O F

ZEDIG ONDERZOEK, OF DE VEREENIGDE
Nederlanden in de tegenwoordige tyds-omstan-
digheden zig kunnen houden buiten 't Ge-
schil tusschen de Koninginne van *Hungarye*
en *Bobemen*, en eenige tegen Haare Majesteit
verbonden Vorsten :

Opgedragen aan den Hoog Ed. Heere

W. VAN HAREN,

DOOR

MR. DAVID VAN EVERS DYCK. R. G.



In 's GRAVENHAGE,
By ISAAC BEAUREGARD,
Boekverkooper in de Spuytstraat 1742.

MAATSCH.
NEDERL. LETTERK.

Figure 1: Four typical treatises. From top left to bottom right, treatises of English, German, French and Dutch origins. Note the lengthy titles, especially the German one mentioning many different subjects. Many of these subjects are in some way related to the balance of power in Europe, again showing how diverse that term is and why the used corps of sources has such a diverse range of subjects.

These sources can all be found in the source list at the end of this paper.

Chapter 1: From player to pawn.

Modern perspectives on eighteenth-century state power, the Dutch Republic as a great power, and the balance of power.

The main question of this thesis demands that several things from our modern debate are clarified. There are three general topics that will be discussed in this chapter: the Dutch Republic as a great power and when that status was lost, the definitions of power and great power, and finally the nature of the balance of power. First we will be looking at the debate about the Dutch Republic as a great power. We will consider the argumentations and perspectives of various scholars. What were the most important elements of Dutch power? When did the Dutch Republic no longer possess these elements of power? When was the Dutch Republic no longer a great power, and why was this status lost? Once this analysis is complete, we can start making some statements about the modern academic opinion on power and great power status, our second topic. What are the core elements of power according to modern scholars? Strongly related to this, then, is the question how the status of ‘great power’ should be defined in the first place. What constitutes a great power? What requirements must a state fulfill for modern academics to see it as a great power? This definition has also been subject to debate, not seldomly in conjunction with the debate about the status of the Dutch Republic. Finally, we should also shortly consider the topic of the balance of power. How should we look at it? It is already known that there is no clear definition of the concept, which is and has always been the case.¹⁸ This paper will not attempt to give a clearer definition of the concept. It will only be explained and core elements of the balance of power will be discussed, which will help us better understand the contemporary discussions about the balance of power and the role the Dutch Republic played in it.

If we eventually wish to achieve synthesis between past and modern perceptions of the Dutch Republic as a great power, it is very important to consider the large debate that has been going on around this subject. Of course, important to us are the moments these authors consider to be the points or periods in time that the Dutch Republic lost her great power status. However, given the fact that the power of the Republic consisted of multiple aspects, it is also relevant to us to study the arguments the authors propose for their viewpoints on the matter. What elements of power did, according to them, make up the great power status of the

¹⁸ Anderson, ‘Eighteenth-Century theories on the balance of power’, 183.

Republic? When did the Republic start losing these elements, fading away as a great power? Having a good overview of these arguments is very important if we wish to compare with the past, where there also have been certain perceptions of what exactly brought a state power or the great power status, which we will see in later chapters.

To start us off, we have Olaf Mörke to argue for the year 1672, The Year of Disaster (*Rampjaar*), as the end of the Dutch Republic as a great power in Europe. In his article about the Republic's place between other European powers, he discusses the nature of Dutch power. According to him, the political power of the Republic was based off of her economic strength and the economic advantages she had over her competitors. This strength was also her weakness, according to Mörke. Damaging the economy would damage political power as well. France decided to do exactly this with trade embargoes, tariff lists and taxation of Dutch goods later in the seventeenth century. Because politics and economy were so closely intertwined in the Dutch Republic, this made France both an economic and a political enemy that was able to damage Dutch power whenever it desired to do so during the many wars around the end of the century.

Another way in which this relationship between the economy and political power was dangerous was related to the political structure of the Republic. Many regents were merchants and traders, who valued money over military prestige, unlike other European rulers such as Louis XIV. Therefore, whenever there was a time of peace, the regents immediately sought to decrease the power of the stadtholder and to reduce the size and expenses of the military. Instead, the regents focused on keeping the Republic out of conflict, which was most profitable to their business. This political course allowed France, England and the German states of Cologne and Münster to nearly overrun the Republic in 1672.

Mörke argues that after 1672 the Republic could hardly play any important role in European politics because of these economic vulnerabilities and the reluctance to keep the military in a good fighting condition at all times. Dutch power depended too much on peacetime conditions.¹⁹ Mörke thus looks at the problem from an economic and political perspective, blaming the loss of great power status on the growing incapability and unwillingness of the Republic to act and defend her economic interests.

Quite a popular period in time during which the Republic is perceived to lose her great power status is during the Spanish war of Succession and the following Peace of Utrecht (1713). Perhaps a good place to start here is Victor Enthoven. Enthoven, much like Mörke,

¹⁹ Mörke, 'In het Centrum van Europa', 293.

blames the loss of great power status on the economic structure of the Republic. An interesting argument about economic dependence is presented. During the 80 years' war, Spain and the Dutch Republic were depending on each other for a lot of trade and profit, which helped finance the war effort on both sides. After the Münster peace, there again were favorable trading conditions for the Republic. The most important competitor was England, but there was no economic dependence on either side, so a trade war was hardly possible. England was unable to touch the Dutch trade supremacy that made her powerful. However, this all changed when France became an important market for the Dutch. Unlike earlier times, this relationship was one-way: the Dutch needed France to make good trade profits, but not the other way around. France sought and managed to exploit this, and was easily able to hurt the Dutch economy. The Dutch were unable to do anything about this.

The situation worsened in the late seventeenth century because of trade restrictions put up against France, as a part of the agreements of the Grand Alliance that fought against France. The Republic still wanted to trade, as it was a necessity, but during the Nine Years' War and the Spanish War of Succession it was forbidden by the allies to trade with the enemy. Especially the navy was hit hard by these economic difficulties, as they were partially directly dependent on trade profits. This issue was one of the major reasons why the Dutch navy was lacking in numbers and strength during the Spanish War of Succession. Enthoven places the moment of the loss of great power status for the Republic somewhere during the Spanish War of Succession, although the above does seem to argue that already in the decades before this, Dutch power was quickly waning because of the economic dependence, growing trade barriers and all the problems that resulted from that.²⁰

David Onnekink looks at the problem from a diplomatic viewpoint. The War of Spanish Succession was going favorably for the Republic around 1710. Unfortunately for the Republic however, a major change in political course took place in the British Parliament, which soon started separate peace negotiations with France. The Republic was already having issues bringing together enough money to fight in the alliance, and would never be able to continue fighting France alone. Thus, there was a lot of pressure for peace talks, even though not all of the Dutch war goals had been met. Because of the Dutch dependence on Great Britain to continue any fighting, France no longer had to be as careful with her diplomacy as she had been while she was losing in the war, and started making more aggressive demands towards the Republic, bolstered by the prospect of Great Britain leaving the war. The war

²⁰ Enthoven, 'De ondergang van de Nederlandse handelssuprematie', 263.

itself and the Peace of Utrecht ultimately ended up being successful for the Republic, but the war had exposed some major problems: all things considered, she had been unable to follow her own political goals and had been crucially dependent on Great Britain to fight the war with France, and had been unable to do anything about Great Britain and France negotiating peace terms without including the Republic. In another article written by Onnekink he also explains that the problems caused by the Spanish war of Succession left such a sour taste in the mouths of the regents, that further participation in larger European affairs and risking another war was strictly avoided by neutrality politics.²¹ Onnekink summarizes the loss of great power status as being caused by internal political divisions, incorrect interpretations of English politics, and as a result being powerless and reluctant to follow an independent political course because of monetary and military shortcomings.²²

Frequently mentioned when talking about the decay of Dutch power after the Treaty of Utrecht are the debts the Republic accumulated during the Spanish War of Succession. Johan Boogman states that after the war, most of the income of Holland, the richest province of the Republic, had to be spent on interest payments for the war debts. As a result it was simply impossible to maintain an army and a navy big enough to play an important role in international politics. Forced neutrality then led to a lack of a common enemy for the Republic, which caused quarrels among the various provinces and regents, decreasing unity and hindering governmental efficiency, further weakening the Republic's military and navy. The Republic was formed by and owed its strength to a basis of war, and when that basis of war was exchanged for neutrality politics, Boogman argues, there was no way the Republic could survive as a coherent powerful state.²³

Moving on to the decades beyond the Treaty of Utrecht, we still see plenty of support for the great power status of the Dutch Republic. Jonathan Israel acknowledges that after the Peace of Utrecht, the Republic's military power declined relative to other European powers. Her military spending returned to peacetime levels, in much the same fashion as had happened in the late seventeenth century at her zenith of power. Different this time around however was the fact that other European states maintained much larger peacetime armies, thus showing a relative decline of Dutch military power. True decline didn't happen until

²¹ D. Onnekink, 'Nederland en het Europese machtsevenwicht', in: J. Pekelder, R. Raben and M. Segers eds., *De wereld volgens Nederland: Nederlandse buitenlandse politiek in historisch perspectief* (Amsterdam 2015) 25-41, see 32-33.

²² Onnekink, 'Een generale, goede en duursame vrede', 63-94.

²³ J. Boogman, 'Achtergronden, tendenties en tradities van het buitenlands beleid van Nederland (eind zestiende eeuw – 1940)', in: N.C.F. van Sas ed., *De kracht van Nederland: Internationale positie en buitenlands beleid in historisch perspectief* (Haarlem 1991) 16-35, see 23-24.

much later, and throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, the Dutch Republic was at least a ‘middle-ranking power of considerable importance in European and world affairs.’²⁴ Thus, Israel argues for a relative decline that in the first few decades of the eighteenth centuries kept the Republic up with the great powers, after which further decline changed that reality.

Another supporter of a late loss of great power status is William Doyle. He also emphasizes the relativeness of the decay of Dutch power, arguing that the Dutch economy and Dutch credit remained significant players on the international stage until at least the 1730s. Signifying of still being powerful during the war of Spanish Succession, he talks about the large contribution of troops the Republic gave the alliance during the War of the Spanish Succession. As a symptom of decreasing significance Doyle speaks about neutrality politics playing an important role after the Peace of Utrecht, with the exception of the Austrian war of Succession, in which the Republic ‘gained nothing that could not have been secured by neutrality.’²⁵ The only beneficial outcome from the war was that France was temporarily exhausted and could no longer pose a threat, allowing the Republic to once again focus on trade instead of conflict. However, this would prove detrimental as it caused an alienation from England, which would eventually result in the disastrous Fourth Anglo-Dutch war.²⁶

Olaf van Nimwegen argues that the relevance of the Dutch Republic as a military force on land didn’t end until 1756. During the Austrian war of Succession the Republic still played a very important role, at one point even managing to raise an army of 90,000 to fight for the alliance, although at a gigantic cost. The relevance of the year 1756 in the loss of great power status is because in 1756 Austria made an alliance with France, which nullified the significance of the barrier fortresses the Republic had in the Austrian Netherlands.²⁷ In the years before this, the old alliances with Great Britain and Austria and the barrier itself had already been decaying.²⁸ Without the barrier, the Republic was unable to defend herself against new French aggression, although France was out of the way as a threat for the moment.

Among all these people, there are also some scholars who believe that the Dutch Republic never was a great power to begin with. An example is Peter Rietbergen. He claims

²⁴ Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 985-986.

²⁵ Doyle, *The old European Order*, 276.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Nimwegen, ‘De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden in oorlog met Frankrijk’, 82-83.

²⁸ O. van Nimwegen, *De Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden als grote mogendheid: buitenlandse politiek en oorlogvoering in de eerste helft van de achttiende eeuw en in het bijzonder tijdens de Oostenrijkse Successieoorlog (1740-1748)* (Amsterdam 2002) see chapters IX and X, 347-402.

that the Republic was never truly able to become a great power, because her own territory and population were too small to draw armies from. Still, the Republic is often seen by scholars as a great power because regardless of the above, she was too powerful to be completely ignored by other countries either, especially when it came to matters at sea. Rietbergen also concedes that she was of great economic significance in Europe. However, the Republic also was constantly meandering in her politics, stuck between England and France, and was therefore incapable of fully deciding her own political course. This was complicated further by the way the Republic was governed, which required a lot of discussions and concessions, slowing down decision-making. The fact that economic matters played a big role in Dutch politics wasn't helpful either. Therefore the Republic was unable to be completely independent and to create her own path forward, which according to Rietbergen should be a prerequisite for being called a great power.²⁹

Helmut Gabel is also opposed to the idea of the Republic ever having been a great power. He acknowledges that the Republic was a powerful force to be reckoned with until the eighteenth century, but that even before that the Republic had crucial weaknesses. An example of this is the Republic always following England in her political course in the late seventeenth century. Gabel brings in some contemporary writers that did not consider the Republic a great power, for the reason that she alone wasn't able to fight in a war to defend her interests, and that her politics were too much focused on peace. Another problem was again the decentralized political system, which made it very difficult to create a consistent foreign policy between the regents and the stadtholder at the time, William III. Thus, Gabel argues that if a country cannot decide its own foreign policy, then that country can't be seen as a great power.³⁰

These scholars and their research are examples of the much broader debate with many more opinions. Niek van Sas calls the Republic powerful until the turn of the eighteenth century, after which any power the Republic was thought to have was merely a façade.³¹ Johan Aalbers considers the decay to have started in 1713, but the Republic remained a relevant force in Europe in his eyes until roughly the 1740s by influencing French and English politics.³² Just about every single book or article writing about the Republic inevitably starts

²⁹ Rietbergen, 'Persuasie en mediatie', 22.

³⁰ Gabel, 'Zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit', 33-35.

³¹ N.C.F. Van Sas, 'De kracht van Nederland: Nationaliteit en buitenlands beleid', in: N.C.F. van Sas ed., *De kracht van Nederland: Internationale positie en buitenlands beleid in historisch perspectief* (Haarlem 1991) 9-15, see 11.

³² Aalbers, 'Het machtsverval van de Republiek der Verenigde Nederlanden, 29-31.

speaking of decay in an economic, political, naval or military sense after the Spanish war of Succession. We can continue almost indefinitely with mentioning arguments, but the arguments we've seen so far seem to cover most of what the modern debate consists of. We have very clearly seen what modern academics consider to be key elements of power: size and usage of military, a strong economy, the land area of the state and the size of the population to recruit soldiers that are sure to have the best interests of the state in mind (as opposed to mercenaries) and the ability to follow an independent foreign policy. Very obvious is that most of these are highly objectivist arguments. After all, the size of the military, economic profits, land area and population size can be put in numbers and compared to other states. The only exceptions we've seen so far are the considerations about the Republic being able to follow her own political course and her ability to influence other states. Of course the mentioned elements are important to power, but by the end of this paper one will be able to see the gap in our knowledge about social-constructivist elements of power, which certainly mattered as well, as will be shown.

Naamen der Staaten.	Grootte in	Bevolking, zielen.	Inkomsten, Daalders.	Krygsmacht	
	vierk. myl.			te land. Man	ter zee. Schep. van lijie.
III. FRANKRYK . . .	10000	25,000000	—	—	—
IV. GROOT-BRITTANNIEN.	6000	12,000000	114,000000	60000	170
V. VEREENIGDE NE- DERLANDEN . . .	625	2,500000	15,000000	40000	35
VI. OOSTENRYK . . .	10000	20,000000	60,000000	300000	—

Figure 2: An excerpt of a table taken from a Dutch treatise from 1791. This table compares various qualities of France, Great Britain, the Dutch Republic and Austria. From left to right: Land area in square miles, population count, national income, size of the army and of the navy. Seeing this comparison of these objectivist criteria, it is no surprise that some don't see the Republic as a great power during this time. Note that this table is still more or less representative of the situation 50 years earlier, according to contemporary treatises at least.

Source: *De staatkundige balans van Europa* (Amsterdam 1791) 1. *Short Title Catalogue Netherlands* (STCN). Record number: ppn 183924754.

These observations about the debate of the Dutch Republic as a great power agree with broader discussions about power and great powers that exist in the academic world. Matthew Anderson argues that back in eighteenth-century Europe, especially the physical size of the state and the population count were highly important in how powerful a state was judged to

be. After all, that meant that armies could be conscripted and fed.³³ Jeremy Black agrees with this, but explains that quality mattered as well beside quantity. Governments needed to be able to mobilize their resources, to make crucial changes to military and government. Only then could a state properly respond to changes in the world around it and continue to play an important role.³⁴ These same arguments are also often used to discuss whether or not the Republic was a great power at any given point. We saw Rietbergen arguing for a large state and population as a necessity, for example. Instead of extensively re-analyzing the literature we just discussed for the concept of ‘great power’ however, a quote from Simon Groenveld will be used instead, as it encompasses most of the arguments we see in the debate:

*‘[The notion of great power] indicates sovereign states, which are quantitatively and qualitatively able to determine and follow their own foreign policy that other states are required to take in regard, and are able to fight a war relying on their own power. The size of the state plays a significant role, as does the population count and economic power, if only for the resulting profits that could be mobilized for support political and military power’.*³⁵

So, modern opinions about the core elements of power are often objectivist in nature, and the same goes for the debate about great power status, with the additional requirements that a country can be independent of other states thanks to these objectivist elements and good governance. We can already ask ourselves however if such definitions suffice. The one cited above implies that power comes from within a state only. But does power not actually exist relative to others? Certainly, a role must also be played by those others then, perhaps through *attribution* of power not necessarily based on objectivist elements. Can a state be a great power because other states consider it to be one? The definition above wouldn’t allow us to say so, but as we will see when we get to the contemporary debate, definitions like the one quoted above run into severe difficulties, and it will be shown that the attribution of power was very important in considerations about the Dutch Republic as a great power.

Finally, it is time to shortly consider the balance of power. As said before, the term was and is hardly well defined. William Doyle calls it ‘A nebulous concept’.³⁶ Matthew S. Anderson states that ‘The balance of power was still, as it was always to remain, a cloudy and

³³ Anderson, ‘Eighteenth-Century theories on the Balance of Power’, 186.

³⁴ Black, ‘The theory of the balance of power’, 58.

³⁵ S. Groenveld, ‘Ter inleiding’, in: S. Groenveld, M. Ebben and R. Fagel eds., *Tussen Münster & Aken: De Nederlandse Republiek als grote mogendheid (1648-1748)* (Maastricht 2005) 3-8, see 4.

³⁶ Doyle, *Old European order*, 266.

indefinite concept'.³⁷ This is highly interesting to see. The concept of the balance of power was central to the political debate of the eighteenth century, yet nobody truly knew what it encompassed. Even today, definitions are lacking. A few decades ago Martin Wight made an attempt to describe the balance of power using fifteen statements he created from observations about it in contemporary sources. The core of these fifteen statements is listed below:

- No single state should ever become strong enough to dominate the rest. Any aggressors must be dealt with by the overwhelming force of the rest of the whole system.
- The balance is not made on a basis of equality; power distribution is approximate.
- The balance is not rigid, alliances and the makeup of it can shift.
- The distribution of power in the balance is the basis of international order and freedom.
- Members have a duty to co-operate to avert dangers to the balance; the balance is a peace settlement and a form of international law.³⁸

Wight certainly has made a good attempt at capturing the concept, and what we later see in the sources seems to fit quite well within this outline. Yet, the many properties the concept seems to have illustrates the problem of defining the balance of power. Therefore, one must not think too narrowly when discussing the balance of power. This also explains the big diversity within the sources: many different topics are related to the balance of power in some way because it was such a vaguely defined concept. This is also why sources aren't always directly written about the balance of power, but rather about things relating to it, such as alliances, threats to international freedoms such as trade, the conduct of governments or state interests, to name a few examples.

³⁷ Anderson, 'Eighteenth-Century theories on the balance of power', 183.

³⁸ M. Wight, 'The balance of power and International Order' in: M.C. Brands, N.C.F. van Sas and B.A.G.M. Tromp eds., *De Veiligheid van Europa: Aspecten van de ontwikkeling van het Europese statenstelsel* (Rijswijk 1991) 1-26, see 11-17.



Figure 3: A literal, visual representation of a balance of power. In this case it concerns Great Britain fighting the Spanish, French and the Dutch during America's struggle for independence, but this image quite simply captures the contemporary concept: state power existed as balance, and coalitions would always attempt to keep the balance even against a stronger state.

Source: American Antiquarian Society, European Political prints 1781-84, Folder 1, BM Number BM-5827.

As has been plentifully mentioned now, the contemporary debate holds much more than the mainly objectivist reasoning we have seen above. Before we dive into all of our sources, perhaps it is a good idea to illustrate and introduce the differences in thought by using an example.

A good place to start might be the *Institutions politiques* By Jacob von Bielfeld, a Prussian baron writing about the political systems of Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. In his second book from 1760, the European political system, power in general, the balance of power and separate states are considered. When Bielfeld talks about power we can make a comparison to the modern debate. To quote a definition he gives for power:

[the word power encompasses]... *toutes les qualities & proprietes d'un Etat, don't la reunion fait naitre les forces & les ressources qui lui sont nécessaires pour se faire respecter des autres Peuples de la Terre, se defender contre leurs attaques, & faire valoir, dans le besoin, les droits & les pretentions qui'il peut avoir à leur charge*³⁹

It seems that Bielfeld agrees mostly with the modern debate: as elements for a powerful state he mentions a state being able to gather the resources and strength to defend itself, to make itself respected and to assert its rights and goals, things that could probably best be achieved by military force. But later on he makes an interesting statement: he claims that it is easy to believe that a state's power is directly dependent on the land area the state possesses, something we also see in the modern debate. This however, is not necessarily true according to Bielfeld. Often, large states have large empty territories that do not add to a state's power, but still need to be defended. Bigger states have more neighbors that can attack from more directions. He goes on to mention that a large population isn't a guarantee of power either: quality matters over quantity in his opinion, because the past has proven several times that smaller states can defeat much bigger ones. 'Real' power comes from more than just a good geographical position, the amount of inhabitants and the state's economy.⁴⁰

Bielfeld then makes a further interesting statement on power. Power involves a decently sized territory (but not too empty as mentioned above), decently populated to supply the army, requires a favorable position preferably with access to the sea, needs rich trade and industries, good contacts with other great powers to participate in important international affairs, needs patriotism of a sort, the ability to sustain a war over longer periods and time, and finally requires a government that governs based on wisdom and not on ignorance, superstition and greed.⁴¹ Here we see many objectivist arguments return, but also a few new arguments we can call social-constructivist in nature: the geographical position of the country, political structure, good governance, international contacts and an army that wishes to serve the fatherland. Further on another very relevant point is made, namely that the power of a state is also, in part, based on the opinion of other states. If a certain state is taken in high regard, perhaps because of past prestige that has gained the state a lot of respect, that state can

³⁹ J.F. von Bielfeld, *Institutions politiques: Tome second.* (Leiden 1760) 78.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 79-80.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 80.

be an important power without actually meeting the objectivist requirements for this.⁴² Bielfeld mentions the Papal State as an example, but something like this also applies to the Dutch Republic, as will be discussed later.

In this case, Bielfeld serves to illustrate some things we can find in the discussions about the balance of power. The objectivist arguments we saw in the modern debate also apply to past thought, but as expected, there is more than just that, as we will first see in our next chapter about Dutch pessimism about their own power.

⁴² Ibidem, 82.

Chapter 2: ‘The Truth is, we have a very bad game to play...’⁴³ Dutch pessimism about Dutch power.

When analyzing contemporary opinions about the power of the Dutch Republic, a clear, almost perfect split is observed within these contemporary opinions. On one hand, Dutch writers and thinkers are pessimistic about Dutch power in various aspects, especially in the later eighteenth century. They don’t attribute the Republic a large role in European affairs, they claim that the Republic has little interest in engaging in those affairs unless their own business is at stake and they often see themselves as not being powerful in any way in the first place. On the other hand, sources from other European countries are much more positive about Dutch power, as we will see in the next chapter.

This chapter will focus on the Dutch pessimism, and we will discuss the several reasons why the Dutch didn’t view the Republic as a great power during most of the first half of the eighteenth century. Why were the Dutch so pessimistic about the power and capabilities of the Republic? What arguments were put forward to show that the Dutch Republic wasn’t a player, but merely a pawn on the European chessboard? As mentioned before, modern scholars are already aware of this pessimism. The reasons often mentioned in this light involve economic issues after the Spanish War of Succession and a desire to focus on a profitable trade rather than warfare, which was of course detrimental to trade. We know that there is truth in these kinds of arguments, but did the contemporary Dutch understand this as well, or were there other reasons for their pessimism?

It turns out that the pessimism was well-argued for by contemporary Dutch writers. Several reasons to be pessimistic about Dutch power can be uncovered from analyzing our sources, each of which will be separately discussed, in decreasing order of prominence in the sources. The first and foremost mentioned reasons about the Dutch Republic not being a great power are objectivist in nature. The status and size of the military and economy were considered to be instrumental to power, and it is acknowledged that the Republic had problems with both of these. Secondly, it also shows that, in part because of these problems, the Dutch were reluctant to attempt to play the role of a great power in the first place, rather trying to stay of conflict and nourishing their trade. Thirdly, and interestingly when compared to later chapters, the Dutch see themselves as weak because they feel like they are highly dependent on their main allies, Austria and Great-Britain. They were required to help keep the

⁴³ *The Conduct of the Dutch Explained and Vindicated, in which the Business of the Barrier, the Succour of the Queen of Hungary, and the Succession of East-Friesland are clearly stated.* (London 1744) 22.

Republic's barrier in the Southern Netherlands intact in the face of French expansionism. This dependence also led to treaties that forced the Republic out of her neutrality, which was also viewed as negative. This brings us to a fourth reason we frequently see, namely that the allies took advantage of the Republic. She was forced into alliances because of the French threat, but her own needs were supposedly ignored by the allies because the Republic had no choice but to follow their demands, whatever they were. To finalize, some more general observations from the sources that bring us the feeling of pessimism will be discussed.

As mentioned, the seemingly most important reason why the Dutch didn't view the Republic as very powerful is objectivist in nature, and matches what we know from our modern debate: the Dutch Republic simply wasn't able to participate in European affairs on a level that the European great powers could because the Republic was unable to maintain a qualitatively and quantitatively comparable land army or navy, in part thanks to the poor state of the economy. For instance, in a published letter from a member of the Estates-General to a member of the British Parliament in 1744, the writer explains to the Brit why the Republic isn't so eager to participate in the Austrian War of Succession. To begin, he states that:

*'You know that we are not recover'd from the Expences brought upon us by the last general War [Spanish War of Succession], and therefore need not be surpriz'd that we are not over fond of entering upon a new one?'*⁴⁴

A little further on it is said that the French army has shown itself to be vastly superior to the Republic's forces, which makes the Republic want to stay neutral, out of fear of a French invasion.⁴⁵ Interestingly, this writer is pessimistic, but assumes the British recipient to be pessimistic as well by saying:

*'How low an Opinion soever you may have of the Dutch, I hope you will allow, that they ought not to be made Beasts of Burthen...'*⁴⁶

Thus we see that this writer doesn't deem the Republic powerful enough to play a large role in European politics, because the Republic has monetary issues, an army lacking in quality and quantity, and a much more formidable enemy that poses a risk, should the

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 5-6.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, 9.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, 18.

Republic decide come out of her neutrality. Because of this, the writer asks for the Dutch to be excused for remaining neutral to avoid exacerbation of their already glaring problems.

De Jaaren	't Getal der Soldaaten in Vlaanderen	Dito in Portugaal	Dito in Spanjen	Onderstandtgeden aan verſcheide Vorſten betaalt. Ryxdrs.	't Getal der Oorlog Schepen
1701	79858	Het getal der Troupen, naar Portugaal en Spanjen gefonden, bedraagt 23807 Man.		75000	
1702	110242			200000	55
1703	120242			360555	50
1704	120242			610333	56
1705	120242			707593	56
1706	121242			791868	54
1707	112271			1168784	49
1708	122458			1210805	53
1709	122458			1162118	50
1710	129458			1162118	43
1711				1162118	40

Figure 4: This table from a 1726 treatise shows the Dutch contributions of (from left to right) troops, money to allies and warships to the Spanish War of Succession. Considering the fact that the Republic only had about two to two-and-a-half million inhabitants around this time, it is not surprising that the relatively large manpower and monetary contributions exhausted the Republic's resources.

Source: *Verhandeling, Daarin ontdekt worden: I. De Rampzaalige gevolgen, die de Engelsche en Hollanders van de oprichting der Compagnie van Oostende te vreesen hebben.* (Amsterdam 1726) 5.

In a treatise from a somewhat later time, 1759, discussing Prussia's rise to power, we see similar sentiments when both France and Prussia are considered to be dangerous to the Republic, because of the reduction of her standing armies, navies and a general apathy to war. The writer warns that the Republic now risks becoming a simple pawn in the game of Europe, something the modern academic debate often considers true for this time period.⁴⁷ A published exchange of polemic letters between two Dutch politicians from 1740 also shows this process already happening then, when we find complaints in their communication about how the Republic is unable to maintain good relations with other powers because of her neutrality, and has been incapable of following up on her political promises to her allies. The expansion of the Dutch army in response to the outbreak of the Austrian war of Succession is noted here, but is also written off as still being insignificant when it's considered relative to

⁴⁷ *Aanmerkingen over den Aanwasch der Grootheit en Ontzachelyke Oppermacht van Zyne Majesteit den Koning van Pruissen, Mitsgaders wat influentie van voor, ofte nadeel, progressen zyner Wapenen, op het politicq Systema van Europe natuurlykerwyze zoude kunnen hebben.* (The Hague 1759) 9.

the might of other European powers.⁴⁸ One of the writers even apathetically states that maybe the government shouldn't have bothered, given the fact that such a small augmentation didn't add anything to the real strength of the army and was wasted effort better spent on other affairs.⁴⁹

Besides the (to the Dutch) obvious incapability of taking on an important role in European politics, there is also a clear reluctance to do so, even if it were possible. Trade is often used as an argument why the Republic couldn't and shouldn't participate in any conflicts after the Spanish War of Succession. In a series of books containing several published letters from a Dutchman to a friend, we see his awareness that trade was what once made the Dutch Republic strong. War, he then argues, is a way to disrupt the trade, and as a consequence also Dutch power. Therefore, intervening in European conflicts such as the Austrian War of Succession is undesirable.⁵⁰

However, this same person also states that the Republic staying out of war wasn't always a good thing. The same letter discussed above reveals the opinion that the anti-war mentality is strange: the writer sees the neutrality as malicious, and that his fellow countrymen are sacrificing their lives and luxuries by allowing France to grow stronger, instead of intervening like their ancestors did.⁵¹ Likewise, in a treatise discussing European interests, the writer also acknowledges the Dutch weakness, but states that by remaining neutral the Republic is alienating herself from her former allies. War is bad, but on the long term neutrality will also be detrimental. The Republic depends on Great Britain and Austria to survive and vice versa, thus she should participate in the wars they are fighting to secure the alliance and guarantee their and her own continued existence.⁵² From these last two authors we really get the impression that the Republic was stuck between two evils. Whatever she picked, it would lead to more trouble in one way or another.

Another argument in Dutch pessimism is a general feeling of dependence on other powers. The Dutch were terrified that the French would get their hands on their barrier in the Southern Netherlands. In the same treatise we just discussed the writer states that the barrier is

⁴⁸ *Het Pro en Contra, wegens de Vermeerdering Der Magt Van de Republicq. Door twee Vermaarde Politiken.* (Alkmaar 1740) 6-12.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 12.

⁵⁰ *Lettres d'un Seigneur Hollandois a un de ses amis. Sur les droits, les Interêts & les différentes vuës particulieres des Puissances Belligerantes. Avec des réflexions Politiques sur les Evénemens les plus intéressans de la Guerre Présente. Tome premier.* (The Hague 1747) 13.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*. 4-5.

⁵² D. van Eversdyck, *'T Verlangen van Europa; of Zedig Onderzoek, of de Vereenigde Nederlanden in de tegenwoordige tyds-omstandigheden zig kunnen houden buiten 't Geschil tussen de Koninginne van Hungarye en Bohemen, en eenige tegen Haare Majesteit verbonden Vorsten.* (s.l. 1742) 27-29; 56.

the most important security measure the Republic has, but it strongly depends on other great powers to defend it for the Republic. These other powers must be allied to or at least look favorably upon the Republic, otherwise the Republic is in great danger of being overwhelmed by France.⁵³ In a way the barrier gets a negative connotation here, as it requires alliances, while the Republic would rather stay neutral. This is in contradiction to the European view of the barrier we will discuss later. One earlier discussed writer even states that the barrier is a bad thing. The author speaks about how in practice, the barrier doesn't work as it is constantly overrun by France. At the same time however, the barrier treaties do force the Republic to participate in conflicts she doesn't want to participate in. Again, as a result of dependence on others, the Republic suffers.⁵⁴

It has also turned out that dependence might not have just been on the allies, but on France as well in this time. We've seen in the academic debate above that France was very important in Dutch trade, so conflict with France was to be avoided. In a response to a letter from the French ambassador in 1742, the writer, possibly the Estates-General or a member thereof, explicitly states that the Republic wants peace with France because it keeps her trade, her means of existence, secure. In this letter the Republic even mealy pleases the French king to permit her to 'Conserve precious alliances and confederations' with her former allies to protect her own borders.⁵⁵ Thus we see here the acknowledgement that Dutch trade still depends on France. In this source, it almost sounds as if the Republic sees herself as a vassal of France. While this isn't the case of course, appeasing language like this does show how the Dutch felt about their own chances if it came to a war with France, with or without the allies.

Another reason why the Dutch felt pessimistic about their power should perhaps not be sought in the Republic herself, but rather in her allies, Great Britain and Austria. These were frequently allied to each other and the Republic between the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. What can sometimes be found in Dutch sources is a sense of betrayal by these other powers. The earlier cited writer to a British member of Parliament states that the Republic follows up on her promises made in treaties and agreements during the Austrian war of Succession, but only does so reluctantly because, for her support to the war, she gets nothing in return from the allies. The writer asks the recipient whether it is so strange then that the Republic is careful in what she does and that they shouldn't be surprised that pushing

⁵³ Ibidem, 16-17.

⁵⁴ *Lettres d'un Seigneur Hollandois a un de ses amis. Sur les droits, les Interêts & les differentes vuës particulieres des Puissances Belligerantes. Avec des réflexions Politiques sur les Evénemens les plus intèressans de la Guerre Présente. Tome second.* (The Hague 1747) 153-154.

⁵⁵ *Antwoort op de Voorgestelde Memorie van den heer Ambassadeur van Vrankryk.* (The Hague 1742) 14.

the Republic too much will only make her less eager to exert herself for the cause of others.⁵⁶ In a previously discussed letter it is claimed that the Republic refuses to fight alongside her allies, because she is afraid that these allies will impose laws and treaties on her that are against her own interests.⁵⁷ Further elaboration in that letter has the writer claiming that the Republic has been consistently used by England and Austria without reward, and that it is not certain whether these allies would do the same for the Republic if the need were to arise.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, participating in the war of the Austrian Succession is perilous to the Republic, claims the same writer in a different letter, and getting engaged further in the war is a sure way to cause even more detriment to the Republic.⁵⁹ In a longer French version of the letter this chapter started off with, it is also shown that Austria doesn't defend the Southern Netherlands properly, because Austria knows that Great Britain and The Republic will take over that responsibility, because they have no other choice. Austria has thus seen fit to abandon the Republic here.⁶⁰ The Republic doesn't want things to be like this, but has no choice, and in effect is always the loser: either do as her allies say and become victim of their will, or be enslaved by the enemy.⁶¹

Because of things like this, it shouldn't be surprising that the sources also show that the Dutch are not just passively unable but also actively unwilling to try and play the role of a great power, instead rather concentrating on securing themselves and their own good. Sometimes it is acknowledged that the Republic joining in or staying out of a war is good or bad for the balance of power, but when this is spoken of the reader also gets the idea that whatever role the Republic will play in the balance, it isn't a crucial role. A passive role in the balance of power is sometimes attributed as well. For example, one writer states that if France occupied the Republic, it would eventually lead to maritime supremacy over the British and a possible conquest of Great Britain following after that, fatally altering the balance of power.⁶²

The most important arguments given for Dutch pessimism have been mentioned above, but just from reading the texts and the tone they are written in one also gets the feeling the Republic isn't considered to be powerful. She is hardly ever mentioned as ever having been a great power. The few times where it is at least somewhat implied all argue for a

⁵⁶ *The Conduct of the Dutch Explained and Vindicated*, 10-12.

⁵⁷ *Lettres d'un Seigneur Hollandois a un de ses amis. Tome premier.* 11-12.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, 38-39.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, 242-244.

⁶⁰ *Lettres interessantes sur la Conduite des Hollandois, ecrite par un des Etats Generaux a un Membre du Parlement de la Grande-Bretagne. On l'en examine L'Affaire de la Barriere, les secours qu'on donne a la Reine d'Hongrie, & le cas de la Succession d'Ost-Frise.* (London 1744) 20.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 28.

⁶² van Eversdyck, *'T Verlangen van Europa*, 14-15.

powerful Republic only before the Treaty of Utrecht.⁶³ Consequentially, most of the sources originating from the Republic mainly discuss the wants and desires of the Republic above all else. Compared to the other European sources, there is relatively little attention to broader European matters, also showing us a kind of timidity the Dutch seemed to have about trying to be part of this bigger system, again showing their reluctance and self-perceived incapability of participating.

Because of these things it has become very clear that the Dutch were highly pessimistic about the power of the Dutch Republic. As we've seen, the Dutch saw their armies and navies as weak and had considerable economic issues, in part caused by the many previously fought wars. This rendered them incapable of playing an important role in larger European affairs, but even if they could they were reluctant to, rather focusing on keeping the peace to safeguard their trade. Besides this they seemed to think of their allies as bad allies, being perhaps only a lesser evil when compared to France instead of being good, reliable allies. This was because in the eyes of the Republic, her needs had frequently been ignored and her dealings with the allies forced her into actions she didn't want to commit, such as breaking her neutrality and getting involved in more conflicts. With these kinds of perceptions it is no wonder that the Dutch didn't consider themselves a great power, or even a considerable power during the first half of the eighteenth century, which explains the general apathy and negativity we see in our sources. Interestingly, we see a lot of objectivist arguments: the size and quality of army and navy and economic arguments dominate the negativity, although we also do see some social-constructivist argumentation such as the 'curse' of the barrier, which forced the Republic into malignant alliances and costly wars. This chapter thus confirms that much argumentation for a loss of great power status by the early eighteenth century from the modern debate was shared by the contemporary Dutch. We can ask ourselves if perhaps modern authors have focused too much on Dutch sources when trying to determine her status as a great power. The European sources, then, might have been overlooked, given the fact that the Dutch pessimism about their power was not shared by contemporary Europeans, especially the British. We will see this in the coming chapter.

⁶³ See for example: *D'Ontmaskerde Fransman. Naaktelyk Vertonende dat den tegenwoordigen toeleg van Vrankrijk eygentlijk niet anders is, als by dese conjuncturen van tijden, De Vereenigde Nederlandtse Provincies Te subjugeren, om op de ruinen van de selve den Standaart van een Universele Monarchie op te Regten.* (Cologne 1701) 8.

Chapter 3: ‘Holland and Zealand are so strong by Nature, that they are capable of defending themselves against the whole world..’⁶⁴

European optimism about Dutch power.

Having analyzed the Dutch contemporary perspective on their great power status, and seeing the negative answer, it is now time to turn to the broader European debate. How did people living in other European states think about the power of the Dutch Republic? As mentioned, it turns out that the negativity seen quite early in Dutch sources finds no matching pessimism in the European sources. Almost uniformly, the European sources are much more optimistic about the capabilities and power of the Republic throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. While the Dutch Republic sees herself as a power struggling to continue her existence and clinging to neutrality in the hopes of surviving, the rest of Europe still sees her as formidable in various ways until as late as the 1750s. Considering what we know about the modern debate and the contemporary Dutch opinion, this is very surprising. Why couldn't the other European states see the weaknesses of the Republic and her incapability of keeping up with the rest of the European powers? This chapter will focus on analyzing the reasons why the Dutch Republic was still seen as an important power by other powers in Europe until roughly the end of the Austrian War of Succession (1740-1748).

If we shortly reconsider the debate outlined in the first chapter, it has to be clear that this perception of a powerful Dutch Republic couldn't have been based on objectivist reasoning. Indeed, as we study the contemporary European opinion, we see completely different arguments about what makes the Dutch Republic so powerful, many of them social-constructivist in nature. Again, several arguments are most prominent and these will be discussed in order of decreasing prominence.

A first argument is related to the past and prestige. It seems that contemporary thinkers and writers thought of prestige as an important element of power. Thus, the Republic's past achievements and the role she played in the balance of power and the Grand Alliance mattered a lot in the European perception of her power. Therefore, they judged the Republic to be much stronger than the Dutch themselves did. A second important reason the Europeans seemed to have for viewing the Republic as a great power is related to her governmental structure and how the country was ruled. Possibly because of the Enlightenment did the Europeans think of the Republican government and her careful maneuvering on the European

⁶⁴ *The advantages of the definitive Treaty, to the people of Great Britain, Demonstrated.* (London 1749) 16.

playing field as wise government, something to be commended and signifying of a wise, powerful state. Some even state that her course of government should be followed by others, attributing the Republic a leadership role in politics. The third important element we find is the Dutch barrier in the Southern Netherlands. As we will see, the barrier was thought of as a crucial part of the balance of power, important for all of Europe. The trust put in the Dutch to defend the barrier and her own stake in defending it bring us the belief that other Europeans thought of her as strong enough to play such an important role. These arguments are important, but also a general feeling one gets from reading the sources will be discussed, as that too speaks of the European optimism about Dutch power. Finalizing this chapter will be a short comparison between this European optimism and the previously discussed Dutch pessimism, as an interesting difference in perspectives on some arguments can be found.

Perhaps it is a good place to start where we ourselves are right now: studying history to find out how we got to where we are today. Those who wrote treatises and essays on the balance of power and European politics were no stranger to this. Plenty of these writings have historical considerations in them, often about the balance of power itself, or how various powers have risen to matter or fallen to lose significance in this balance. As it turns out, historical perspective on a certain power very much mattered in how powerful a state was perceived to be. As a German writer discussing the plans of the anti-French alliance during the Austrian War of Succession says:

‘A State should be no less cautious of risking its Honour and Reputation, than the Merchant his credit; for how rich soever the Adventurer, he is soon unhinged if he loses his Credit; and however powerful soever the State, it loses half its Weight and Influence, if it loses its Reputation, or forfeits its Honour.’⁶⁵

To this writer, prestige and honor clearly matter in how a state is perceived by others. It seems that this particular writer was not alone in this mentality; we already saw Bielfeld saying the same, and M.S. Anderson also found evidence of such thoughts, as seen in the introduction to this paper. Several times more in other sources studied for this paper there are also references to the Dutch Republic’s past, and prestige is given to the Republic based on that past, sometimes arguing that the Republic is in later times still as mighty as she was in her heyday.

⁶⁵ *An impartial review of the Present Troubles in Germany, the Conduct of the Generals now in the Field, and particularly of the late Battle of Dettingen* (London 1743) 36.

Several examples of this prestige can be found. Let us momentarily return to Jacob von Bielfeld. When he is writing his third book in the early 1770s, he does consider the Republic to be quite weak already, as we will see when he returns in a later chapter discussing the Dutch decay of power in European eyes. However, he remains somewhat optimistic, saying that the Dutch navy still has quite a bit of potential to become powerful once again. He bases this opinion on the fact that the Republic was in her recent past a state that always paid much attention to her navy. Bielfeld speaks of a former Dutch genius, and that no country in Europe was in that sense comparable to her at sea. Seventeenth-century Admirals Tromp and De Ruyter are mentioned as models for good navy management, and it is also stated that the British navy would have never stood a chance against the French in earlier wars, had the Republic not been there to give support.⁶⁶ Thus, although Bielfeld speaks mostly about the past here, he is convinced that the Republic, even as late as 1774, is perhaps able to become mighty and formidable at sea again, and is solely hindered by poor government.⁶⁷ Here we quite clearly see the point described above: because the Republic was at some point very mighty at sea, Bielfeld thinks that she is still quite capable of being so, if only the government tried harder. Nowadays we know that this wasn't true, and that the Republic's navy was in an abysmal condition, as would soon show in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, but this case neatly illustrates the power of prestige.

Bielfeld is a late example of this, but we also have some writers from a time period somewhat more fit to our discussion. In a treatise concerning the German territories in the Austrian War of Succession from 1741, the writer states that if the Duke of Marlborough, a very important British general during the Spanish war of Succession and Anthony Heinsius, Grand Pensionary of Holland 1689-1720, were to rise from their graves, 'they would blush for the bungling Conduct of their Countrymen'⁶⁸. This implies that, during the time period the author writes about, none of the allied powers were trying hard enough to stop France's growing power, but that they were certainly capable of doing so if only they put more effort into it. That in turn implies that nothing much has changed in the countries responsible for the balance of power, and brings us the idea that this writer thinks the Republic is still capable of playing the same role in the balance of power as she did during the Spanish war of Succession. Another example of prestige attributing power to the Republic is from 1749. In

⁶⁶ J.F. Von Bielfeld, *Institutions politiques: Tome troisieme* (Leiden 1774) 208-209.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 208.

⁶⁸ *The Groans of Germany: or, the enquiry of a Protestant German into the original Cause of the present Distractions of the Empire; the fatal Consequences of an Emperor devoted to France and the Conduct of Great Britain.* (London 1741) 11.

this treatise the peace treaty of Aix-la-Chappelle (1748) is discussed. The writer praises how the Dutch provinces of Holland and Zealand brought the Republic into the Austrian War of Succession, and claims that they were able to do so because:

*‘Holland and Zealand are so strong by Nature, that they are capable of defending themselves against the whole World...’*⁶⁹

The writer then explains why he feels that this is the case. He does so by referring to the Year of Disaster (1672). Louis XIV had almost overrun the Republic, but the spirit of the Dutch people was strong and decisive, which allowed them to decide to breach the dykes and save the Republic from demise.⁷⁰ This accomplishment apparently impressed the writer so much that he believed it could happen again. Once more, we see the idea that not much has changed since past times, and thus even as late as 1749 we see someone who is under the impression that the Republic can be an extremely powerful state if she desires to be so, thanks to the prestige she gained from surviving the Year of Disaster. These examples clearly demonstrate that the quote at the beginning of this chapter could be representative for some contemporary political thought: that prestige from even a long-gone past could still greatly matter in perceptions of power in later times.

Her own prestige wasn’t the only thing from the past that made the Republic seem more powerful than the Dutch themselves thought. Something else that seems to have made the Republic more powerful in European eyes is tradition, namely in the form of alliances. The ‘Old System’ of the Grand Alliance, an alliance mainly consisting of England (later Great Britain), the Dutch Republic and Austria was the core of resistance against the expansion of French Influence in Europe, from the late 17th century until 1756. Of course the Republic highly valued her allies, especially in later times, to keep her safe, but it seems that the other allies (most notably Great Britain) also desired that this Old System remained intact. In plenty of treatises writers seem convinced that the participation of the Dutch Republic in the alliance is crucial for a victory, as this alliance had had many victories in the past. An example of this is a treatise offering a solution to keep the balance of power safe, where it is argued that Great Britain should help out Austria in her conflict with France because if Great Britain, the

⁶⁹ *The advantages of the definitive Treaty*, 16.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 17.

Republic and Austria unite, it will mean victory over France.⁷¹ Later on the wording becomes a bit stronger and more clearly supportive of a powerful Dutch Republic:

‘And whatever Hopes England may flatter herself with, of supporting herself singly, when the rest of the world is subdued; I will venture to prophesy, that her Fate will be the same with the rest in a few Years, if not a few Months. For at the bottom, we and the Dutch are the Mark the French aim at.’⁷²

The writer is thus saying that Great Britain can’t fight her wars alone. Together with the Dutch they stand strong, and France attacking Austria is just an attempt to undermine that strength.⁷³ A treatise examining the conduct of the allies from 1747 even states that Great Britain follows the Republic in many things she does, and that following the Republic in her preparedness against France to resist her attempts at ‘ill purposes’ is advisable.⁷⁴ This even attributes a leadership role to the Dutch Republic in her mentality towards war. Being able to set examples and having powerful states follow the Republic in their political decisions makes the Republic seem quite powerful. More of Dutch attitudes towards war and peace will be discussed later on in this chapter.

In an earlier discussed treatise about the German territories we also see the desire that the Grand Alliance should be revived during the Austrian War of Succession in order to keep the peace in Europe, as settled by the Treaty of Utrecht.⁷⁵ The writer resents the fact that instead of this old alliance, a completely different, complex web of treaties and alliances has been formed to fight in the Austrian War of Succession. Great Britain isn’t doing a good job at keeping the balance in Europe and thus the Old System must be restored in order to keep the balance safe.⁷⁶ We see here that the Old System and Britain’s previous allies carry a lot of weight in the eyes of the contemporary writers, preferring this Old System that had always worked so well over a newer system, which they write off as unsuccessful. This also can be seen as a form of prestige, and the writer essentially asks: why change a winning team?

⁷¹ *The present measures proved to be the only means of securing the Balance of power in Europe, as well as the Liberty and Independency of Great Britain* (London 1743) 35.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 43.

⁷³ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁷⁴ *The conduct of the Allies and the management of the War, impartially Examined. In Which the Reasoning of the Author of Faction Detected as to Foreign Affairs, is considered and Refuted.* (London 1744) 6.

⁷⁵ *The Groans of Germany*, 43.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 43-44.

Strongly related to the prestige of the Old System is also the idea that there is some form of co-dependence between the Dutch and the British, which could have evolved from the many decades of close co-operation. Of course we see this a lot in the British sources. A treatise complaining about the newly established Ostend East-India Company written in 1726 emphasizes how strongly Great Britain and the Republic are connected. According to this writer, they together maintain the entire European balance of power, and because their security and trade are connected to each other, one cannot survive or maintain the balance of power without the other. The writer also states that if the Republic would disappear, no other would be strong enough to take over her prominent position.⁷⁷

This also explains a constant feature across many sources, namely that the Dutch Republic and Great Britain are very often mentioned together when wars and the balance of power are discussed, again with both as important keepers of the balance of power. An earlier mentioned general treatise considering the whole of the European balance of power defends the British crown for not declaring war on France as of 1743 and for not assisting the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in an earlier war, presumably the Polish War of Succession (1733-1735). Why did this happen? The writer mentions two reasons, one of which is very relevant to us:

*'The Dutch (without whom we ought to never engage in a Land-War) had signed a Neutrality with France...'*⁷⁸

What is obvious here is that Great Britain was afraid to get into any conflict on the continent without getting the Dutch involved, and that in two instances, because of the Republic's neutrality, Great Britain remained neutral (so far) in important European conflicts. This means that Great Britain, by most modern academics seen as much more powerful than the Republic at this time, maybe already a great power, seems to be quite heavily depending on the Dutch Republic to be able to exercise that power in Europe, at least on the continent. Consequentially, this makes the Dutch Republic seem quite powerful as well, being a necessary ingredient for the British to be successful in manifesting her power. The Republic, then, is able to have a great influence on the balance of power in Europe, by choosing to or

⁷⁷ *Verhandelinge, Daarin ontdekt worden: I. De Rampzalige gevolgen, die de Engelsche en Hollanders van de oprechtinge der Compagnie van Oostende te vreesen hebben.* (Amsterdam 1726) 2-19.

⁷⁸ *The present measures proved to be the only means of securing the Balance of power in Europe*, 23.

choosing not to participate in any given conflict. A powerful state depending on a different state grants that latter state quite a position of power in the eyes of others, as we can see here.

A treatise from 1735 considering the Polish War of Succession and the British role in this conflict has a similar tone. The writer is deeply concerned about the Republic's neutrality in this conflict. Perhaps the Republic is afraid to rely on her allies because of past diplomatic mishaps or changes in political climates.⁷⁹ But, what the author fears much more is the following:

*'... but perhaps, more probably, that French Gold has found its way to some of the Chiefs in the Administration there; and then, if this should happen to be the Case, adieu to the Liberties of Europe.'*⁸⁰

Shortly before this is said, the writer states that if the Republic and Great Britain do not come to Austria's aid, it will result in Austria eventually falling victim to French ambitions.⁸¹ Thus it comes down to the following: Austria requires help, but Great Britain cannot help Austria alone. The Republic must join in order to save the balance of power in Europe, but the writer is afraid that the Dutch neutrality might be a consequence of corruption of the government by France. If that happens to be the case, the writer believes that the liberties of Europe, i.e. the balance of power, may as well be said farewell to. The role of the Dutch Republic in alliances was thus considered crucial until the middle of the eighteenth century, likely because of earlier successes of the Old System. Writers truly seem to have believed that the Old System was still viable during the Austrian War of Succession, and some might have even seen it as the only alliance that could really work.

A second theme we frequently see in our sources has to do with government and political structure. Many European writers considered the Republic to have a wise government that made well-thought out decisions that were in the best interest of the Republic. Several times we see writers praising the Dutch government for her 'wisdom' and commendable carefulness. In a treatise discussing the British conduct in relation to the balance of power, the writer acknowledges that the Dutch are very slow in political decision-making and are quite clearly holding back with taking up arms in the Austrian War of Succession. But this is no wonder, given the fact that in the past, the Republic hasn't always

⁷⁹ W. Revolution., *The Real Crisis: or, the Necessity of giving immediate and powerful Succour to the Emperor against France and her present Allies*. (London 1735) 28.

⁸⁰ Ibidem.

⁸¹ Ibidem, 27.

been treated too fairly by the other allies. Their wariness should be applauded, not condemned because:

*‘The first principle in every Government, is that which is the Basis of the Law of Nature, I mean Self-Preservation.’*⁸²

A French treatise discussing options for a general European peace written two years later also states that the Dutch Republic should be counted among the great powers of Europe, in part also because of the wisdom of her government and the jealousy her neighbors have because of that.⁸³ Especially British writers seem to be understanding of the Republic’s neutrality and self-interest, but are still convinced that if it comes down to it, the Republic will be there to fight for her allies and the balance of power, especially if there is something to gain.⁸⁴ A writer of a letter to an English periodical in 1734 praises the Dutch wisdom and says that Great Britain should do as the Republic does: refusing to exert herself for the balance of power because her allies are stupid enough to constantly wage war against states they can’t fight alone.⁸⁵ Again, the Republic is attributed a leading role in war and peace mentality that, if it were up to the writer, should be followed for the good of Great Britain.

Occasionally we also see a more general remark about the political structure of the Dutch Republic. The fact that she is a republic is then mentioned as being the reason why she was able to establish such a fruitful trade, and in consequence was able to become powerful.⁸⁶ The earlier discussed treatise that claimed that the Republic could defend herself against the whole world states that her power comes from the republican freedom, and that this freedom must be defended at all costs. After all, if that freedom is taken away the Republic would ‘revert to its Original, an uninhabited bog’.⁸⁷ So this also gives us the impression that other European powers saw her as powerful because of her governmental structure. A French book about the Republic and her trade even directly puts her among the great powers with one of

⁸² *A letter to the E___ of S___; in which are examined the Conduct of several Ministries with respect to the Balance of Power in Europe, the Necessity of Supporting the House of Austria, and prescribing Bounds to the Power of France.* (London 1743) 18-19.

⁸³ *Les intérêts qui divisent les Sourverains de L’Europe, Depuis la mort de l’Empereur Charles VI. Examinees sur les principes de la nature, à l’égard de la Societé & de ses devoirs.* (Paris 1745) 28.

⁸⁴ *An impartial review of the Present Troubles in Germany*, 32.

⁸⁵ *Brief aan den Craftsman over de Veranderingen van Zaaken in Europe, Door een Oorlog welke tegen den Keyzer werd gevoert.* (The Hague 1734) 7.

⁸⁶ *Dutch Policy: Or, the only means of growing high and mighty, both by Sea and Land, Without any Regard to the Ballance of Power in Europe* (London 1744) 3-4.

⁸⁷ *The advantages of the difinitive Treaty*, 17.

the main reasons being her republican government.⁸⁸ This does make sense, given the fact that her trade had made the Republic powerful and that the Republican government was much more conducive to trade than most monarchies. Thus, the Republic's uncommon form of government also allowed her to appear more powerful and capable than she thought herself to be.

A third social-constructivist argument that argues for the Dutch Republic still being an important power in Europe until halfway through the century is related to her geographical position. For us, there are two key elements here: her coast on the North Sea and her associated economic advantages from this, and the barrier in the Spanish/Austrian Netherlands. The element of the coastal position for trade is frequently used in a passive matter, and will be noted after the element that matters much more to us: the barrier. The barrier was very relevant when it is thought of in the context of the balance of power, as it required and created active intervention of different states to ensure its survival. Why this made the Republic seem powerful will be explained below.

An important fact that can be taken from the sources is the fact that the Dutch barrier in the Austrian Netherlands wasn't just important to the Dutch Republic, but to Europe as a whole. The Dutch Barrier officially came into existence with the barrier treaties that were created during the War of the Spanish Succession and shortly after the Peace of Utrecht. Essentially, these treaties allowed the Republic to garrison a handful of cities in the Austrian Netherlands to function as a protective barrier against French invasion.⁸⁹ In the century before this, the barrier already existed in a way, with Dutch-controlled parts of Brabant and Flanders and the Spanish Netherlands functioning as a buffer zone against France.⁹⁰ Naturally, the Republic paid close attention to the security of her barrier since it came into existence, and in Dutch writings from this period we often see complaints and fears about the barrier being overrun. A powerful neighbor such as France would be incredibly bad news for the Republic, which put her at risk for wars on her own territory and having her trade in the Southern Netherlands and at sea endangered. But surprisingly, as stated, plenty of writers abroad also considered the barrier to be incredibly important, and not just for the conservation of the Dutch Republic. Because the Republic had such a large stake in keeping the barrier safe that did mean however that, in European eyes, the Republic was an important active participant on

⁸⁸ *Le grand tresoir historique et politique du florissant commerce des Hollandois dans tous les états et empires du monde*. (Rouen 1712) First page of the Preface, which lacks a number count.

⁸⁹ O. van Nimwegen, 'The Dutch Barrier: Its origins, Creation and Importance for the Dutch Republic as a Great Power, 1697-1718' in: J.A.F. de Jongste and A.J. Veenendaal Jr. eds., *Anthony Heinsius and the Dutch Republic 1688-1720: Politics, war and finance* (The Hague 2002) 147- 175, see 154.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 148-149.

the bigger European political playing field whose role could even become crucial when the barrier was at risk.

A treatise from the end of the eighteenth century shows us that during our studied time period the barrier was perhaps even a core element of the whole European balance of power. According to this writer, the Republic and her barrier were important for British trade and naval superiority in the North Sea. At the same time it served as a strong frontier for the Holy Roman Empire against France. Putting the control of this barrier in Dutch hands was natural, as their direct political but also commercial interests would ensure that it would always remain preserved.⁹¹ Although this treatise is from a much later time than the period we're discussing, we see similar sentiments in contemporary writings. This shows that the Dutch were entrusted with the preservation of a crucial part of the European balance of power, which shows that other European powers, in this case her allies, saw her as powerful enough to do so. Of course, the barrier treaties also involved the Austrians in the protection of the barrier, but with some frequency we see complaints in our sources that the Austrians aren't doing their part in keeping the barrier safe. More on this will be discussed in a later chapter, but the fact that others were aware that Austria wasn't doing enough, yet little action was taken, brings the thought that the Republic was considered powerful enough to maintain the barrier on her own.

Another treatise from 1743 shows that the Republic is reluctant to engage in the Austrian War of Succession, but now that her barrier is at stake, she is considering it. The author is very happy about this, but what this most importantly shows is that there is quite a desire by the allies to have the Republic participate in the war to preserve the balance. Thus, the Republic is again shown as being powerful enough to have a direct effect on larger European affairs, and she may be willing to do so because of her interests in the barrier as a broader European interest.⁹² In way, then, the barrier was something that could 'activate' the Republic and force her to come out of neutrality to come fight for the allied cause. The allies were quite aware of the fact that when the barrier was at stake, the Republic would be much more inclined to take up arms in order preserve it.⁹³ That in itself doesn't seem to grant the Republic any power, but if perceptions of power involve taking on an active role in international politics then surely the barrier made the Republic seem much more powerful than she perhaps was. After all, the danger to her barrier was a big reason why the Republic

⁹¹ Bruce, J., *Review of the events and treaties which established the balance of power in Europe and the balance of trade in favor of Great Britain.* (s.l. 1796) 63; 77-78.

⁹² *The present measures proved to be the only means of securing the Balance of power in Europe*, 51.

⁹³ *An impartial review of the Present Troubles in Germany*, 32.

fiercely fought in the Spanish War of Succession and why she eventually joined into the fighting during the Austrian War of Succession. Interestingly, Olaf van Nimwegen also calls the barrier the ‘cement that held the Maritime Powers and Austria together’, and calls the Republic the cornerstone of the Old System through her barrier.⁹⁴ Because the Old System gave the Republic power through prestige, the barrier kept the prestige from the Old System standing.

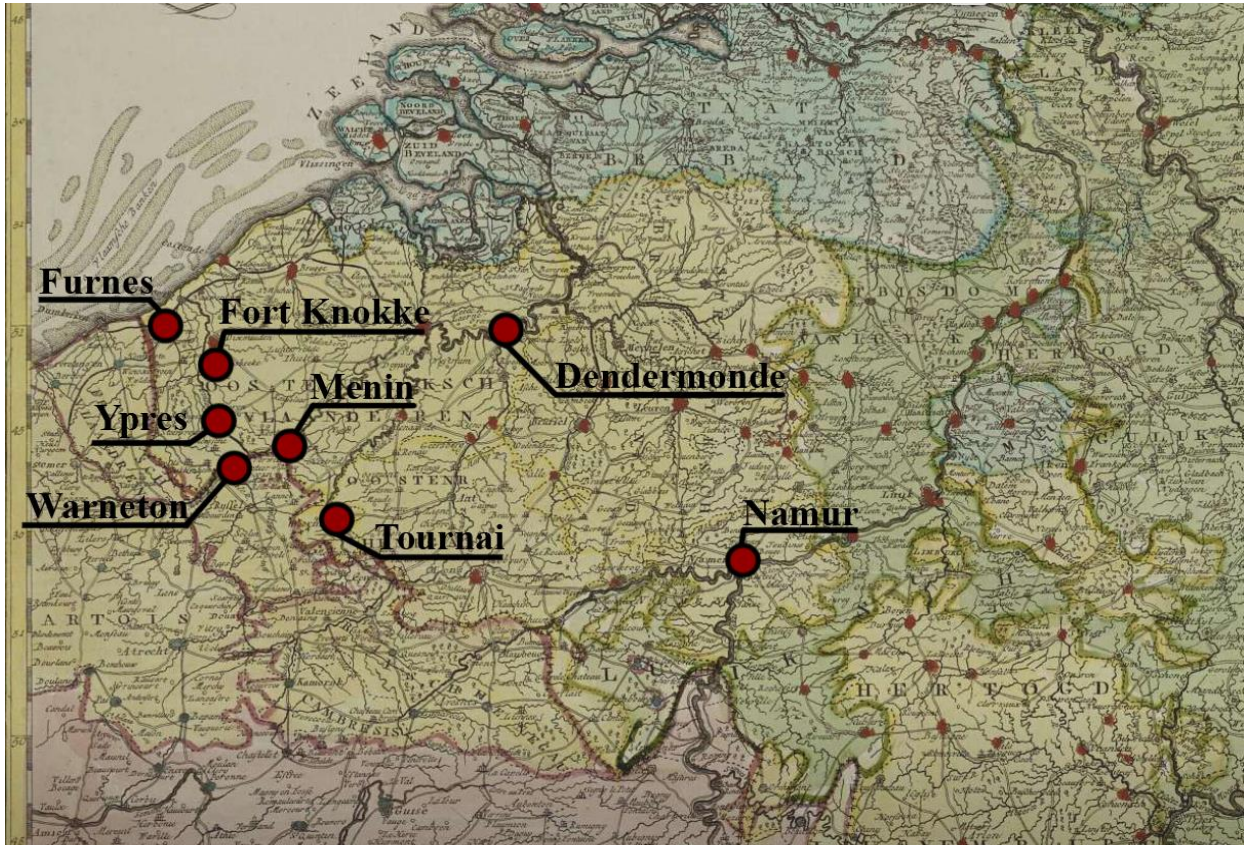


Figure 5: Locations of the Dutch Barrier fortresses, per the Third Barrier Treaty of 1715, overlaid on a map from the end of the eighteenth century. The barrier served to slow down any French attacks, to give the Republic time to mobilize and prepare her armies for battle.

Sources:

Map: Rijksmuseum, object number RP-P-AO-1-95.

Locations of fortresses: Nimwegen, ‘The Dutch Barrier’, 165.

Overlay of locations and modifications to map: Own work.

We thus see that the barrier was given importance in various ways, as being a protector of the balance of power and to keep France at bay, but perhaps also to bring the Republic into a fight for that balance of power. This also explains why so much fighting

⁹⁴ Nimwegen, ‘The Dutch Barrier’, 169.

occurred over the barrier, and why authors complain when the Republic is left to fend for herself in the Austrian Netherlands.⁹⁵

Of course, this claim about the barrier making the Dutch Republic powerful requires some nuance. It is important to make a distinction between an active role and a passive role of the Republic in maintaining the barrier. As is already well known among historians, the Dutch Republic did try her hardest to preserve the barrier as a means of protecting herself from France. As shown above, Europe saw the Republic as important to European matters and as a powerful state, as the security of the balance of power in Europe was entrusted to her protection of the barrier. But we should not forget that the barrier also passively mattered to Europe, without the Republic being a player. After all, the Republic, powerful or not, still had enormous economic potential. If France were to get her hands on the Dutch territories, the balance wouldn't be in danger because the Republic was no longer there, but rather because France now possessed the Dutch assets: A greatly enriched global trade, the coast with easy access to the North Sea to endanger British maritime power, and plenty of colonized overseas territories enhancing both of these risks. Therefore it is not surprising that the barrier was given such a huge importance. Of course the Republic was still important in various ways, as has been and will be further discussed, but this should certainly be kept in the back of the mind when speaking about this subject. Likewise, the Austrian Netherlands themselves mattered in this way: this too was still a rich region of Europe that needed to be kept out of French hands, which was another reason to secure it, not necessarily contributing to a perception of a powerful Dutch Republic.

Next to the themes discussed above, there are plenty of other mentions of the Republic being important and powerful in Europe that don't too strictly fall in a single category. Just generally speaking from the corps of European sources as a whole, in their discussions of the politics and wars at the time, writers mention the Republic often enough that the reader gets the idea that the Republic was a relevant state within Europe that needed to be included if one wanted their discussion and arguments to seem valid. Especially the strength of the Republic's navy is still considered pretty high until the mid-eighteenth century, frequently being called a maritime power, or in conjunction with Great Britain, one of 'the' maritime powers of Europe that are unmatched by France.⁹⁶ One earlier mentioned French treatise does exactly this by placing the Republic next to Great Britain on the level of great powers just

⁹⁵ *Lettres interessantes sur la Conduite des Hollandois*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Natural Reflexions on the present Conduct of his Prussian Majesty, The Concern which England has, and Part she ought to take in the present Broils of the Empire*. (London 1744) 26.

because the author considers her navy to be so powerful.⁹⁷ The Republic and Great Britain are, as said before, also plentifully mentioned together as being important to keep the balance of power in Europe, clearly showing that Great Britain and/or Austria alone aren't enough.⁹⁸ The other European powers are very convinced that the Republic's reluctance to partake in bigger affairs is simply due to carefulness and the fact that she attempts to secure the needs of her people first before doing anything else.⁹⁹ This then isn't interpreted as a state trying to keep itself safe during a time of military or political weakness, but rather as a state refusing to get pushed around by others and deciding over her own matters by instead looking at its own interests first before paying attention to other affairs, such as preparing for a conflict with France rather than raising troops to fight elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ When a writer calls for action against France, the Republic is often mentioned as a state that needs to help intervene in order to keep the balance.¹⁰¹ When there is spoken of subsidies and troops, it is said that Dutch subsidies are quite large and also very important to the upkeep of troops against France. These subsidies, along with British subsidies, were supposedly even larger than the French subsidies to troops.¹⁰² The trade of the Republic and her overseas empire are also regularly mentioned as being something that makes her powerful.¹⁰³ After all, trade is what made her powerful to begin with and trade was often subject of the wars she fought.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ *Les intèrêts qui divisent les Sourverains de L'Europe*, 28.

⁹⁸ *Brief van een Engelsman aan een Hollander zijn Vriend*. (s.l. 1735) 8-14.

⁹⁹ *An impartial review of the Present Troubles in Germany*, 32.

¹⁰⁰ *Les intèrêts qui divisent les Sourverains de L'Europe*, 29.

¹⁰¹ *Revolution, The Real Crisis*, 28.

¹⁰² *Les intèrêts qui divisent les Sourverains de L'Europe*, 32.

¹⁰³ *Le grand tresoir historique et politique du florissant commerce des Hollandois*, 1-2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.



Figure 6: 'The benefit of Neutrality': this print depicts Spain and France trying to steal a cow, with Great-Britain pulling the tail to prevent it. Beneath it sits a Dutchman, reaping the profits of the conflict by milking the cow. This British print looks very negatively upon the Dutch Neutrality in 1745, as instead of helping to keep the balance, the Republic benefits of British suffering. This too was an important reason why Great-Britain wanted to involve the Republic in the war: so that she couldn't freely profit from the damage done to British commerce.

Source: American Antiquarian Society, European Political prints 1720-65, Folder 1, BM Number BM-2665.

Perhaps also worth mentioning is the interesting fact that every now and then, the Republic is mentioned to be not all that strong. But when this is mentioned, she is usually not alone in this. One treatise even dares to call all of the allies weak, all reduced to this weakness by France.¹⁰⁵ Also implied often is that Great Britain and the Republic must help out if Austria wants to stand a chance against France, and as said before Great Britain seems to have 'needed' the Republic to be able to be a relevant power herself. What this all means is that separately none of these states were particularly strong, but only in combination they could be a relevant force. This is not flattering, but it puts the Republic on par with the rest of the allies when it comes to considerations about power. Therefore, the power we consider Austria or

¹⁰⁵ *Britannia in Mourning: or, a Review of the Politicks and Conduct of the Court of Great Britain with Regard to France, the Balance of Power, and the True Interest of these Nations.* (London 1742) 8.

Great Britain to have, we might also have to attribute to the Republic. Perhaps she was not much different from her allies, at least in their eyes. Given the fact that Austria is often considered a great power in this time, and Great Britain sometimes as well, this does give us an argument to consider the Republic to be a great power as well.

From this chapter it has become clear that other European powers apparently viewed the Republic as being more powerful than she viewed herself, at least until the end of the Austrian War of Succession. What is notable and important to the argument this paper attempts to make is that the arguments for this view of a powerful Republic are mostly social-constructivist in nature. Where we see mainly pessimistic objectivist arguments in the literature, and also in part in Dutch contemporary opinion, we now see optimism in the social-constructivist arguments. The Republic's prestige from past accomplishments had writers abroad considering her to be powerful, and many years later they still saw her as able to repeat the actions that gave her that prestige, if necessary. A similar kind of prestige was attributed to the 'Old System' of the Grand Alliance that had fought against French expansionism for many decades, often successfully. Because of all these successes, writers believed that the Republic was a crucial element in this alliance to help maintain the balance of power in Europe in general and to be a check on French power. This is why she was called upon to fight along in European wars in the first half of the eighteenth century. The same goes for the barrier, which some believed was a barrier for all of Europe, being the linchpin of the balance of power that secured everyone from French domination. The Republic was a relevant player here because her stake in the barrier was perhaps the largest, protecting her from a dangerous neighbor. Even the Republic's reluctance to partake in larger European affairs and desire for neutrality were viewed as a manifestation of power: rather than weakness, it was interpreted as an independent state refusing to be pushed around by others, placing her own interests first before those of the rest of Europe, keeping a politically independent course when this was best for her to safeguard her trade and to prevent her allies from exploiting her. Thus very clearly, the Republic was considered to be a powerful state, just as important to the balance of power and the European system as states like Great Britain and Austria were. We now perhaps have an argument to 'extend' the Dutch great power status further into the eighteenth century than most of the modern debate agrees upon. But important is also the question of where the end of this extension should be placed? This is what we will be dealing with in the coming chapter.

After seeing all these arguments, it is obvious that there is a contradiction to be found here. A comparison is in order. Dutch writers were negative about many things, such as the

barrier keeping the Republic engaged in European affairs while at the same time hardly working to keep the French threat at bay. Her neutrality and hesitating, stagnating government were viewed by most Dutch as negative and as being the reason the Republic's alliances were wilting and that she was being exploited by her allies. Likewise, the old alliances were often seen as negative, as a drain on Dutch power, power that would best be maintained by independence and freedom to trade instead. These are clearly negative points, but from the European perspective these arguments are suddenly positive: the barrier was in their eyes a well-cared for element of the balance of power that could cause the Republic to fight and successfully maintain the balance of power in Europe. The slow decision-making and neutrality of the government was not seen as negative and a sign of weakness, but rather as wise government, carefully making decisions to find the best path between her own interests and those of others, instead of throwing herself into wars or getting pushed around by allies and enemies alike. The alliances some Dutch writers resented were in European eyes an important element of Dutch power, as the prestige from these and the influence it granted in the balance of power kept her on the European playing field as a relevant force. The Republic contributed, but in European eyes also benefitted from the alliances, although

Clearly there are some clashing opinions here, and this could tell us something about differing perceptions of power between the Dutch and other Europeans. The Dutch saw their economy as their most important source of power, and the economy was best nourished by peace and neutrality because that encouraged trade. Thus, there was no interest in taking part in European affairs because that was detrimental to their power. But other European writers seemed to think that the participation in European affairs was crucial if a state wished to be considered an important power. After all, they were negative about neutrality and positive about participation. What does this tell us? The division between objectivism and social-constructivism this paper is discussing perhaps already existed in a similar way back in the eighteenth century! We can see clearly opposing viewpoints: the Dutch Republic considered her strong economy and the consequential ability to pay for a large military important to her power, while other European writers seemed to deem other things important as well, such as that wise government, the barrier or the alliances. These differences also explain why the Dutch felt pessimistic, while other Europeans were optimistic. Still, these differences couldn't prevent the eventual decay of this European optimism, as we will see in the coming chapter.

Chapter 4: ‘... for Holland is not any more to us, what she formerly was, the faithful friend and ally of Great Britain...’¹⁰⁶

Decay of European optimism about Dutch power.

It is quite interesting to see that eighteenth-century European writers discussing the balance of power and the politics of Europe viewed the Dutch Republic as powerful for much longer than modern day academics do or the contemporary Dutch writers did. But, interesting as that is, it is of no help to determining a moment or time of decay of this Dutch power if that opinion never changed. Fortunately for us, that change did eventually take place. It seems that after the Austrian War of Succession ended, the contemporary European writers were quick to realize that the Dutch Republic was not as strong as she once had been and that her role in international affairs was quickly diminishing, if not completely finished off yet. This chapter will show how the European writers thought of the Dutch Republic after the war of the Austrian succession, up until roughly 1780, when everyone was truly able to see her weakness as she was humiliated in the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war by her former ally that was, as we’ve seen, once dependent on her.

This decay of Dutch power can be observed from the sources in three ways. The most obvious way, of course, is that the writers of treatises and other writings start mentioning the Republic’s problems and weaknesses. They talk about her former glory and how she is now irrelevant to bigger European matters. Some glimpses of these complaints are already visible before the first half of the century, which will be discussed as well. A second way the decay becomes obvious is when writers discuss the breakdown of the social-constructivist elements that made her important in European eyes before the middle of the century, such as the barrier, her wise government and the Old System. The third and final way the decay of Dutch power and relevance becomes obvious is simple silence. Before the middle of the century, the Republic was plentifully mentioned and discussed in the context of European politics and the balance of power, but after the Austrian War of Succession she starts disappearing from the discussion. This implies that the people who discussed these European matters no longer saw the Republic as a relevant force that could bring any notable change in the European playing field, and was thus no longer a great power in their eyes.

¹⁰⁶ *Occasional reflections on the Importance of the War in America, And the Reasonableness and Justice of Supporting the king of Prussia, &c, in Defence of the Common Cause.* (London 1758) 44.

Perhaps it is best to start off a little earlier than that however. It has been discussed that before the middle of the century, most authors viewed the Republic as still powerful and relevant. However, as overwhelmingly positive they were about the Republic, they were not universally so. Although few in number, already before the middle of the century we occasionally see some doubts concerning the Republic and her ability to be as powerful as most of Europe sees her. An earlier discussed treatise in which we found much positivity about Dutch power also does state that she was sluggish to come into action in the Austrian War of Succession, and could have prevented a lot worse by intervening sooner. The writer seems forgiving however, acknowledging that the Republic also needs to look after herself, rather than putting the rest of Europe first.¹⁰⁷ The treatise discussing the German states argues that compulsive neutrality in general is a bad thing. Given the fact that the Republic was indeed compulsively trying to stay neutral to defend herself this in effect is also a negative remark.¹⁰⁸ The treatise that discussed allied conduct also argues that yes, the Dutch Republic will always follow up on her word. But in what way? The author discusses some Dutch contributions to the war effort of the Austrian War of Succession and states that the Dutch troops are of low quality, causing the army to falter. He also suspects that the Dutch generals secretly have orders to try not to aggravate France against the Dutch. Because of these problems, he doubts that the Dutch are truly willing to wage war as intensely as the other allies do, likely out of fear for France.¹⁰⁹ A British letter discussing the general state of European affairs notes troubles with the Dutch form of government and army management. The writer discusses Dutch army expansions, which has brought her army to 80.000 men strong, on paper. However, it is then claimed that the actual strength of the army is only 50.000 men, and that the remainder of the payments that were supposed to go the other 30.000 soldiers instead disappeared into the pockets of the 'military bourgeoisie'. Private interests are more important to many of the rulers of the Republic than European interest, and this kind of governing is bad for the common good (i.e. the balance of power).¹¹⁰

Again, these remarks are within a sea of positivity about her power, but they are a harbinger of what comes after the Austrian War of Succession. The opinions we can draw from the sources after this time seem to be inverted, now becoming either silence or negative remarks, with here and there some outnumbered remnants of the former positivity. What

¹⁰⁷ *An impartial review of the Present Troubles in Germany*, 36.

¹⁰⁸ *The Groans of Germany*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ *The conduct of the Allies and the management of the War, impartially Examined*, 45-46.

¹¹⁰ *Lettres D'un pair de la Grande Bretagne; a Milord, archeveque de Cantorberi. Sur l'état present des Affaires de l'Europe..* (London 1745) 53-54.

exactly causes this quite sudden change can't be said for sure. Perhaps it was a review of the events during the war that showed Europe that the Republic hadn't participated much at all and wasn't interested anymore in bigger European affairs, instead concentrating on preventing herself from going under by French or Prussian pressure. Important to note here is that after 1748, the Dutch Republic wouldn't participate in any major European conflict until the Revolutionary wars in the 1790s, and wouldn't be engaged in another (smaller) war until 1780. This could explain her general absence from the sources, but we must keep in mind that during the earlier years of the Austrian war of Succession and her neutral years before that, she tried to remain neutral as well, and yet was subject to debate and discussions about the war, the balance of power and how the Republic should get involved in order to maintain that balance.

Once again, let's return to Bielfeld, writing in 1774. His words decently illustrate what others say about the subject as well. Bielfeld notes that the Republic always kept only a small army in peacetime, too small to defend her land borders. Even the expansions of the army during the Austrian War of Succession were quite useless, as her soldiers were badly trained due to various reasons. Her form of government isn't helping either, with the elite exchanging high-ranking positions such as army officers without considering skill or abilities. The Republic isn't able to change her position either: she is simply too small to sustain an army larger than 60.000 to 80.000 men, which is much smaller than other European armies.¹¹¹ In general, Bielfeld accuses the Dutch government of having become decadent and malicious to her own interests. A little later on he mentions that the only reason the Republic hasn't been conquered by France, is because the rest of Europe doesn't want to see that happen.¹¹² This is quite an overturn from what we saw previously, where the Dutch were considered to be able to defend themselves, albeit with alliances, and their contribution to the Austrian War of Succession was thought of as decent. A French book from 1777 discussing 'several powers' in Europe, doesn't pay much attention to the Dutch Republic in the European system, but importantly says that if France would desire so, she could conquer territories all the way up to the Rhine. This implies that the Republic wouldn't be able to stop her from doing so, with or without European help.¹¹³ Another French book from 1779 also discusses the Republic and recalls a time where she was more powerful, but is now unable to be so. She lacks the money to provide for a sufficient army and therefore cannot exert any power, and the only reason she

¹¹¹ Bielfeld, *Institutions politiques. Tome troisieme*, 206-207.

¹¹² *Ibidem* 206-210; 226.

¹¹³ M.R.C.B., *Essais Politiques sur L'État actuel de Quelques Puissances*. (London 1777) 25.

still exists is because she remains quiet and at peace with many other European states. Thus, her existence is to be thanked to diplomacy instead of power.¹¹⁴

The remarks of a weak Republic compared to her former glory generally seem to happen a bit later in time than our second argument, the decay of the social-constructivist elements that had made the Republic powerful in European eyes. This starts very shortly after the Austrian War of Succession. In a treatise discussing the peace terms of the treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle we see the complaint that the Dutch barrier is gone, and that it is feared that the Republic will come under French influence. Restoration of the barrier is extremely expensive, and the writer is aware that the Republic is unable to make that kind of money available for this restoration. So in this treatise, the vulnerability of the Republic and the bad condition of her finances are noted.¹¹⁵ A series of books discussing the interests of European powers notes in 1751 that the Dutch army and Navy had been weakening since the end of the Spanish War of Succession because of a compulsive desire for peace, resulting in a weak, indecisive army in the Austrian War of Succession and fluctuating and irregular behavior from a government which could not be relied upon, which was to the detriment of the allies and of profit to France.¹¹⁶ Reading this particular source, one gets the feeling that the weakness of the Republic was very suddenly uncovered within the last few years of the Austrian War of Succession. A 1758 Treatise discusses French plans for Europe in British eyes, in which the Dutch Republic mostly seems to be considered a pawn on the chessboard of Europe, and not a player, saying that France more or less has the Republic under her thumb.¹¹⁷ Especially because the barrier no longer functioned since the Franco-Austrian alliance of 1756, the Republic had little other choice than to stay quiet and keep out of affairs that could put her at risk of a war with France.¹¹⁸ This points us to something quite important. In the same treatise it is also acknowledged that:

*'...for Holland is not any more to us, what she formerly was, the faithful friend and ally of Great Britain'.*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ *Discours politiques, Historiques et Critiques, sur Quelques gouvernements de L'Europe* [Vol I] (Neufchatel 1779) 161. (page 161 in the book, page 1 of the section 'Discours sur la Hollande')

¹¹⁵ *The advantages of the definitive Treaty*, 22-23.

¹¹⁶ *The Present State of Europe, explaining the Interests, connections, Political and Commercial views of its Several Powers* (London 1750) 491-492.

¹¹⁷ *Occasional reflections on the Importance of the War in America*, 38-39.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 73.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 44.

Here we clearly see the breaking down of the 'Old System' of alliances. Austria will no longer protect the barrier because of the alliance with France, and apparently the Republic and Great Britain are also drifting apart. The Republic is weakened and according to the writer sees Great Britain as a dangerous competitor to her trade, instead of a sister nation.¹²⁰ So here we see clearly that the Old System is no more, and that obviously is detrimental to the Republic. Without her alliances, she is unable to act in the face of a French threat, which could certainly be an argument for why she is no longer a great power at this time.

As said before, the relative absence from the discussion also tells us something about how Europe thought about the Dutch Republic and her power. A French book from 1757 for example considers the European system. In the text the important powers of Europe are mentioned. Great Britain, Austria, and France are most important, the Republic no longer being mentioned amongst those important to the balance. It is also said that these powers can divide Europe amongst themselves if they like, which also implies that the Republic would be open for conquest.¹²¹ This is just one example among more, but it serves as enough to illustrate the argument of silence about the Republic.

Thus the decay has become clear. Already shortly before the end of the Austrian War of Succession did some writers have their doubts about Dutch power. What should be noted here is that we see some objectivist argumentation here: the authors complained about the size of the army contributions to the Austrian War of Succession but also about the Dutch army in general, which was by that time relatively small compared to the rest of Europe. We also saw some complaints about the quality of the army, which was apparently poorly trained, and the generals reluctant to actually engage in combat.

After the Austrian War of Succession, then, we clearly see the breaking down of many of the social-constructivist arguments that made the Republic appear powerful before the middle of the century. Her prestige seems to have been tarnished by what writers after the Austrian War of Succession saw as poor performance during that war. The Old System too found her end: Great Britain grew more and more powerful on her own, and in 1756 the Franco-Austrian alliance put an end to the relevance of the barrier. As France had been exhausted by the Austrian War of Succession, at least temporarily, the common enemy of the Old System also faded away. The alliance broke apart, and the Republic was more or less defenseless against France once she would regain her strength. The Republic also didn't take

¹²⁰ Ibidem, 100.

¹²¹ M. le Chevalier., *La paix de L'Europe ne peut s'establir qu'a la suite d'une longue treve ou Porject de Pacification Generale, combine par une suspension d'Armes de vingt ans, entre toutes les Puissances politiques.* (Amsterdam 1757) 100; 109.

part in any more big European conflicts until the revolutionary wars in the 1790s. Her once wise government is now stamped as misgovernment, causing further weakness. In just a decade or so, the European optimistic opinion of Dutch power collapses entirely, soon writing her off as an irrelevant state that can only passively matter to the balance, as in having a rich trade, a possible conqueror of which could use to become richer and more powerful. Her glaring weakness would show during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war (1780-1784), when a war with what had been a close ally for over a century would prove disastrous to the Republic.

With these observations we have all parts of the puzzle for the contemporary opinion: the Dutch opinion, which is already very negative early on and the European opinion, which starts out as positive but quite abruptly turns sour as major changes take place that for once and for all remove the Dutch Republic from the position of a great power in Europe.

Conclusion: New definitions?

Considering all that we've seen above, it is easy to see that the current academic debate about the Dutch Republic as a great power is lacking crucial information, and should not be continued in its current form. Not to say that the objectivist arguments often cited there are invalid: quite the opposite, they still significantly mattered in the contemporary opinions on Dutch power and power in general, as we saw in the example of Bielfeld. In the first chapter about Dutch pessimism we also saw these objectivist arguments return in complaints about the army, navy and economy. But, social-constructivist arguments also played a role, as her alliances and government were also viewed as reasons the Republic was weak. Even more social-constructivist arguments appeared when we looked at the European opinion of Dutch power. They saw the Republic as powerful much longer than the Dutch themselves, because of her past military achievements and her participation in the Old System, the significance of her barrier and her government, which was perceived as wise, independent and strong.

The decay of the Dutch great power status in contemporary European eyes was also very clearly visible. Her reputation was tarnished, the Old System fell apart due to her neutrality and the *renversement d'alliances* between Austria, France and Great-Britain, and the barrier no longer functioned either. Wise government was now seen as misgovernment, resulting in a weak army, a weak navy and neutrality politics. One of the few positive things the Republic is still credited with after this time is her rich trade. Besides this however, she disappeared from our sources as an active player on the European chessboard, becoming a pawn instead.

What we can conclude from the contemporary debate is that the Dutch were pessimistic about their power, and most considered the Republic's status as a great power in Europe to be gone after the Spanish War of Succession. Many of the reasons for this pessimism were objectivist in nature, much like the modern debate, which also sees most supporters for a loss of Great power status around the same time. For the Dutch opinion on the decay of great power status, 1713 and the Treaty of Utrecht seems a fitting endpoint. However, the European opinion on the power of the Dutch Republic remained high for much longer, at least until the Austrian War of Succession, followed by a rapid decline of this opinion. These findings thus support a very late decay of great power status. If we have to attach a year to this type of decay, it should probably be 1756, for the same reason Olaf van Nimwegen has argued in our first chapter, namely because that was the year the Old System truly came to an end and the barrier lost its significance. By that year then, most of the

important social-constructivist arguments that once argued for a powerful Republic could no longer be supported.

Thus now we seem to be in more trouble than when this paper started, now perhaps having two different dates for the loss of ‘great power’ status for the Dutch Republic: 1713 when the modern and contemporary Dutch objectivist reasoning is maintained, 1756 when European contemporary social-constructivist reasoning is also brought into the equation. To find a synthesis between this is quite difficult, given the objectivist arguments that are currently attached to great power status. According to modern criteria, the Republic can’t ever have been a great power. But with those criteria neither Great Britain nor Austria would be great powers either, given the fact that they apparently required alliances and foreign policies to accommodate these alliances to win a fight against France, often also including the Republic. France, then, could perhaps be the only great power in Europe at the time. And even this might not be so certain: in both the Austrian and Spanish Wars of Succession she herself had various allies fighting alongside her, so we may ask ourselves if she could truly fight her wars all alone. Thus by objectivist definitions, there might not have been any great powers in Europe, which would render the term obsolete.

Now we might have found a problem that causes the debate about the Dutch Republic as great power to be so broad and diverse. The very definitions and criteria for great power status are unhelpful in their current form. As observed in this paper, many criteria contemporary writers thought of as important for being a great power are left out. To solve this issue, the requirements for great power status need to be amended with social-constructivist criteria, while the objectivist criteria should be nuanced to allow for alliances and alliance-accommodating foreign policies. Of course we can’t stick criteria such as the barrier or the wise government of the Republic on our definitions of a great power. Rather, we should look at the effects these criteria had. This is where we get back to the balance of power.

Given the fact that it was such an important concept at the time, and many of the social-constructivist arguments we saw were rooted in their effect on the European balance of power, perhaps we should add a state’s ability to influence the balance of power as a criteria for being a great power in the eighteenth century. Doing so would settle three important problems: first of all, this would add an important contemporary social-constructivist criterion to definitions that lack both the contemporary and the social-constructivist angle. Secondly, it would solve the aforementioned problem of no European state in the eighteenth century fitting the current definitions. After all, France, Great Britain and Austria, states that around the

middle of the century are often seen as great powers, were indeed able to significantly influence the balance, restoring them to great power status if the balance of power criterion is added to our criteria. Thirdly, the Republic then can also be counted among the great powers until at least the end of the Austrian war of Succession in 1748, and at the latest until 1756, thus placing the loss of great power status somewhere in a period of merely 8 years, instead of over 80 years, as in the modern debate we know today.

One could counter-argue that this too is problematic given the fact that the balance of power was considered to be made up of smaller balances, in which smaller states could have enough effect to affect a regional balance, and in consequence the general balance.¹²² Perhaps a counter for this would be that a state cannot be considered a great power if it cannot affect the general balance directly. But of course, new definitions and criteria will always lead to new debates about inclusion and exclusion of various states from great power status. The proposed changes therefore aren't just educated suggestions, but also invitations to further debate, especially from the social-constructivist angle, which is something our current definitions of power, great power, and the Dutch Republic as a great power certainly need.

¹²² Wight, 'The Balance of Power and International order' 17.

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